

**PROFILE
WORKSHEET****THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF SOCRATES**

CHAPTER 5

Early one morning in 339 B.C. a quiet group of students gathered in the meeting place where their friend and advisor, Socrates, had stood trial a few weeks before. An Athenian jury had sentenced their mentor to death, and at sunset a cup of poison would silence him forever.

Socrates as Teacher

Socrates lived in poverty rather than charge his students fees. Wearing the same cloak every day, he usually walked the streets of Athens in bare feet. He had no wish to buy material things, preferring to own the truth. He tossed ideas into the air like a juggler. It was said he raised thousands of questions but answered none of them. He asked questions of everyone he met and forced his students to use reason and logic. He never took himself or others too seriously, but his keen wit and sharp tongue—qualities that defended his strong sense of right and wrong—would cost him his life.

Troubled Times

Athens surrendered to Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian Wars in 404 B.C., and the Spartans forced the Athenians to replace their democratic government with a group of 30 tyrants, 2 of whom had studied with Socrates. The tyrants took away valuable property and executed hundreds of Athenian citizens. Although Socrates opposed these rulers, it was well-known that he also disliked democracy.

When the 30 tyrants were forced to leave Athens in 403 B.C., the city's democratic government was restored. Because of his connection to the tyrants and his criticism of democracy, the new rulers felt Socrates was a bad influence particularly since he ridiculed democratic leaders and other important Athenians.

The Athenian leaders, fearing that Socrates' constant criticism and contempt for authority would upset the peace of the city, repeatedly warned him to stop his teaching and his criticism of the government. He refused to do so. Finally, the leaders brought the 70-year-old philosopher to trial, accusing him of denying the existence of Athens' gods and of introducing new gods that the government

had not approved. A more serious charge, however, was that he corrupted the Athenian youth by teaching his students to disrespect and disobey their elders.

Athenian Trials

A trial in ancient Athens was very different from a modern-day trial. To assure swift justice, each case had to be presented and a verdict rendered in one day. Since there were no judges or attorneys, accused people, who could be charged with a crime and brought to trial by anyone, were expected to defend themselves. Their fates rested in the hands of a jury that could range from 101 to 1,001 citizens. (There was always an odd number of jurors to prevent tie votes.) The jury voted by dropping tokens marked guilty or not guilty in large jars, and there was no appeal from their decision. The accuser proposed the penalty the defendant should be given if found guilty. If convicted, the defendant also proposed a sentence, and the jury chose one of the two proposals. Since all decisions required a simple majority, one vote could determine guilt or innocence.

The Case of Socrates

The 501 jurors at Socrates' trial listened as the philosopher's accusers claimed that he had denied the gods and was an evil influence on the youth of the city. Realizing that he had little hope of being found innocent, the wise old man did not prepare a defense, but apologized to the jury for his simple manner of speaking. Next, Socrates explained that the real reasons for his trial were rumors that he twisted the truth and believed himself to be superior to other men. He had denied these falsehoods for years. It was true, he said, that the oracle of Delphi had called him the wisest man of all. Socrates himself did not understand this until he realized that his wisdom was in admitting what he did not know. Most men who were considered wise could never admit they did not hold the answer to every question. Rather than twisting truth, he claimed, he made his students see the mistakes in their reasoning, which made him enemies.

He continued by saying he never denied that the

gods existed. He had worshipped in the temples many times. The jury should realize that he, Socrates, was a gift from the gods to Athens. He was a “gadfly,” a critic who annoyed the city’s leaders by pointing out what was wrong. Far from corrupting young men, his entire life was an example of simple living and the quest for truth. Socrates told the jury, “acquit me or not; but whichever you do, understand that I will never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times.”

By a vote of 281 to 220 the jury found Socrates guilty. Since his accusers had asked for the death penalty, Socrates was expected to ask the jury for exile, which would certainly have been granted. But the elderly teacher shocked the jury by asking for a reward instead of a punishment. He asked them to have the government provide him with free meals for life, an award given to Olympic champions. When the jury became angry, friends begged Socrates to change his mind. Faced with Socrates’ refusal to compromise and angered by his stiff-necked pride, the jury voted 361 to 140 in favor of the death penalty. The philosopher did not fear death and told the court, “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die and you to live. Which is better god only knows.”

Carrying out the Sentence

Executions usually took place within 24 hours of a death sentence, but Socrates’ death was delayed several weeks. Each year Athens sent a delegation to the temple of Apollo on the sacred island of Delos. No executions could take place until the delegates returned in their ship. At the time of Socrates’ trial, unfavorable winds had delayed the ship.

During the weeks of waiting, friends and family visited the condemned man. Some of his wealthier students bribed the officials of the prison to allow Socrates to escape, but the old man refused. The verdict was wrong, he said, but the law must be obeyed. To run away would make it seem that he had abandoned his beliefs.

On his last morning Socrates’ chains were removed and he said good-bye to his weeping wife and children. He spent the rest of the day as he had most others—teaching. But this day, his lesson cen-

tered on death. He told the students that all philosophers should look forward to dying. Once the soul was free from the demands of the body it could find true wisdom in the next world.

Although it was customary for the poison to be administered after sunset, Socrates bathed before sunset and then called to the jailer to prepare the deadly poison. Socrates drank the hemlock and walked around his cell until his legs grew numb. He told his grieving friends to stop crying like hysterical women, and laid down upon his bed. As the chill of death crept from his legs to his heart, he asked that a bird be sacrificed to Asclepius (the god of healing) as gratitude for his painless death. Soon his breathing slowed and then stopped.

The Legacy of Socrates

Socrates’ teachings were continued by his pupils, especially Plato, whose writings tell us most of what we know about the philosopher. Socrates spent his life examining his own ideas and trying to discover the truth about many subjects. His contribution became an important part of the heritage of Western civilization—a legacy that reminds us to think of ourselves and to stand up for what we believe is right.

REVIEW

Use the reading to answer the following questions.

- 1. Interpreting Ideas** Why is Socrates considered a hero?
- 2. Evaluating Idea** Why did he call himself a gadfly?
- 3. Comparing Ideas** How were trials in Athens different from modern-day trials?
- 4. Forming Opinions** Socrates’ death has been called a suicide. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.
- 5. Analyzing Ideas** Most of our knowledge of Socrates comes from one source, his student Plato. Why should this make historians cautious in writing about Socrates?