The Symposium

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PLATO

Plato is one of the most important philosophers who ever lived; his thought influenced the entire subsequent Western philosophical tradition. He was born into an aristocratic Greek family. His father was named Ariston and his mother Perictione, and he had two brothers and a sister. The young Aristocles was said to have been given his nickname, Plato, by his wrestling coach (*platon* means "broad" in Greek). In his youth Plato wanted to become a playwright, but in his late teens or early twenties he heard Socrates teaching in the marketplace and decided to devote his life to philosophy. Plato continued to study under Socrates until the age of 28, when, in 399 B.C., the older philosopher was tried and executed for impiety. After this, Plato spent time traveling around the Mediterranean before settling down in Athens to write and establish his Academy, which would become the predecessor of the modern university; Aristotle became his most famous student there. The Academy persisted until 86 B.C. Plato also invented the dialogue, a literary form which depicts a conversation between one or more characters. Some of his most famous dialogues (he wrote more than 20) include *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *The Republic*. Plato died at the age of 81.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Even though an event exactly like the symposium portrayed in *Symposium* probably didn't occur, ritual banquets like this one—marked by liberal drinking and deep discussion—were markers of culture and status in classical Athens and were attended by aristocratic men like the characters in the dialogue. In fact, the men in *Symposium* were all historical figures. Because Plato wrote this dialogue after Alcibiades was murdered (404 B.C.) and Socrates was executed (399 B.C.), we can also assume that he was trying to convey something of these men's character to a younger generation that was still wrestling with the upheavals caused by the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) and the emergence of Athenian/Greek identity. Plato's own influence as a philosopher made both an immediate and an ongoing cultural impact: his most famous Academy student, Aristotle, became the tutor of the young Alexander the Great, and Plato's writings essentially launched the academic discipline of philosophy, from antiquity through the Middle Ages and down to the present day.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Plato's best known work, *The Republic*, especially sections 514-517 ("the cave"), discusses an ascent to goodness that provides an interesting comparison to Diotima's ladder, within the context of an overall discussion of the ideal city-state. Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, written c. 523, is heavily influenced by Plato's dialogues. It contains a dialogue between Boethius and Lady Philosophy and looks to God as the source of all good. Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1308-1320), with its allegory of the soul's journey toward God, also gives a later, Christian view of something akin to Diotima's ladder of ascent.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Symposium*
- **When Written:** c. 385-370 B.C.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** c. 385-370 B.C.
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Platonic dialogue
- **Setting:** Agathon's house in Athens, Greece, in 416 B.C.
- **Climax:** Socrates's description of Diotima's "ladder of love"
- **Antagonist:** Alcibiades, and the other party guests to various extents
- **Point of View:** Third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

More than Friendship. Even though the concept of "Platonic Love" is often thought to have its origin in *Symposium*, the term doesn't appear there. The colloquial understanding of the concept—which contrasts it with romantic love—actually has more in common with ideas found in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*. In *Symposium* Plato sees love as needing to transcend attachment to particular bodies and souls altogether, seeking union with eternal goodness and beauty.

The Invisible Plato. Although Plato portrays his teacher, Socrates, as well as many of his historical contemporaries as characters in many of his dialogues, Plato himself never appears in any of these texts—even at events at which he probably *was* present, such as the death of Socrates, which he describes in the dialogue *Phaedo*.

PLOT SUMMARY

A young man named Apollodorus, a disciple of Socrates, is walking along with an unnamed companion. He tells his friend the story of a recent conversation with another friend, Glaucon, in which he told the story of a dinner party that had

taken place more than a decade ago in Athens. Apollodorus wasn't at the party, but an acquaintance named Aristodemus, also Socrates's disciple, was there, and he told Apollodorus all about what he saw and heard there.

One day, Aristodemus says, he came upon Socrates, who invited him to a dinner party, or symposium, at tragic poet Agathon's house. At the symposium (a Greek ritual banquet that includes libations to the gods, hymns, and drinking wine), Eryximachus, a doctor, proposes that they take turns giving speeches in praise (also called eulogies) of Love, or the god Eros.

Phaedrus, a young student of rhetoric, gives the first speech. He says that Love is an old god who gives great benefits, such as the relationship between a lover and his boyfriend. Such relationships instill both pride and shame, which are important for living a good life. He also says that Love gives lovers and boyfriends the courage to die for another, which can be useful to society, especially in war.

Pausanius, Agathon's older lover, argues that it's important to distinguish between Common love and Heavenly love. Common love is felt by inferior people and directed toward women and unintelligent boys. Heavenly love is directed toward older boys who are beginning to develop intelligence. Even in the latter type of relationship, a boyfriend should only gratify his lover if there's also a mutual interest in developing the boyfriend's intelligence and virtue.

In his speech, Eryximachus discusses the insights he has gained about love from his practice of medicine. In particular, he sees how love is involved in the balancing of bodily humors, of musical harmonies, of the weather, and of relationships between humans and the gods.

Comedic writer Aristophanes begins his speech with a myth. He explains that humans used to consist of two half-humans—each person consisted of two males, two females, or one male and one female. When these primordial humans threatened the gods, Zeus cut them in half. The resulting half-humans were sexually attracted to the type with which they'd originally been united—either men to women (and vice versa), women to women, or men to men. Regardless, each half-human longs and searches for reunion with his or her "other half." Ultimately, then, love is the search of what is like oneself.

Agathon's speech is the most rhetorically impressive so far, though it has relatively little substance. He lauds Love as the most beautiful god, both possessing wonderful things within himself and conferring those qualities on all good things.

When Socrates begins to speak, he first asks Agathon some challenging questions. He gets Agathon to agree that Love must be love *of* something that Love does not already possess. Socrates then tells the story of his dialogue with a wise woman named Diotima of Mantinea. Diotima helps Socrates see that Love isn't actually a god, but rather a *daimon*, an intermediary spirit. This form is proven by the fact that the gods are already perfectly happy and beautiful, but since Love needs something, he can't be a god. She also challenges Socrates to identify "love" not with the beloved object, but with the one who needs and seeks the thing beloved. Moreover, the beloved object—the good—is desired forever.

Diotima goes on to explain that love's function is "giving birth in beauty both in body and in mind." By this she means, in short, that immortality is the object of love. People often try to achieve this immorality through reproduction—having biological children. However, men who birth "immortal" children—like virtues and philosophical discourses—take a superior path.

Diotima further explains that all she's said so far leads to "the final mysteries." She describes a "**ladder** of ascent," which shows how a wisdom-loving soul proceeds toward a vision of the eternal Good. This ascent starts with love for one body, but it gradually recognizes the beauty of all bodies, then proceeds from bodies to minds, and then begins to apprehend the interrelation of all types of beauty. The more one appreciates beauty in general, the less attached he is to specific instances of beauty. Once he reaches this point, he is able to see Beauty as it eternally exists in itself, not simply as it appears in those specific things that share in its character. Only at this point does the philosopher (the lover of wisdom) produce the kind of virtue that leads to immortality.

Shortly after Socrates concludes his speech, Alcibiades, the notorious and handsome politician who is Socrates's lover, drunkenly barges into the party. He insists on eulogizing Socrates himself rather than Love, speaking of Socrates's famed moderation, sexual restraint, and constant occupation with philosophical problems, even in the midst of the battlefield. Alcibiades is helplessly attracted to Socrates, but Socrates's way of life is baffling, and Alcibiades can't bring himself to emulate it. He nevertheless commends Socrates's discourses, which cover most of what one must know in order to become a good person. The symposium dissolves into chaos soon after, and after a little further talk with Agathon and Aristophanes, Socrates departs alone the next morning.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Socrates – Socrates (c. 470 B.C.–399 B.C.) was Plato's teacher and appears as a main character in many of Plato's dialogues, including *Symposium*. Though he left no writings of his own, he is considered the founder of Western philosophy. He was executed for alleged impiety at the end of his life. In *Symposium*, he is described as going around barefoot, rarely bathing, and being impervious to drunkenness or sexual seduction. He's so wrapped up in philosophical dialectic, in fact, that he sometimes

stops wherever he happens to be and just stands, thinking, for long stretches of time. He gives the penultimate speech at the symposium, most of it consisting of a dialogue with the fictitious prophetess Diotima, who guides him to an understanding of Love as the ascent toward the Good, or the Form of Beauty. He is also Alcibiades's lover.

Alcibiades – Alcibiades is a notorious figure, both historically and within *Symposium*. Historically, Alcibiades betrayed Athens more than once and was exiled, then recalled from exile in 407 B.C. because he was the only person thought capable of helping struggling Athens defeat Sparta in the last years of the Peloponnesian War. However, he was subsequently rejected and murdered at the conclusion of that war, though the exact circumstances of his death are uncertain. At the time *Symposium* is set, Alcibiades would have been in his thirties. In Plato's dialogue, he stumbles drunkenly into the party after the rest of the speeches have already been given and offers a eulogy of Socrates, who is his lover. Though Alcibiades is baffled by Socrates's way of life and fails to follow it himself, Alcibiades nonetheless professes his helpless love for Socrates, and his speech paints Socrates as an ideal philosopher.

Diotima of Mantinea – Diotima is a fictitious prophetess whom Socrates invents in his speech at the symposium. He portrays her as having initiated him into the higher mysteries of Eros through a dialectical discussion. Through the metaphor of a **ladder** of ascent, she teaches Socrates that love is the search for immortality through the vision of the form of Beauty. Diotima is the only woman in the dialogue who is shown to have any intellectual value, but her status as a prophetess also suggests that no mortal woman could compare to her wisdom.

Aristophanes – Aristophanes was considered to be the most accomplished writer of comedies in the ancient world. In *Symposium*, his speech is an exercise in myth-making, explaining that sexual attraction came about when Zeus cut humans in half from the form in which they originally existed; thus, humans spend their lives seeking their "other half" in order to regain wholeness. Love, in his view, seeks to reunite with its own characteristics.

Agathon – The historical Agathon was a writer of tragedies, none of which have survived. In *Symposium*, he is described as a good-looking man in his mid-thirties at the time of the dinner party, which takes place at his house. He is celebrating having won the tragedy competition at the Lenaea, a religious festival, two days before. He was trained in rhetoric by Gorgias, and, like his mentor, he is often criticized for his flowery speech, which Plato ably imitates with Agathon's speech in *Symposium*. The gist of his speech is that the god Love contains all good and beautiful things within himself, and though his speech is emotionally appealing, it lacks strong argumentation. Agathon is the "boyfriend" in his relationship with Pausanias.

Pausanias – Pausanias is an older man who is in a long-term relationship with Agathon in *Symposium*, though little is known about him as a historical figure. In his speech, he distinguishes between "common" and "heavenly" love, arguing that the latter is felt between lovers and their boyfriends, especially when these relationships are focused on the development of virtue. In contrast, lesser people feel only common love, which includes love for women.

Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum – Aristodemus is the one who told Apollodorus what happened at the symposium, so it's really his perspective that makes up most of *Symposium*, albeit narrated by Apollodorus. He's described as "a little man who always went around barefoot." The fact that he goes without shoes shows that he imitates his mentor, Socrates. Apollodorus says he was in love with Socrates at the time of the symposium. He isn't formally invited to the symposium but comes along as a last-minute guest of Socrates, whom he follows everywhere.

Apollodorus – Apollodorus is the narrator of *Symposium* who describes the speeches of the symposium to his unnamed companion, although he wasn't there himself. He heard about the speeches from Aristodemus, and he shared the details in turn with Glaucon. Apollodorus is from the city of Phalerum, not far from Athens, Greece. He's nicknamed "the softy," even though his criticisms of non-philosophical ways of life are "savage." He would have been very young at the time the symposium itself took place and would have been a second-generation disciple of Socrates.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Eryximachus – Eryximachus is an Athenian physician. He suggests the topic of love for the symposium speeches. His speech connects love to his practice of medicine and to harmonies observed throughout the natural world.

Phaedrus – Phaedrus is a young man and a student of rhetoric. He delivers the shortest speech in *Symposium*, focusing on Love's antiquity and the way that it can bestow courage on lovers and boyfriends.

Glaucon – Glaucon is Apollodorus's friend who caught up with him on the way to Athens at the beginning of the dialogue, requesting a more exact account of what was discussed at the symposium.

TERMS

Love/eros – This term can be complicated in Greek philosophy, and even within a single work of Plato's, because of its various shades of meaning. Love or *eros* can refer to passionate sexual desire; it can refer to the Greek god of love, Eros ("Cupid," in Roman religion), as it does in the speeches of **Phaedrus** and **Agathon**; and it can refer to broader types of deep human desire, as it does in other places throughout the *Symposium*. In

Socrates's speech, in particular, *eros* goes beyond a passionate interpersonal love, like that celebrated by **Pausanias** and **Aristophanes**, to refer to human desire more broadly, culminating in the lover of wisdom's search for eternal goodness and Beauty. Scholars have long debated exactly to what degree Plato distinguishes between the various meanings of "love," so his use of the term throughout *Symposium* always warrants careful consideration.

Beauty – In *Symposium* 210a-212a, **Socrates**, through **Diotima**, discusses the eternal Form of Beauty (*kalon* in Greek) that "always *is*, and doesn't come into being or cease." This unchanging, eternal Beauty is the source of all lesser and particular beauties, and it is the sight toward which the lover of wisdom seeks to ascend—passing from specific, earthly instances to ever more abstract and universal beauties before arriving at "the great sea of beauty." Gaining this sight (though the mind, not the senses) is the only thing that enables one to give birth to true virtue and thus to partake of immortality oneself.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE NATURE OF LOVE

In the *Symposium*, the philosopher Plato's dialogue set in Athens in the fifth century B.C., a man named Apollodorus describes a dinner party to an unnamed friend, who's eager to hear what was discussed by famed the teacher Socrates and the other guests about love. Though Apollodorus wasn't there himself, he tells the story based on the reports of a friend, Aristodemus, who accompanied Socrates to the dinner party. During the party, one guest, Eryximachus, suggests that they should take turns giving speeches, as is customary at such gatherings. On this occasion, each guest will take a turn praising Eros, the god of love. Through the speeches of various guests, including the playwright Aristophanes and the poet Agathon, and culminating in the speech of Socrates himself, Plato argues that love is the pursuit of what is good and beautiful.

In his speech, which consists of a myth he creates on the spot, Aristophanes argues that love is the pursuit of individual wholeness in union with another person. He says that, once upon a time, human beings looked much different. There were three genders—male, female, and androgynous. These humans each had two heads, two sets of arms and legs, and two sets of genitals. When these humans tried to reach heaven in order to attack the gods, Zeus decided to weaken them by cutting each human in half. Zeus later took pity on the hobbled humans and rebuilt their bodies so that they were capable of having sexual intercourse with each other. This was the beginning of human beings' desire for one another: "It draws the two halves of our original nature back together and tries to make one out of two and to heal the wound in human nature." The original composition of each half-human determines his or her current sexual attractions: formerly "androgynous" men are attracted to women, formerly "androgynous" women to men, and so forth.

Aristophanes concludes that humans' longing for one another is not just the desire for sexual satisfaction, but "the desire [for] and pursuit of wholeness." A lover "wants to find a loved one who naturally fits [their own] character." Tucked inside the myth Aristophanes shares is the idea that humans are fundamentally incomplete on their own, and that love—finding another person with whom one fits, like a puzzle piece—is essentially the pursuit of completion. For Aristophanes, goodness and personal completion are one and the same.

In contrast, Agathon argues that the god *eros*, or Love, contains in itself the pinnacle of all good things and stands in need of nothing else: "Love is…supreme in beauty and excellence and…responsible for similar qualities in others." Agathon gives an elaborate catalogue of Love's praiseworthy qualities: "father of luxury, elegance, delicacy, grace, desire, longing […] every man should follow him [Love] singing beautiful hymns of praise, sharing the song he sings to charm the mind of every god and human." In his speech, Agathon paints love as both pure and seductive, breathing gentle qualities like "grace" into lovers, as well as more sensual ones like "desire" and "longing." Love is also an equalizer of sorts, as everyone—gods, common men, and great leaders alike—has the impulse to seek out love and celebrate it. Agathon's speech is a sweeping and rhetorically seductive eulogy, with something in it to stir any listener.

When Agathon finishes his speech, his audience bursts into applause, showing that his elegance has pleased them and suggesting that his conception of love comes closest to contemporary assumptions about its meaning. And although he hasn't actually offered much besides elegant rhetorical statements about love's beauty, Agathon does seem to conflate love with goodness and argue that the pursuit of love is ingrained in all people.

When it's Socrates's turn to give a speech, however, he suggests that the preceding speakers have "[given] the appearance of praising love" without actually having done so, and he proposes to give a different kind of speech that will "tell the truth about love"—that love is actually the search for the good and the beautiful.

First, Socrates undermines Agathon's argument by asking him a series of questions about the speech he just gave, which described how love is the patron and peak of all things

beautiful. Socrates begins his questioning by asking: "Is it Love's nature to be love *of* something or nothing?" Agathon admits that love is definitely *of* something—that it desires that "something" and doesn't possess that thing already. In contrast, then, to Agathon's enthusiastic eulogy, Socrates demonstrates that love is not sufficient unto itself, but is directed toward what it doesn't have and what it needs.

Socrates then gives the account of love he says was given to him by a prophetess named Diotima, who was "wise about this and many other things." Diotima chided Socrates, he reports, for supposing that if Love in itself isn't beautiful, that necessarily means it must be ugly, and that if it isn't wise, that means Love must be ignorant. Instead, it's possible for love to be positioned in between these opposing qualities. From that point Diotima leads Socrates to the similarly nuanced conclusion that Love actually is neither a god nor a mortal, but something in between—a *daimon*, a great intermediary spirit.

Coming to the crux of his argument, Socrates shows how Diotima guided him toward the truth that Love is not the *object*—beautiful, elegant, perfect, and so on—but rather the subject's search for these things. In other words, people tend to personify Love and to chase after it, but Love should instead be understood as the passionate search, through philosophy, for the eternal Beauty that can alone bring happiness.

By portraying Socrates rejecting the cleverly stated and conventional views of love offered by others at the party, Plato presents an altogether different perspective. Using Socrates as a mouthpiece, Plato rejects the clichéd view that people are simply seeking their "other halves," as Aristophanes has suggested, because they are seeking something they *don't* already have—not the characteristics they already recognize as their own. Likewise, love isn't something eternally self-existent, as Agathon put it, but rather something the lover of good things must actively, continually long for and pursue.

INFERIORITY OF WOMEN

The symposium, or ritual banquet, at Agathon's house is a very intentionally male space. Symposia would often include flute-girls (courtesans who provided entertainment and often flirted with guests), but after the men settle the question of how much the guests should drink that night, Eryximachus proposes that they should "send away the flute-girl who's just come in, and let her play for herself, or for the women in their part of the house, if she prefers, and that we should spend the evening in conversation." This statement underscores the fact that even the men and women within a given household were strictly segregated, it makes clear two key features of the symposium: first, it will be intellectually oriented (that is, not a space for women, who were thought irrational) and second, whatever eroticism occurs there will be male-oriented. The rest of Plato's dialogue bears out the view that women are inferior to men. Even though Socrates's speech modifies aspects of previous speakers' views, like those of Pausanias and Aristophanes, Plato still argues through Socrates and the other guests that women are neither fit objects for men's love, nor—because of their inherent irrationality—are they themselves capable of loving.

Pausanias, one of the symposium guests, argues that love for women is inherently "common" and inferior to love for boys or other men. This so-called common love is undiscriminating, felt only by "inferior" people. Such people "are attracted to women as much as boys, and to bodies rather than minds. They are attracted to partners with the least possible intelligence, because their sole aim is to get what they want." In other words, women lack sufficient intelligence to be worthy objects of love; they exist purely so that men can satisfy their baser desires. "Heavenly" love, by contrast, is felt toward boys who are beginning to be capable of some intelligence ("around the time that they happen to grow a beard"). Because it's founded on intelligence and virtue, this type of love is oriented toward "a fully shared life," something that isn't possible with women. According to Pausanias, "This [love]…is a source of great value to the city and to individuals, because it forces the lover to pay attention to his own virtue and the boyfriend to do the same. All other forms of love derive from the other Love, the Common one." In other words, then, "common" love toward women is not only a waste of a man's time, it's also useless to society at large.

Aristophanes, through his myth-making, creates a space for the desire of women, but he ultimately argues that love of women is inferior to love of men, echoing Pausanias's argument. After explaining how humans and their attractions came about through Zeus's splitting in half of the double-humans who originally existed, he claims that men who love other men are "the best of their generation" and "naturally the bravest" because of their desire for what is "bold, brave and masculine." They desire to return to the wholeness they once possessed, so they are attracted to those qualities they already have. He further argues that men with these superior desires will only settle for marriage and fatherhood out of the pressures of convention; since a lover "wants to find a loved one who naturally fits [his] character," such men possess a primeval superiority.

Socrates's presentation of the prophetess Diotima, and of her teaching rejecting aspects of previous speakers' arguments, suggests that Plato has a somewhat more elevated view of women than was common in classical Greece, but this view ultimately doesn't value women in and of themselves. The very fact that Diotima isn't an ordinary human being, but rather a prophetess with access to wisdom that mortal humans can't easily attain, underscores the fact that women weren't viewed as equal to men in Plato's society. Instead of overturning the widely held idea that women were irrational and inferior to

men, Diotima's status was intended by Plato to be shockingly unconventional.

Diotima's teaching also presents a radical rethinking of reproduction that ultimately downplays physical childbearing as an inferior pursuit. Intercourse and reproduction, she explains, are one way that mortal human beings can get to close permanence and immortality. Men with merely "bodily" desires for children are drawn toward intercourse and childbearing with women, and that is praiseworthy; however, Diotima argues that there's a still more superior path. There are men who "are even more pregnant in their minds than in their bodies, and are pregnant with what it is suitable for a mind to bear and bring to birth"—in other words, wisdom and virtue. Men with such intellectual desires are drawn toward other men, in order to form the kinds of friendships that can bear immortal children—things that are founded on virtue and will stand the test of time, like poetry, laws, and philosophical discourse. Such people "have a much closer partnership with each other and a stronger bond of friendship" than men and women can have with each other or parents can have with their biological children. Diotima takes for granted that "everyone would prefer to have children like [Homer's or Hesiod's] rather than human ones"—so even in Diotima's view, natural childbearing is inferior to "mental" childbearing, the latter being something that only men can attain.

While Plato's argument through Socrates doesn't claim that marriage and conventional parenthood are worthless, it does prize intangible, philosophical beauty as an incomparably higher goal. "If someone could see beauty itself…not cluttered up with human flesh and colors and a great mass of mortal rubbish," then that person couldn't help but realize the superiority of beauty's eternal form to anything found on earth. Only someone "who's given birth to true virtue and brought it up"—something that only happens through men's wisdom-seeking relationships with one another—"has the chance of becoming loved by the gods, and immortal." Even with the example of Diotima as prophetess and educator of Socrates himself, there's no place within Diotima's scheme for a mortal woman who's capable of pursuing true virtue or giving birth to immortal beauty.

SOBRIETY, RESTRAINT, AND WISDOM

Symposium highlights two common characteristics of classical Greek culture—homoeroticism (conceived of rather differently from a modern understanding of homosexuality) and love of drinking parties. Plato critiques both these cultural elements by portraying Socrates as the utmost exemplar of sobriety and restraint. In doing so, Plato makes the counter-cultural argument that a true lover of wisdom—even if that person isn't devoid of desires and enjoyment of material pleasures—avoids the extremes of self-indulgent sexuality and uninhibited drinking.

Socrates has advanced so far in philosophy that he doesn't get drunk, even if he joins in the ritual drinking of a symposium. The implication is that he is so "drunk" on philosophy that he's no longer vulnerable to drunkenness from wine, even if he enjoys imbibing. As the men at Agathon's symposium are deciding how much wine they're fit to drink that night, Eryximachus says that they don't need to take Socrates into account, since "he can drink or not drink, so it'll suit him whatever we do." Mixing wine with water to achieve a desired level of potency was one of the first orders of business at a symposium, but this doesn't matter for Socrates, since he isn't vulnerable to drunkenness the way that the other men are, even if he drinks freely.

At the end of Plato's dialogue, the dissolute politician Alcibiades—who's also Socrates' lover—stumbles drunkenly into the party, supported by a flute-girl. His presence signals that Socrates's lofty discussion of the immortal form of beauty has come to an end. Alcibiades even elects himself master of ceremonies and fills a huge goblet with unmixed wine, breaching every norm of symposium etiquette. He tells the other guests: "Not that my trick will have any effect on Socrates, gentlemen. However much you tell him to drink, he drinks without ever getting more drunk." Alcibiades's teasing "indictment" of his lover Socrates actually underscores Plato's idealized picture of Socrates as the ideal philosopher who's untouched by things like drunkenness.

In the course of his eulogy of Socrates, Alcibiades, through his own self-pitying critiques, backhandedly compliments Socrates's famed sexual restraint as well. Alcibiades admits that he's in love with Socrates, in part because of his attractive teaching: "My heart pounds and tears flood out when he speaks, and I see that many other people are affected in the same way. [Other famous orators] haven't produced this kind of effect on me; they haven't disturbed my whole personality and made me dissatisfied with the slavish quality of my life." He goes on to claim that Socrates pretends to be erotically attracted to beautiful young men just like anyone else is, but "if you could open him up and look inside, you can't imagine, my fellow-drinkers, how full of moderation he is!" He indignantly complains that he has repeatedly tried to get Socrates to sleep with him, even prevailed upon him to stay overnight with him in his bed, but after making a bold advance and embracing the Alcibiades all night long, Socrates "completely triumphed over my good looks - and despised, scorned and insulted them […] when I got up next morning I had no more *slept with* Socrates than if I'd been sleeping with my father or elder brother." Alcibiades is helplessly attracted to Socrates, in part because of his beautiful way of life, yet he's repeatedly frustrated and perplexed by Socrates's philosophical detachment from sexual appetites.

Despite feeling baffled and insulted, Alcibiades concedes that Socrates's arguments about life are the only ones that make any sense, and that "They range over most — or rather all — of

the subjects that you must examine if you're going to become a good person." In other words, a person who is truly dedicated to wisdom, like Socrates himself, must not bend to the cultural pressures toward sex or drunkenness; wisdom and philosophy should be satiating enough. Alcibiades's disruptive presence also serves another purpose in Plato's dialogue. After the ultimate philosophical prize pictured in Diotima's mysteries, Alcibiades's complete failure to grasp Socrates's teachings—in spite of his superficial attraction to them—has the effect of grounding Socrates and displaying the need to continue giving philosophical discourses so as to lead ordinary people to wisdom while there's still hope for them.

THE ASCENT TO IMMORTALITY

One of the *Symposium*'s most interesting features is the fact that earthly indulgence—a drinking party characterized by erotic overtones—provides the setting for philosophical contemplation. But embedded in the very structure of Plato's dialogue is a gradual progression from more worldly conceptions of love to more exalted ones—a progression that's echoed by Diotima's higher mysteries at the end of Socrates's speech, when she describes a **ladder** of progress to immortality. By structuring the work around ascending forms of love, Plato argues that immortality, only achievable through philosophy's continual quest for truth, is the overarching goal of human life, though not every human being will choose to pursue it.

Most of the symposium guests view love as something that's oriented toward mortal life in some way. For example, Phaedrus, the first speaker, argues that love shames men into courageously sacrificing their lives for one another, marshaling homoeroticism as a militarily useful phenomenon—that is, something that could be helpful in mortal wars that take place in this life. Eryximachus, a doctor, argues that love is bound up with the Greek medical practice of harmonizing discordant elements and can be observed throughout the natural world, not just in human beings. By coupling love with medicine and nature, Eryximachus squarely positions love as something worldly. Even Aristophanes argues that love is an urge to discover and unite with the "other half" from whom one was separated in his or her preexistent state. Like Phaedrus and Eryximachus, Aristophanes conceives of love as a worldly and human phenomenon.

However, Socrates's speech presents a contrasting perspective. Through the discussion he presents between his teacher Socrates and the prophetess Diotima, Plato argues that the object of love isn't simply to possess the good, but to "[give] birth in beauty both in body and in mind," meaning that one gradually ascends, through philosophy, to a vision of the ultimate, eternal Form of beauty.

When Socrates objects that only a prophet can understand such things, Diotima explains that "All human beings are pregnant in body and in mind, and when we reach a degree of adulthood we naturally desire to give birth…sexual intercourse between men and women is a kind of birth." Intercourse and reproduction seem to be the closest that mortal human beings can get to permanence and immortality, so it's understandable that human beings naturally desire such an experience.

Though having biological children is viewed by many people as a satisfactory way of achieving immortality, Diotima argues that philosophically inclined men have a better, more enduring option: philosophical discourse. Male partners who engage in such progress toward wisdom together "have a much closer partnership with each other and a stronger bond of friendship than parents have, because the children of their partnership are more beautiful and more immortal…People look enviously at Homer and Hesiod and other good poets, because of the kind of children they have left behind them, which provide them with immortal fame and remembrance by being immortal themselves." In other words, because philosophical discourse produces intellectual "children" like virtue and wisdom—exemplified in the enduring cultural productions of poets like Homer and Hesiod—the "parents" of such offspring enjoy a partnership that transcends the physical, and their offspring far outlive any biological children.

Ultimately, any man who loves wisdom should progress toward this latter kind of "childbirth," and Diotima prescribes a specific series of steps to get there—a ladder toward the eternal Form of beauty. Even if he loves one human body at first, a man should eventually progress toward loving the beauty of *all* bodies, and from there to the recognition that minds are even more valuable than bodies. As he values intellectual discourse more and more, a man will observe the interrelations between every kind of beauty: "Looking now at beauty in general and not just at individual instances, he will no longer be slavishly attached to the beauty…of any particular person at all… Instead of this low and small-minded slavery, he will be turned towards the great sea of beauty and gazing on it he'll give birth, through a boundless love of knowledge, to many beautiful and magnificent discourses and ideas." Thus, having gazed upon the ultimate Form of beauty, which lasts forever, a man will have overcome all those earthbound forms of love with which the average person satisfies himself.

Plato's argument, presented in Socrates's speech, dramatically overturns all the concepts of love that have come before it, commending a view of happiness that doesn't readily appeal to most people. This tension is illustrated by the ambivalent figure of Alcibiades, for example, who responds to the external beauty of Socrates's words but persists in pining for earthly satisfactions. By using the conventional classical Greek event of the symposium and the puzzling figure of Socrates to demonstrate his view, Plato suggests that his own age wasn't prepared to receive such a lofty approach to beauty—but that such a quest for immortality is worth the effort, outshining any

worldly benefits of love or misguided fixation on earthly offspring.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LADDER/STAIRCASE/ASCENT

In *Symposium* 210a-212a, in Socrates's dialogue with the prophetess Diotima, Diotima describes the stages through which a lover of wisdom must ascend in order to apprehend true Beauty. In short, the ascent, resembling a staircase, goes like this: one "should go from one [body] to two [bodies] and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful forms of learning...[to] that form of learning which is of nothing other than *that* [eternal, unchanging] beauty itself." In other words, one must progress from love for physical things to love for mental things, and from love of particular things to love of universal things in order to arrive at true happiness and wisdom. Some Plato scholars have identified *Symposium*'s six speeches—those of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates—as roughly approximating the stages of ascent. Though this section of *Symposium* has traditionally been called "Diotima's ladder" or the "ladder of ascent," neither phrase actually appears in the dialogue.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Symposium* published in 1999.

172a-173e Quotes

As it happens, the other day I was going to the city from my home in Phalerum, and someone I know spotted me from behind and called me from a distance. He said (with playful urgency):

'Hey, the man from Phalerum! You! Apollodorus, won't you wait?'

I stopped and waited.

He said, 'Apollodorus, I've just been looking for you to get the full story of the party at Agathon's, when Socrates, Alcibiades and the rest were there for dinner: what did they say in their speeches on love? I had a report from someone who got it from Philip's son, Phoenix; but he said you knew about it too. He wasn't able to give an exact report. Please give me your account. Socrates is your friend, and no one has a better right to report his conversations than you. But before you do,' he added, 'tell me this: were you at this party yourself or not?'

Related Characters: Apollodorus, Glaucon (speaker), Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum, Alcibiades, Socrates, Agathon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *Symposium*, the speaker, Apollodorus, relates how, as he was walking to Athens, his friend Glaucon caught up with him, wanting to know the details of a dinner party that took place at least a decade earlier. Glaucon has tried unsuccessfully to get the story from somebody else, and he assumes that Apollodorus, as Socrates's disciple, will be able to tell him exactly what Socrates said. Apollodorus himself is, at the same time, telling this whole narrative to yet another acquaintance who's curious about the same event. It transpires that Apollodorus wasn't at the party himself, so his accounts of the speeches are filtered through yet another person, Aristodemus, an older disciple of Socrates. The fact that the symposium is being described at several levels of removal from the event itself is in keeping with the dialogue's emphasis on philosophy as a difficult quest for truth that requires persistent search. The eagerness of the various inquirers hints at philosophy's erotic associations as they will be brought out in the course of the speeches; philosophy taps into the same kind of urgent desire as sexual passion does. It could also simply hint at the curiosity of a younger generation of Athenians about an older generation filled with storied personalities.

174a-177e Quotes

❝ After this, Aristodemus said, Socrates lay down and had dinner with the rest. They then poured libations, sang a hymn, and performed all the other customary rituals, and turned to drinking. Pausanias took the initiative, saying something like this: 'Well, gentlemen, what's the most undemanding way to do our drinking? I can tell you that I'm in a really bad state from yesterday's drinking and need a rest. I think that's true of many of you, as you were there yesterday - so think about how to do our drinking in the most undemanding way.'

Related Characters: Pausanias, Apollodorus (speaker), Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum, Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this scene took place, Socrates had walked in late to the dinner party because he'd been standing outside contemplating a philosophical problem. Now that he's joined the rest, the group can carry on with the regular symposium activities. A Greek symposium was a heavily ritualized event, filled with both material and intellectual pleasures, including good food, plentiful wine, religious worship, bawdy flirtations with serving girls, and intricate philosophical debates. One of the first things the guests would do would be to pour out the amount of wine they planned on drinking that night and mix it with water until it reached the desired strength. On this particular night, Pausanias, who's one of the older men among the group, says that he's still recovering from the previous day's drinking—a celebration honoring his boyfriend Agathon's victory at a drama festival—so they'd better take things easier tonight. This helps set the tone for an evening that will be marked by heavy conversation rather than indulgence, a change that mirrors Socrates's own characteristic restraint.

❝ "Isn't it terrible, Eryximachus," he says, "that the poets have composed hymns and paeans to other gods, but none of them has ever composed a eulogy of Love, though he is such an ancient and important god." […] I think Phaedrus is quite right on this point. I'd like to please him by making a contribution to this project; also this seems a good occasion for those of us here to celebrate the god. If you agree, we won't need anything to occupy us but discussion. I'd propose that each of us should make the finest speech he can in praise of Love, and then pass the topic on to the one on his right. Phaedrus should start, because he is in the top position, and is also the originator of the topic.'

Related Characters: Phaedrus, Eryximachus, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

In addition to feasting and drinking, it was also customary for speeches to be part of the proceedings at a symposium, and for someone to suggest a theme upon which everyone was required to speak, as Erixymachus does here. Eryximachus quotes Phaedrus complaining to him that Love, or Eros, is relatively underappreciated among the Greek pantheon. Phaedrus was a young student of rhetoric, so it makes sense that he would be thinking a great deal about the classical Greek poetic corpus and the prominence of various gods. And he raises a good point—while earlier Greek tradition included plenty of material praising Aphrodite, goddess of love, the male god Eros wasn't yet a strongly distinct character at this point in antiquity. Eryximachus, in keeping with the mentoring role that an older man would assume in relation to a younger man in the Athenian context, wants to help Phaedrus resolve his legitimate question. Thus the theme of the evening, and of Plato's *Symposium*, is set.

178a-180b Quotes

❝❝ Because of his antiquity, [Love] is the source of our greatest benefits. I would claim that there is no greater benefit for a young man than a good lover and none greater for a lover than a good boyfriend. Neither family bonds nor public status nor wealth nor anything else is as effective as love in implanting something which gives lifelong guidance to those who are to lead good lives. What is this? A sense of shame at acting disgracefully and pride in acting well. Without these no individual or city can achieve anything great or fine. [...] If there was any mechanism for producing a city or army consisting of lovers and boyfriends, there could be no better form of social organization than this: they would hold back from anything disgraceful and compete for honor in each other's eyes. If even small numbers of such men fought side by side, they could defeat virtually the whole human race.

Related Characters: Phaedrus, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In the evening's first speech on love, Phaedrus opens with a standard eulogy (or speech of praise, which typically addressed the origin and excellent qualities of the thing or person being praised). Phaedrus begins by claiming that the god Love is one of the oldest of the gods and thus has conferred some of the greatest benefits on humanity. He argues that one of the chief of these benefits is the lover/boyfriend relationship—a culturally accepted aspect of the relationship between young, elite Athenian men and their older mentors. He goes on to argue that such relationships instill the proper shame and pride that are necessary to leading a good life, and thus are beneficial to society at large. It's somewhat ironic that in praising Love, shame is one of the first characteristics Phaedrus brings up. Phaedrus's view of an army of lovers is also rather uncritical. He assumes that the lovers and boyfriends would be just fine with their partners sacrificing themselves for one another, and would be able to pick themselves up from heartbreak immediately in order to continue fighting. However, Phaedrus gives a believable effort for a novice rhetorical student in a roomful of intimidating figures.

180c-185c Quotes

❝❝ Common Love is genuinely "common" and undiscriminating in its effects; this is the kind of love that inferior people feel. People like this are attracted to women as much as boys, and to bodies rather than minds. They are attracted to partners with the least possible intelligence, because their sole aim is to get what they want, and they don't care whether they do this rightly or not. So the effect of love on them is that they act without discrimination: it is all the same to them whether they behave well or not.

Related Characters: Pausanias, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Pausanias gives the second speech of the evening. He begins by saying that the subject of "love" hasn't been defined narrowly enough, and that he seeks to draw a distinction between what he calls "common" and "heavenly" love. In this quotation he describes the characteristics of "common" love, which he says derive from the younger, common Aphrodite. (Pausanias is putting a unique twist on two explanations of the origin of Aphrodite, goddess of love, claiming that the more ancient Aphrodite is responsible for heavenly characteristics and the younger for more earthly ones.) His major point about "common" love is that it's undiscriminating—hence the preference of its practitioners for women or young boys. In classical Greek culture, women had low social status and were thought of as irrational. Boys (that is, post-pubescent young men who hadn't yet grown a beard) weren't considered to be much above women, and in fact were "womanly" thinkers, not yet capable of rational thought. By implication, heavenly love should be more concerned with minds than with bodies—a point Pausanias will develop later in the speech.

These two rules must be combined (the one governing the love of boys and the one governing the love of wisdom and other kinds of virtue), to create the conditions in which it is right for a boy to gratify his lover. These conditions are realized when lover and boyfriend come together, each observing the appropriate rule: that the lover is justified in any service he performs for the boyfriend who gratifies him, and that the boyfriend is justified in any favor he does for someone who is making him wise and good. Also the lover must be able to develop the boyfriend's understanding and virtue in general, and the boyfriend must want to acquire education and wisdom in general. When all these conditions are met, then and then alone it is right for a boyfriend to gratify his lover, but not otherwise.

Related Characters: Pausanias, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Pausanias continues his speech distinguishing between common and heavenly love. Now he clarifies the conditions under which it's acceptable for a young boyfriend to sexually gratify his older lover: when both men are invested in the development of the boyfriend's character. Homoeroticism in a classical Greek milieu was not thought of in the same way that homosexuality is regarded today. Aristocratic young men tended to be segregated from young women in Greek culture, and it was expected that they would sometimes form erotic attachments to the older men who were heavily invested in teaching and mentoring them to become the next generation of elite Greek men. Generally speaking, these attachments were understood to be a temporary, healthy way to channel sexual desires. Pausanias's speech is a major literary source for understanding this classical Greek perspective on sexuality. In the context of this particular speech, however, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that Pausanias (the older lover in an unusually long-lasting relationship with Agathon) is, to some extent, justifying his own desires—that as long as there's an educative element to the relationship, then a long-term lover/boyfriend relationship should be viewed as acceptable.

189a-193e Quotes

When a lover of boys, or any other type of person, meets that very person who is his other half, he is overwhelmed … with affection, concern and love … These are people who live out whole lifetimes together, but still couldn't say what it is they want from each other. I mean, no one can think that it's just sexual intercourse they want, and that this is the reason why they find such joy in each other's company and attach such importance to this. It's clear that each of them has some wish in his mind that he can't articulate; instead, like an oracle, he half-grasps what he wants and obscurely hints at it. Imagine that Hephaestus with his tools stood over them while they were lying together and …[said], 'I'm prepared to fuse and weld you together, so that the two of you become one.' […] We know that no one who heard this offer would turn it down and it would become apparent that no one wanted anything else.

Related Characters: Aristophanes, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Aristophanes offers the fourth speech in *Symposium*, inventing a myth of human origin that explains how *eros*—in terms of human beings' desire for one another—came to be. In contrast to the speakers who came before him, especially Phaedrus and Pausanias, Aristophanes sees equal benefit in erotic relationships; before, such relationships were always discussed in terms of a power imbalance, with an older lover and a youthful, inexperienced boyfriend. Aristophanes is looking for something beyond mere satisfaction of one's sexual desires; he describes a deep longing of the soul that each partner seeks to fulfill. However, though this speech conveys depths that the previous speeches didn't have, some commentators have suggested that Plato was implicitly critiquing its lack of realism. After all, it's impossible for two human beings to be fully and permanently united with one another, and even if it were possible, that very union would mean mutual destruction of the two individuals. This early idea of the "soulmate"—drawing on the Greek blacksmith god, Hephaestus—is nevertheless a creative and intriguing advancement in the discussion.

194a-198a Quotes

So it seems to me, Phaedrus, that Love is himself supreme in beauty and excellence and is responsible for similar qualities in others. […] Love drains us of estrangement and fills us with familiarity, causing us to come together in all shared gatherings like this, and acting as our leader in festival, chorus and sacrifice. He includes mildness and excludes wildness. He is generous of goodwill and ungenerous of ill-will. He is gracious and kindly; gazed on by the wise, admired by the gods; craved by those denied him, treasured by those enjoying him; father of luxury, elegance, delicacy, grace, desire, longing […] For the whole company of gods and humans, most beautiful and best of leaders; every man should follow him singing beautiful hymns of praise, sharing the song he sings to charm the mind of every god and human.

Related Characters: Agathon, Apollodorus (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Agathon delivers the last of the symposium speeches before Socrates, and in some ways, the long build-up is appropriate—it's a much more rhetorically elegant offering than any of the speeches that have come before. Agathon undertakes to do what he says the previous speakers haven't done adequately—praise the *nature* of the god Love as well as the benefits Love gives. Having described Love's youth, beauty, and virtue, Agathon now reaches the rhetorical climax with an elaborate list of the things Love does and inspires among humanity. Indeed, it's an appealing picture—Love fosters unity among people, grants them all desirable things, and even helps them achieve harmonious relations with the gods. However, Agathon's speech is more concerned with pleasing the crowd—as their immediate applause shows—than with actually teaching them or persuading them of something. Agathon's speech is beautiful, but it's rather empty. However, it provides an ideal setup for Socrates to challenge the thinking of both Agathon and the crowd and propose to them a better way.

198b-201c Quotes

'Now try to tell me about love', he said. 'Is Love love *of* nothing or something?'

'Of something, undoubtedly!'

'For the moment,' said Socrates, 'keep to yourself and bear in mind what love is *of*. But tell me this much: does Love desire what it is love of or not?'

'Yes,' he said.

'When he desires and loves, does he have in his possession what he desires and loves or not? […] Think about it,' Socrates said. 'Surely it's not just probable but necessary that desire is directed at something you need and that if you don't need something you don't desire it? I feel amazingly certain that it is necessary; what do you think?'

'I think so too,' said Agathon.

'That's right. Now would anyone who was tall want to be tall or anyone who was strong want to be strong?'

'That's impossible, according to what we've agreed already.'

'Yes, because no one is in need of qualities he already has.'

Related Characters: Agathon, Socrates, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange between Socrates and Agathon creates a kind of prologue to Socrates's lengthy, climactic speech at the symposium. It's also the most straightforward example of the Socratic method, called the dialectic, within *Symposium*. This method, as portrayed by Plato in many dialogues, involves the teacher—in this case Socrates—asking his interlocutor a series of questions in order to help the interlocutor see where and how his beliefs are inconsistent, as well as the logical implications of those beliefs. Through this process, the interlocutor is led toward a better understanding of the truth. This teaching method is not meant to deliver fully-formed truth to the interlocutor, but rather to help him learn how to seek and arrive at truth on his own. Thus, in its own way, the dialectic is a miniature version of the larger philosophical journey that *Symposium* is about. In this example of dialectic, Socrates leads Agathon to abandon his belief that Love contains all good things fully within itself. He does so by suggesting that love clearly desires an object, and that no one desires something that they already possess in full.

201d-204c Quotes

"Now I'll let you go. I'll try to restate for you the account of Love that I once heard from a woman from Mantinea called Diotima. She was wise about this and many other things. On one occasion, she enabled the Athenians to delay the plague for ten years by telling them what sacrifices to make. She is also the one who taught me the ways of Love. I'll report what she said, using as a basis the conclusions I reached with Agathon, but doing it on my own, as far as I can.

Related Characters: Socrates, Apollodorus (speaker), Diotima of Mantinea, Agathon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in Socrates's speech, he moves on from his dialectical exchange with Agathon and introduces the figure of Diotima of Mantinea. Diotima's existence hasn't been proven from any historical sources; she seems to have been a fictional figure invented by Plato for the purposes of the dialogue. (Though Socrates claims to have learned about the Form of Beauty from Diotima, this was actually a theory developed by his student Plato, so this aspect of the speech, at the very least, is fictionalized.) Diotima is a prophetess and wise woman who initiates Socrates into the higher mysteries of love. She is portrayed as authoritative and almost goddess-like, enabling Socrates to position himself as the learner in the exchange (the role Agathon just occupied in his dialectic with Socrates). Based on everything that's been said about women so far in *Symposium*, especially concerning their irrationality and their resulting inability to pursue wisdom, it's surprising to find a woman occupying such a role. Then again, the unexpected figure of Diotima may help prepare Socrates's audience for the surprising and unconventional theory of love that's about to unfold.

"So how could he be a god if he is not in possession of beautiful and good things?"

"That's impossible, as it seems."

"Do you see, then," she said, " that you don't believe Love is a god?"

"But what could Love be?" I said. "A mortal?"

"Far from it."

"What then?"

"Like those examples discussed earlier," she said, "he's between mortal and immortal."

"What does that make him, Diotima?"

"He is a great spirit, Socrates. Everything classed as a spirit falls between god and human."

Related Characters: Diotima of Mantinea, Socrates, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In Diotima's conversation with Socrates in Socrates's speech, Diotima asks Socrates a series of questions that force him to rethink his understanding of Love as a god. In his dialogue with Agathon, Socrates had already established the point that Love doesn't already possess good and beautiful things; he needs and desires them. This contradicts another statement Socrates has made, however—that the gods are perfectly happy and beautiful. If Love can be said to need and desire the things that the gods already perfectly enjoy, then he can't be a god himself. Love is, rather, a great intermediary spirit, or a *daimon*, whose job is to carry messages and gifts between mortals and gods. Diotima goes on to explain that *daimones* fill the gaps between these two states of being, helping the universe to become an interconnected whole. Besides undermining a major belief that's been expressed in most of the previous speeches (that love is a god), this idea is also a stepping-stone to the idea that Socrates/Diotima will later develop—that love isn't an end in itself, either, but is instead the search for wisdom and happiness.

"Because he is the son of Resource and Poverty, Love's situation is like this. First of all, he's always poor; far from being sensitive and beautiful, as is commonly supposed, he's tough, with hardened skin, without shoes or home. He always sleeps rough, on the ground, with no bed, lying in doorways and by roads in the open air; sharing his mother's nature, he always lives in a state of need. On the other hand, taking after his father, he schemes to get hold of beautiful and good things. He's brave, impetuous and intense; a formidable hunter, always weaving tricks; he desires knowledge and is resourceful in getting it; a lifelong lover of wisdom; clever at using magic, drugs and sophistry."

Related Characters: Diotima of Mantinea, Apollodorus (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this section of the prophetess Diotima's dialogue with Socrates, she creates a myth to explain the origins of Love, which, as she's just finished explaining, is not a god, but rather a *daimon*, an intermediary spirit. She tells the story that Love was born when Poverty, a beggar outside the feast celebrating Aphrodite's birth, contrived to reproduce with Resource. Love, the resulting child, combines aspects of both Poverty and Resource. Love is poor, tough, homeless, and needy, but Love is also a brave, resourceful trickster who loves wisdom and stops at nothing to get it. In sum, Love is poor, lacking what he needs most, but he also has the resources to search for and attain what he needs. This is a good shorthand for what Socrates and Diotima have just been discussing—that love should not be identified with the object of its desire, but rather with the ongoing quest to get what it desires. Also noteworthy is that aspects of the description of Love—especially "he's tough, with hardened skin, without shoes"—echoes descriptions of Socrates in *Symposium*. This suggests that Plato means to identify Socrates with the ideal seeker of wisdom—that is, the ideal philosopher.

"Who are the lovers of wisdom, Diotima," I asked, " if they are neither the wise nor the ignorant?"

"Even a child," she said, "would realize by now that it is those who fall between these two, and that Love is one of them. Wisdom is one of the most beautiful things, and Love is love of beauty. So Love must necessarily be a lover of wisdom; and as a lover of wisdom he falls between wisdom and ignorance. Again the reason for this is his origin: his father is wise and resourceful while his mother has neither quality. So this is the nature of the spirit of Love, my dear Socrates. But it's not at all surprising that you took the view of Love you did. To judge from what you said, I think you saw Love as the object of love instead of the lover: that's why you imagined that Love is totally beautiful. But in fact beauty, elegance, perfection and blessedness are characteristic of the object that deserves to be loved, while the lover has a quite different character, which I have described."

Related Characters: Diotima of Mantinea, Socrates, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

In his dialogue with Diotima, part of his eulogy of love at the symposium, Socrates positions himself as the learner and Diotima as the guide, in order to pick up where his earlier dialogue with Agathon—in which Agathon was the student and Socrates decidedly the guide—left off. That tactic is very clear in this quotation, in which Diotima corrects Socrates for some of the same errors Socrates had corrected in Agathon—most notably that "love [is] the object of love instead of the lover." Diotima is guiding Socrates toward the view that love is the search for the eternally beautiful—a view which requires that love *lack* something. Building off the myth of Love as the child of Poverty and Resource, Diotima reminds Socrates that it's possible for love to fall somewhere between ignorance and wisdom, because someone can certainly desire wisdom without yet possessing it; in fact, one *can't* desire wisdom without lacking it. At the same time, this doesn't make Love ignorant, because the one who's ignorant sees no lack in himself and therefore doesn't desire or look for wisdom. That Love's positive qualities all come from his father rather than his mother also underscores the idea that women are inherently inferior to men when it comes to philosophical questions like these.

204d-209e Quotes

"The idea has been put forward," she said, "that lovers are people who are looking for their own other halves. But my view is that love is directed neither at their half nor their whole unless, my friend, that turns out to be good. After all, people are even prepared to have their own feet or hands amputated if they think that those parts of themselves are diseased. I don't think that each of us is attached to his own characteristics, unless you're going to describe the good as 'his own' and as 'what belongs to him,' and the bad as 'what does not belong to him.' The point is that the only object of people's love is the good — don't you agree?"

"By Zeus, I do!" I said.

Related Characters: Diotima of Mantinea, Socrates, Apollodorus (speaker), Aristophanes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Socrates and Diotima continue their dialogue. Socrates, through Diotima, directly engages with Aristophanes's argument that lovers are in a continual search for their "other halves." This view is shown to be nonsense, as Diotima argues that even someone who's suffering from a diseased limb is willing to have that part of themselves removed so that the rest of them won't be fatally infected. This shows that such a person desires something beyond the self; the desire is rather for that person's good. Thus, there must be something beyond the characteristics of the self that is the true object of love, and it can't be neatly identified with what does or doesn't belong to a given person. This is a radical shift in the understanding of love as it's been presented in earlier speeches—Diotima goes on to make the case that love is ultimately the desire for happiness, which can only be found in the good.

"Men who are pregnant in body," she said, "are drawn more towards women; they express their love in trying to obtain for themselves immortality and remembrance and what they take to be happiness forever by producing children. Men who are pregnant in mind - there are some," she said, "who are even more pregnant in their minds than in their bodies, and are pregnant with what it is suitable for a mind to bear and bring to birth. So what is suitable? Wisdom and other kinds of virtue: these are brought to birth by all the poets and by those craftsmen who are said to be innovative."

Related Characters: Diotima of Mantinea, Apollodorus (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this part of *Symposium*, the prophetess Diotima initiates Socrates into the higher mysteries of love by explaining how love is ultimately the search for the eternal Beauty. Besides being rather intricate and puzzling to any reader (and perhaps even to Socrates himself), the passage is also countercultural in a couple of ways. For one thing, Diotima uses the feminine processes of pregnancy and childbirth to symbolize the philosophical quest, which is ironic in that women themselves weren't thought capable of philosophy. For another, she subordinates the drive to procreate and bear biological offspring to an esoteric process of "mental" pregnancy and childbirth that the average person can't comprehend. She's just finished explaining that love is the desire to possess the good and beautiful forever; now she explains that humans often pursue "eternity" in faulty, short-sighted ways. Although the drive to have and raise children does achieve a measure of immortality and is therefore understandable, it pales in significance next to the drive to possess wisdom and virtue—to participate in things that are truly limitless and everlasting.

People like that have a much closer partnership with each other and a stronger bond of friendship than parents have, because the children of their partnership are more beautiful and more immortal. Everyone would prefer to have children like that rather than human ones. People look enviously at Homer and Hesiod and other good poets, because of the kind of children they have left behind them, which provide them with immortal fame and remembrance by being immortal themselves. Or take," she said, "the children that Lycurgus left in Sparta to provide security to Sparta and, you might say, to Greece as a whole. Solon is also respected by you Athenians for the laws he fathered; and other men, in very different places, in Greece and other countries, have exhibited many fine achievements and generated virtue of every type. Many cults have been set up to honor these men as a result of children of that kind, but this has never happened as a result of human children.

Related Characters: Diotima of Mantinea, Apollodorus (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Diotima carries on her argument regarding love as the pursuit of the good. She has just finished teaching Socrates that people naturally desire to possess the good forever, but that they typically go about this in misguided ways—especially by having biological children. Diotima expands on this point by explaining that parenthood doesn't ultimately achieve the immortality that humans long for. It answers the longing to possess something that outlasts the self, but it doesn't connect the parent with something truly permanent. Poets like Homer and Hesiod, however, or the lawgivers Lycurgus (semi-legendary founder of the Spartan constitution) or Solon (shaper of the Athenian constitution) create things that propagate eternal goodness and wisdom—and it's for this reason that people continue to honor those men today. While Diotima's argument rests on a somewhat reductive view of parenthood, her point is that the quest for wisdom should continually press beyond bodily, specific things to mental, universal things.

210a-212a Quotes

❝ Looking now at beauty in general and not just at individual instances, he will no longer be slavishly attached to the beauty of a boy, or of any particular person at all, or of a specific practice. Instead of this low and small-minded slavery, he will be turned towards the great sea of beauty and gazing on it he'll give birth, through a boundless love of knowledge, to many beautiful and magnificent discourses and ideas. At last, when he has been developed and strengthened in this way, he catches sight of one special type of knowledge, whose object is the kind of beauty I shall now describe…

Related Characters: Diotima of Mantinea, Apollodorus (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

This section of Diotima's discourse with Socrates is what's often called "Diotima's ladder," or the "ladder of love." That's because Diotima begins to describe the ascent the soul must pass through in order to gain a vision of Beauty's eternal form. The emphasis in this "ascent" is always to push past individual and specific things to universal, interconnected, and expansive ideas. In commending such ideas, Diotima doesn't mean that material things are worthless, either in themselves or in the quest for beauty. One can't skip any "rungs" of the ladder, so such things as the beauty of a particular person are important steps toward being able to recognize and desire higher beauties. Nevertheless, one can't remain stuck on such particularities if one hopes to progress—this is what she means by "low and small-minded slavery." Diotima means to convey that the "great sea of beauty" is so overwhelming in its expanse that, compared to it, earthbound people and things will indeed seem like foolish traps for the senses.

❝ "When someone goes up by these stages, through loving boys in the correct way, and begins to catch sight of that beauty, he has come close to reaching the goal. This is the right method of approaching the ways of love or being led by someone else: beginning from these beautiful things always to go up with the aim of reaching that beauty. Like someone using a staircase, he should go from one to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful forms of learning. From forms of learning, he should end up at that form of learning which is of nothing other than that beauty itself, so that he can complete the process of learning what beauty really is."

Related Characters: Diotima of Mantinea, Apollodorus (speaker), Agathon, Phaedrus, Socrates

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This particularly famous passage of *Symposium* has sometimes been referred to as the "ladder of love." Diotima's ladder has six steps, which could be associated with each of the six speakers at the symposium, ascending from love of one body (Phaedrus) to a love of learning, albeit an imperfect one (Agathon), to the vision of Beauty in Socrates's speech. Certain resonances from earlier speeches can be discerned, as when Diotima refers to "loving boys in the correct way," which was also a concern

for Pausanias—though a notable difference is that Diotima makes no reference whatsoever to sexual gratification in such relationships. For her (hence for Socrates, and for Plato himself), such relationships with specific men must always give way, over time, to an appreciation for the beauty to be found in all men, both body and soul—and one must also continue ascending from there to appreciating practices and abstract forms of learning. At the top of the ladder, one finds Plato's theory of forms. These Forms are unchanging and universal, and they are the basis for understanding all of human existence and knowledge.

212b-222b Quotes

After Socrates' speech, Aristodemus said, while the others congratulated him, Aristophanes was trying to make a point, because Socrates had referred to his speech at some stage. Suddenly, there was a loud noise of knocking at the front door, which sounded like revelers, and they heard the voice of a flute-girl.

'Slaves, go and see who it is,' Agathon said. 'If it's any of my friends, invite them in; if not, tell them the symposium's over and we're just now going to bed.' Not long after, they heard the voice of Alcibiades in the courtyard; he was very drunk and was shouting loudly, asking where Agathon was and demanding to be brought to him. He was brought in, supported by the flute-girl and some of the other people in his group. He stood by the door, wearing a thick garland of ivy and violets, with masses of ribbons trailing over his head…

Related Characters: Agathon, Apollodorus (speaker), Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum, Aristophanes, Alcibiades, Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

No sooner has Socrates had a chance to finish his speech and the party guests begun to discuss it than the entire gathering is rudely interrupted. At the beginning of the symposium, the men made a point of dismissing girls and drunkenness from the proceedings, but the notorious figure of Alcibiades brings it all jarringly back again. While this seems like an anticlimax, it's actually setting up what is, ironically, one of the most important speeches in *Symposium*. After such a lofty vision of Beauty in Socrates's speech, the sordid realities of Alcibiades's very unphilosophical existence point to the necessity for philosophy in daily life. Also, Alcibiades's garland is associated with Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, so it's as if Dionysus himself has turned up at Agathon's house—the garland calls back to Agathon's joking comment, early in the dialogue, that Dionysus would decide who is the wisest man present, an honor Alcibiades ultimately bestows on Socrates.

"You've all shared the madness and Bacchic frenzy of philosophy, and so you will all hear what I have to say … But you, house-slaves, and any other crude uninitiates, put big doors on your ears!

'So, gentlemen, when the lamp was out and the slaves had left the room, I decided I shouldn't beat about the bush but tell him openly what I had in mind. I gave him a push and said, " Socrates, are you asleep?"

"Not at all," he said.

…"I think," I said, "you're the only lover I've ever had who's good enough for me, but you seem to be too shy to talk about it to me. I'll tell you how I feel about this. I think I'd be very foolish not to gratify you in this … Nothing is more important to me than becoming as good a person as possible, and I don't think anyone can help me more effectively than you can in reaching this aim. I'd be far more ashamed of what sensible people would think if I failed to gratify someone like you than of what ordinary, foolish people would think if I did.'"

Related Characters: Socrates, Alcibiades, Apollodorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Alcibiades stumbles into the scene late, after everyone, including Socrates, has already delivered their speeches. But his sketch of Socrates's character serves the purpose of illustrating the way of life which Socrates, through Diotima's words, has just commended in his own speech. His joking remark that the "uninitiates" should block their ears is a reference to the Greek mystery religions, in which only carefully prepared initiates would hear the most esoteric secrets; it suggests that his "exposé" of Socrates's character somehow parallels Diotima's initiatory teaching of Socrates. Even though he means this ironically, Alcibiades's character sketch can be seen as a concrete example of the lifestyle to which Diotima points only abstractly. Alcibiades's speech also underscores, to a greater degree than the earlier ones

did, just what a gut-wrenching struggle the philosophical quest can be. Alcibiades's relationship with Socrates has truly shaken up his life. While Diotima's ladder teaches one to rise above the particular, Alcibiades feels stuck on the puzzle Socrates presents to him, and he can't get past that puzzle in order to pursue a better life—something that was apparently true in the controversial life of the historical Alcibiades as well.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

172A-173E

The dialogue begins with Apollodorus in the middle of a conversation with an unnamed companion. His companion has asked him about a dinner party at Agathon's house, where Socrates and several others made speeches about love. Apollodorus explains that he's well prepared to answer his companion, because he'd been asked this same question by another friend, Glaucon, while he was walking to Athens the other day.

The fact that the story begins in the middle of the action is unsettling, immediately giving the reader a sense of being along for the journey. It's also curious that so many people are eager for details about a dinner party. Leaving Apollodorus's companion unidentified allows the reader to occupy the role of that companion.

Apollodorus explains that Glaucon was eager for a more exact account of what happened at the party, and knew that as Socrates's friend, Apollodorus was the best person to report what Socrates said. Apollodorus pointed out that he couldn't give an exact account, because the symposium took place a long time ago, and Apollodorus has only been Socrates's disciple for the past three years. Apollodorus explained to Glaucon that before he became Socrates's disciple, he "used to run around aimlessly," with no interest in philosophy; though he thought he was doing something important, he was actually in a "pathetic state."

Glaucon and the present-day companion are both very eager to know exactly what Socrates said at this party, which likely took place more than a decade ago. This suggests that Socrates's teachings were much sought after by this time, even if they come second- or third-hand. Apollodorus's comments on his transformed lifestyle also underscore the importance to Plato of a life spent intentionally pursuing wisdom.

Talking to Glaucon, Apollodorus explains that the dinner party took place after Agathon won a prize for the first tragedy he had written. Apollodorus heard about the party from a man named Aristodemus who was in love with Socrates at the time. Aristodemus had suggested that he relay the story as they walked along the road to Athens. Returning to his present unnamed companion, Apollodorus says he'll tell *him* the story in the same way now.

In connection with religious festivals at Athens, tragedies were performed in competition, and winning the event was a big honor. Aristodemus's feelings for Socrates hint at the upcoming discussion of the homoerotic associations of philosophy. Additionally, telling the story of the symposium as they walk is suggestive of the Platonic emphasis on the journey toward truth.

174A-177E

The narrative now shifts to Aristodemus's point of view. When Aristodemus comes across Socrates, he sees that Socrates has bathed and put on sandals, "things [Socrates hardly ever did." He asks Socrates where he's headed, and Socrates explains that he's going to the dinner party at Agathon's. Aristodemus agrees to come along, even though he wasn't invited.

The fact that Socrates doesn't normally take full baths and goes around barefoot indicates his restrained, philosophical way of life.

As Aristodemus and Socrates continue on their way to Agathon's, Socrates keeps dropping behind. He tells Aristodemus to go ahead, which means that Aristodemus arrives at the party first, uninvited. Agathon is glad to see him, though, and explains that he couldn't find him when he tried to invite him the day before. A household slave reports that Socrates is standing in a neighbor's porch and won't come in. Aristodemus explains that this is one of Socrates's habits—"he goes off and stands still wherever he happens to be."

Aristodemus is placed in a socially awkward position when Socrates lags behind. Socrates's seemingly distracted habit suggests that he's constantly thinking about philosophy and that social conventions are decidedly secondary for him.

Socrates eventually joins them at dinner. After the meal, they perform the "customary rituals," such as pouring libations and singing a hymn. Then they discuss how they will approach that evening's drinking. Pausanias says he's still recovering from the previous day's drinking and hopes they'll find an "undemanding" approach. The other guests agree, though Eryximachus points out that they don't have to account for Socrates, since "he can drink or not drink, so it'll suit him whatever we do."

The symposium was a ritual event, and determining the amount and strength of the wine to be drunk was a key element of such a gathering. The other guests' exhaustion from earlier drinking contrasts with Socrates, who can drink as much as he likes without getting drunk, which seems to be part of his overall philosophical strength and lack of vulnerability to the passions that trouble others.

They agree that each man should drink as much as he wants and no more. Eryximachus suggests that they send away the flute-girl, so that they can spend the evening in discussion. Then he proposes the topic for their discussion. Drawing on a previous conversation with Phaedrus, he says that no one has ever composed a eulogy for the ancient and important god Love (eros). Therefore each of the men should offer the finest speech he can in praise of love. They all agree.

The flute-girl, a courtesan, normally would have stayed at the party to serve and flirt with the men. Her dismissal signals that this evening will be centered much more on intellectual discussion than flirtation. Since women were viewed is irrational, they wouldn't be necessary to the proceedings; they would be an impediment, in fact.

178A-180B

Phaedrus gives the first speech. He begins by saying that Love is honored especially because of his great antiquity. Because of his old age, Love is the source of humanity's greatest benefits. There's nothing better for a young man than a good lover, Phaedrus claims, and nothing better for a good lover than a good boyfriend. Nothing besides such a relationship is effective in planting the seed for a good life. That seed is "a sense of shame at acting disgracefully and pride in acting well."

Phaedrus's perspective on love is fairly simplistic. Basically, Love should be honored because he's one of the oldest gods, and because he gives the gift of erotic relationships, such as those between older men and their "boyfriends" (boys past the age of puberty but not yet old enough to grow a beard). These relationships instill a healthy sense of shame and pride, which are important for a successful life.

Phaedrus explains that a man would be more ashamed to disgrace himself as a coward in front of his lover or boyfriend than in front of any other person. He even suggests that if there were an army made up entirely of lovers and boyfriends, these men would be so obsessed with competing for honor in each other's eyes that "they could defeat virtually the whole human race." Phaedrus also claims that only lovers are willing to die for another person, because Love grants them courage for this. Among other examples, he names Achilles, who was willing to die to avenge Patroclus in the *Iliad*.

Phaedrus envisions a useful social function for this kind of honor-obsessed love. However, it doesn't seem to be a very lofty conception, as it puts a great deal of weight on the power of shame and fear for one's reputation. This view of love is very much focused on the present life, in contrast with the focus on immortality that Socrates will present later.

180C-185C

Pausanias gives his speech next. He says that he doesn't think the guidelines for the speeches have been properly drawn. Love, he argues, isn't a single thing. There's an older, "heavenly" Aphrodite, and a younger, "common" Aphrodite. It's important to distinguish between the functions of these two, and not every type of Love or loving is deserving of praise.

Pausanias's speech, already, shows that it will be a little more rhetorically sophisticated than Phaedrus's speech was. He draws on two different Greek mythological accounts of the origin of Aphrodite, from Homer's Iliad *and Hesiod's* Theogony *respectively.*

Pausanias explains that "common" love is undiscriminating, felt by inferior people. Such people are attracted to women as much as to boys ("partners with the least possible intelligence"), and to bodies as much as to minds. They only care about getting what they want; they don't worry about acting rightly.

Associated with the "younger" Aphrodite, "common" love, as described by Pausanias, isn't concerned with loving well; it's only concerned with fulfilling one's lower, more mortal desires—as shown by the fact that even irrational women are considered suitable objects for it.

By contrast, Pausanias explains, "heavenly" love is derived from the older, more male-influenced Aphrodite and is thus directed at boys. People influenced by this type of love are drawn to boys who are beginning to develop intelligence (around the time they begin to grow a beard). When one initiates a love affair at this point, it shows that they're willing to lead "a fully shared life" and not just trick or exploit the boy. In fact, Pausanias goes on, affairs with younger boys should be illegal, because it's too early to tell whether those boys will turn out well (i.e., be worthy objects of love).

Unlike the inferior love felt toward women, "heavenly" love is discriminating, only directed toward those who have some genuine intelligence. It's concerned with behaving well and with sharing life with another person, not just fulfilling immediate desires. Pausanias himself was in a long-term relationship of this sort with Agathon.

Pausanias says that in Athens, there's a kind of double standard at play when it comes to love for boys. Lovers (i.e. older men) are indulged and admired for trying to woo boys, but at the same time, the boys' fathers try to prevent them from responding to their wooers, and their peers tease them about it. Pausanias suggests that it's all an elaborate test, allowing time to determine whether the intentions of the lover are common or heavenly and whether the boyfriend is a worthy object of love.

Pausanias's comments suggest societal ambivalence about homoerotic relationships, especially when the object of desire was a free male instead of a slave. There was still a stigma attached to being a "boyfriend," especially since it was seen as the sexually submissive role.

Pausanias says that there are certain conditions under which it's right for a boy to gratify his pursuer. The most important condition is that the lover "must be able to develop the boyfriend's understanding and virtue," and the boyfriend must desire such improvement. Such "heavenly" love, concerned on both sides with virtue, is valuable both to individuals and to cities. All other forms are merely "common."

Ultimately, Pausanias concludes that as long as lover-boyfriend relationships are focused on the imparting and attainment of virtue, they're praiseworthy and useful to society. There's still a desire for sexual gratification, particularly on the lover's side, but these relationships are somewhat closer to the kind of love that Socrates will later describe.

180D-188E

Aristophanes is supposed to speak next, but he suffers an ill-timed attack of the hiccups and must switch places with Eryximachus. Eryximachus, being a doctor, recommends some hiccup remedies, including making oneself sneeze.

The significance of Aristophanes's hiccups has been debated by Plato scholars. The hiccups might create a contrast with the careful profundity of Aristophanes's speech, or they might allow his speech to shine more by following Eryximachus's less profound one. At the very least, they provide a comic interlude.

Eryximachus claims that Pausanias didn't take his argument far enough. He says that Love isn't just expressed in the emotional reactions of human beings, but in the reactions of plants and animals, too. His practice of medicine has opened his eyes to this all-encompassing power of love. He explains that medicine is about gratifying the healthy parts of the body and not gratifying the diseased parts. It's the doctor's job to implant or remove the respective good and bad types of love, and to create harmony between "antagonistic elements" within the body.

Eryximachus's views about balancing the bodily humors are reflective of Hippocratic theories of medicine as practiced at the time. It's a strikingly different approach to love than anything the previous speakers have put forward.

Eryximachus then makes a somewhat confusing point that Love also governs the harmonies found in music. The same holds true for the seasons (temperate weather brings harvests and health) and even divination (prophecy "[keeps] an eye on those whose love is the wrong kind and curing this"). So Eryximachus claims that love's power is comprehensive, and at its best, love brings about the greatest happiness by enabling friendship between humans and between humans and the gods.

Eryximachus extrapolates from his own field of medicine to show how Love governs the ideal harmonies found throughout nature. He is basically attempting to present Love in as orderly a way as possible.

189A-193E

Aristophanes's hiccups have stopped, so it's his turn to speak. Before he begins, he jokes with Eryximachus about the "orderly" effect of the "sneeze treatment" on his hiccups. Then he starts his speech with a discussion of the history of human nature. He explains that humans used to look very different than they do now. For one thing, there were three genders—male, female, and androgynous.

Aristophanes, the comedy writer, seems to be giving the rather pompous doctor some good-natured ribbing. Then he switches to a somewhat more serious tack by engaging in mythmaking—telling a story of human origins unknown in previous Greek literature.

Humans were also shaped differently, Aristophanes says. They used to be round, with four hands, four legs, two faces, and two sets of genitals. They tumbled around in a cartwheeling fashion. They were also very strong and ambitious and even made a plan to attack the gods. To stop this from happening again, Zeus decided to cut each human in half. The resulting half-humans clung to their other halves, wanting to be reunited and neglecting to do anything else. Humans started dying off as a result.

Aristophanes's story does have a comic element and clearly isn't meant to be taken completely seriously, yet he's driving toward a serious point about love, rooted in humans's deep-seated desire for unity.

Aristophanes continues that Zeus redesigned human bodies so that they were capable of having intercourse with each other. This is how "the innate desire of human beings for each other started"—the drive to unite two original halves and heal the wound in human nature. Those men who were originally part of an androgynous whole are, as a result, sexually attracted to women; the opposite is the case for originally androgynous women; and those who were halves of a female whole are attracted to other women.

Aristophanes offers an explanation for the origins of sexual attraction in humans; Zeus provided this outlet so that humans could find the satisfaction of temporary union with one another and then go about their lives, rather than pining fruitlessly forever.

Those who were halves of a male whole, however, are attracted to other men. Aristophanes describes these as "the best of their generation" because they are "naturally the bravest." They are bold and masculine, so they also seek out these qualities in others. While "convention" may force such men to get married to women and have children, they could be quite content to spend their lives partnered with other males.

Classical Greek culture didn't tend to view heterosexual marriage as a context for romance or deeply erotic passions, so Aristophanes's theory doesn't see homoerotic desire and "conventional" marriage as mutually exclusive. In any case, Aristophanes portrays men with homoerotic desires as the most masculine, or else they would not be attracted to "manly" qualities. At the same time, Aristophanes devalues women, making it clear that they're only fit partners for lesser men.

Any person who finds his or her "other half" is overwhelmed with love for that person, Aristophanes goes on to explain. It's not just sexual intercourse that people desire, however; they can't even articulate to themselves all they want. But if Hephaestus could offer to weld lovers together for eternity, they would realize this is what they'd always wanted, echoing their original state as whole creatures. Thus, "'love' is the name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness."

Aristophanes refers to Hephaestus, the blacksmith god. Such "welding," he argues, is what humans long for but can't explain to themselves—showing that erotic desire isn't simply sexual in nature.

Aristophanes concludes by saying that the best earthly realization of this innate longing he's been talking about "is to find a loved one who naturally fits your own character." If people revere the gods, then Love will lead them toward this healing union with another person.

Aristophanes's view, that love is the search for what is most like oneself, will contrast sharply with the view that Socrates expresses later.

194A-198A

When Agathon starts his speech, he says that he will depart from his predecessors by speaking not only about Love's gifts, but also about the nature of Love himself. He says that Love is the happiest, most beautiful, and best of the gods and is drawn to what is like himself, especially the young. He is also just, moderate, courageous, and wise.

There is a tone of superior eloquence and rhetorical skill in Agathon's speech from the start—and also, perhaps, a touch of arrogance. His picture of love as youthful directly contradicts Phaedrus's claim of love's antiquity, and Agathon doesn't really offer evidence for his assertions.

In short, Agathon concludes, Love is "himself supreme in beauty and excellence" and brings about the same qualities in others. He is the most beautiful and best leader of gods and humans, all of whom should sing his praise. When Agathon finishes his speech, there are "shouts of admiration from everyone present."

In Agathon's view, love already possesses and dispenses all good things—in contrast to Socrates's view, soon to come. The crowd's immediate, enthusiastic approval suggests both that Agathon's rhetoric is superficially attractive and that his argument lines up with what is conventionally accepted.

198B-201C

Socrates agrees that Agathon's speech was filled with beautiful phrasing and says that it reminds him of the famed orator Gorgias. He goes on to say that he was mistaken in his understanding of how to eulogize a subject properly. Based on what he has heard in the others' speeches, the goal has been to give the *appearance* of praising Love—ascribing the best things to Love to make him look as good as possible—without actually doing so. He says he won't try to compete with those speeches, but offers instead to give a speech which tells the truth about Love.

Gorgias was a famous orator of the late fifth and early fourth centuries B.C.—so, he would have been influential at the time that Symposium *is set. He was known for the kind of poetic phrasing and weak argumentation found in Agathon's speech. Socrates's praise of Agathon's speech, then, isn't to be taken at face value. Likewise, Socrates has not misunderstood the goal of the evening's speeches, but is rather indirectly critiquing what's gone before. His own speech will take a different approach, and this moment serves as the first indication that Socrates's approach will be more rational and measured than those that came before.*

Socrates begins his speech by questioning Agathon on some of the points he made. First he asks Agathon, "Is it Love's nature to be love *of* something or nothing?" Agathon replies that love is *of* something, "undoubtedly." Socrates then establishes that love desires what it is love *of* and that it does not already possess that object of desire. After all, someone who is tall or wealthy doesn't desire to be tall or wealthy, but rather desires to continue being those things in the future. Therefore, desire is "desire for what isn't available and actually there. Desire and love are directed at what you don't have, what isn't there, and what you need."

This is the primary instance of typical Socratic dialectic that occurs in Symposium. *In such a dialogue, Socrates asks his conversation partner questions which are designed to show that person the inconsistency in his thinking and to lead him to a more coherent way of thinking. In this case, Socrates prompts Agathon to rethink his argument that love already has all good things within itself. He is also speaking of love or* eros *more in terms of general desire, rather than in the interpersonal sense emphasized by earlier speakers.*

Next Socrates questions Agathon about his claim that love is beautiful. If the affairs of the gods are "organized through love of beautiful things," as Agathon had said, then it follows, based on what they've just established, that love *needs* beauty and does not already possess it; therefore, it can't be said that love is beautiful. The same conclusion holds true for good things; love seeks what is good and doesn't already embody it. Agathon concedes that he can't argue against any of this.

One could question Socrates's assertion that if something "needs" beauty or goodness, that means it's totally lacking in beauty or goodness itself. However, the point is that Socrates has shown the flaw in Agathon's claim that love fully possesses all good things in itself . Agathon doesn't push back against any of Socrates's claims, showing that his speech really was fairly empty from a logical standpoint.

201D-204C

Socrates turns from his dialogue with Agathon to an account of Love he received from a wise woman called Diotima of Mantinea. He says that he had once had a dialogue with Diotima in which he made some of the same claims Agathon just made—that Love is himself beautiful and good. Diotima responded to his claim by proving the opposite.

Diotima is a prophetess figure invented by Socrates. Picturing a woman as the embodiment of wisdom is counter-cultural on Socrates's part, especially given how women have been described as irrational earlier in this very text. However, it's also notable that Diotima is not a mortal woman; her status as a prophetess suggests that regular women still can't compare with men intellectually. The structure of the coming dialogue with Diotima allows Socrates to put himself in the place of the learner and bring his audience along with him.

If Love isn't beautiful, Socrates asks, then does that mean that Love is necessarily ugly? Diotima calls this idea blasphemous. She points out that there's something between wisdom and ignorance—it's "having right opinions without being able to give reasons for having them." Likewise, it's possible to find an in-between state between good and bad, beautiful and ugly.

Diotima's teaching on the existence of intermediate states is critical for the development of her view of love.

Diotima next demonstrates that Love isn't actually a great god. This is shown by the fact that gods are happy by virtue of possessing good and beautiful things, but as they've already discussed, Love desires and *needs* good and beautiful things rather than already having them. When Socrates demands to know what sort of being Love could then be, Diotima explains that he's a great spirit—*daimon* in Greek—which falls between god and mortal. These beings convey messages between gods and humans, convey prayers and sacrifices from humans to gods, and convey commands and gifts from gods to humans.

Diotima builds on the points they've already established about Love in order to show that Love can't be a god. The Greek term daimon *refers to a being that's of a higher order than humans, yet lower than the gods, anticipating the intermediate role that Love will soon play in the discussion and setting up the idea of a link between mortality and immortality.*

Love is one of many different such *daimones*, or spirits. When Socrates asks about Love's origin, Diotima tells him a myth. After the birth of Aphrodite, the other gods, including Resource, were having a feast. Poverty was begging by the gate, and when she saw that Resource had fallen into a drunken sleep in the garden, she decided to have a child by him. So she slept with Resource, became pregnant, and gave birth to Love.

Like Aristophanes did earlier, Diotima makes up an explanatory tale. In this case, the conception of Love by Poverty and Resource illustrates that within Love is found both need and the means to satisfy that need.

As the son of Resource and Poverty, Diotima explains, Love is always poor. Far from being beautiful, "he's tough, with hardened skin, without shoes or home." He sleeps out in the open. Taking after his mother, Poverty, Love is always in a state of need. Taking after his father, Resource, he bravely "schemes to get hold of beautiful and good things." He's "resourceful in getting…knowledge" and "a lifelong lover of wisdom." Love, Diotima sums up, is neither mortal nor immortal. He's also neither wholly without resources nor truly rich, and he's in between wisdom and ignorance.

Diotima's description of Love evokes certain details about Socrates, like the fact that both go without shoes. Love also begins to be associated with the quest for knowledge and wisdom, which Diotima will champion and Socrates will embody.

Socrates wonders who "lovers of wisdom" can be, if they're neither wise nor ignorant. Diotima explains that it's simply someone, like Love, who falls between wisdom and ignorance: "Wisdom is one of the most beautiful things, and Love is love of beauty. So Love must necessarily be a lover of wisdom; and as a lover of wisdom he falls between wisdom and ignorance." She adds that Socrates had been thinking of Love as the object of the lover, but now he must see that wisdom and similar characteristics are themselves worthy of being loved, while the lover has a different character.

Diotima here returns to a critique of Agathon's argument (that love possesses in itself all good qualities), as well as Aristophanes's argument that love seeks after its own qualities. In contrast to earlier speakers, as well, she identifies Love with the questing lover. Love, while ardent, has a needy and seeking character.

204D-209E

Now that they've dealt with Love's origin and birth and Love's love *of* beautiful things, Diotima turns to the question of what exactly the lover of beautiful or good things desires. Socrates says that the lover desires that these things become his own. Diotima then asks what the lover *gets* when beautiful or good things become his own. Socrates replies that the lover will be happy.

In Greek philosophy, happiness is seen as the goal of human life, and it's not so much a subjective feeling as it is a condition of life—a state of being that's associated with virtue.

Diotima addresses the idea that lovers are people who are seeking their other halves. She rejects the idea that people are simply attached to their own characteristics; after all, people are willing to have their own diseased limbs amputated. She argues that, instead, the only object of people's love is what is good—moreover, they want to have it forever. Love, then, "is the desire to have the good forever."

Diotima explicitly rejects Aristophanes's contention that love seeks its own characteristics. She also moves toward the idea that love is the desire not merely to have good things in this life, but to have them forever.

If this is love's goal, Diotima goes on, then in what way must people pursue it? In other words, what is love's function? Socrates says he doesn't know. Diotima explains, "Love's function is giving birth in beauty both in body and in mind." Socrates is baffled. Diotima clarifies: "All human beings are pregnant in body and in mind." In adulthood, they naturally desire to give birth. Even sexual intercourse is a kind of "birth."

Socrates continues to occupy the place of the learner in his dialogue with Diotima. His bafflement shows that Diotima is getting into the more esoteric, challenging, and novel developments in Plato's thought, especially regarding sexuality and reproduction.

Diotima explains that the object of love isn't simply beauty, but "reproduction and birth in beauty." Reproduction is the object of love because it's "the closest mortals can come to being permanently alive and immortal." If the desire of love is to have the good always, then we must desire immortality along with the good; hence, immortality is the object of love.

Diotima's explanation harkens back to Aristophanes's point that intercourse is humans' attempt to regain their primordial wholeness, but she takes it further: through reproduction, humans desire to create something new and eternally lasting that will outlive their own mortal lives.

Diotima and Socrates discuss the ways of love among animals as well as humans. All mortal things continually change over time, Diotima explains, and all desire to leave behind another thing of the same type before they die. This is how mortal things share in immortality, and it's why all creatures are so eager to procreate and then to preserve the lives of their offspring. This enthusiasm to achieve immortality is love.

The immortality being discussed is not immortality of the soul—an idea that emerges more prominently in other works of Plato's—but rather immortality through reproduction, that is, passing on one's life to future generations.

Diotima goes on to explain that men who are "pregnant in body" are drawn towards women. They try to obtain immortality for themselves and "what they take to be happiness forever" by having children. However, there are also men who are "pregnant in mind," and these are pregnant with "what it is suitable for a mind to bear and bring to birth"—that is, wisdom and other virtues.

Diotima suggests that while biological reproduction can lead to a kind of immortality and a certain degree of happiness, it's inferior to the "mental" pregnancy and fathering of wisdom that other men achieve. Again, this point suggests that women's involvement in philosophical matters is inherently limited.

Diotima says that when a man who is "pregnant" in this way from his youth reaches adulthood, he's attracted to another beautiful mind, which he can educate. When he forms such a relationship, he's finally able to give birth to the "child" he's been gestating for a long time. He and his lover share in bringing up the child they've produced in this way.

When Diotima describes this type of homoerotic relationship as grounded in the pursuit of virtue, she recalls Pausanias's earlier discussion of "heavenly" love, in which it's okay for a boyfriend to sexually gratify his lover as long as they're both concerned for the boy's development of virtue. In this case, however, there's no mention of sexual gratification whatsoever.

Diotima says that men who've created and raised a "child" in this way enjoy a closer bond than parents do, because their child is "more beautiful and more immortal." People praise poets such as Homer and Hesiod because of the "children" they've left behind, "which provide them with immortal fame and remembrance by being immortal themselves." She offers a few other examples from Greek legend and history, claiming that human children never win such honor and fame for their parents.

Diotima builds her argument that reproduction through virtues, such as poetry and laws that benefit whole societies, is superior to reproduction through biological children because it creates things that truly endure for generations. Women are only able to participate in biological reproduction, so according to Diotima, their experience of love will always be inferior to men's.

210A-212A

Diotima says that perhaps even Socrates could "be initiated in the rites of love I've described so far," but the purpose of those rites is to reach "the final vision of the mysteries," and she's not sure he could manage it. Nonetheless, she begins to explain what these higher rites entail. First, when a man is young, he should be drawn toward beautiful bodies. He should first love just one body and "produce beautiful discourses" within that relationship.

Thus begins Diotima's description of a "ladder of ascent" toward the good. She describes this metaphorical ladder as a new set of religious mysteries like those that Greeks would have practiced at Delphi, where the prophetess Pythia resided and uttered oracles. Diotima, in effect, is a new prophetess for these new rites.

Next, Diotima explains, a man should realize that the beauty of one body is closely related to the beauty of another. This should lead him to become a lover of *all* beautiful bodies, and he will reject his former passion for just one body. After that, he should begin to value the beauty of minds above the beauty of bodies. As he observes more and more beauty in abstract things like practices and laws, he'll begin to see various types of beauty as closely related to one another and to realize that the beauty of bodies is petty by comparison.

Diotima proceeds up the rungs of the "ladder," showing how love for one type of beauty gradually gives rise, step by step, to more expansive perspectives on beauty. In particular, love for bodies should give way to love for minds and an appreciation for the interrelation of types of beauty.

After he has begun to see the beauty in practices, Diotima says, a man should start to see the beauty in forms of knowledge. As he learns to look at beauty in general, he should become less and less attached to particular instances of beauty. When this happens, "he will be turned towards the great sea of beauty and gazing on it he'll give birth…to many beautiful and magnificent discourses and ideas." He'll then begin to catch sight of a special kind of knowledge.

Once he is established in love for minds and practices, a man will begin to appreciate beauty in general rather than specific beauties. He will be able to give great discourses at this point. However, it isn't the final step—Diotima suggests that there is an element of divinity at play here that goes beyond the mortal acts described so far.

Diotima, reaching the pinnacle of her "ladder," explains that a man will now "reach the goal of love's ways." He will realize that "beauty always *is*, and doesn't come into being or cease." Such beauty is not beautiful relative to anything else, and it doesn't appear in any specific form—it "[appears] as in itself and by itself, always single in form; all other beautiful things share its character." Even when these other beautiful things change or cease to be, beauty itself does not change.

Diotima is describing Plato's teaching on the Form of Beauty. This Form is unchanging, stable, perceived by the mind rather than by the senses, and distinct from those particular things that share in its character.

Once someone has progressed through these stages and caught sight of beauty's ultimate form, Diotima explains, he's close to attaining his goal. She summarizes once again the **ladder** of ascent from love of particular beauties to love of beauty in general: the lover of beauty "should go from one to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful forms of learning…[to] that form of learning which is of nothing other than that beauty itself."

Diotima sums up what she's just taught Socrates, thereby underlining Plato's own perspective on the pursuit of beauty. This pursuit necessarily starts with something specific, but it must gradually become capable of seeing the beautiful beyond specific instances, until one is able to see and love beauty in its singular simplicity.

Diotima tells Socrates that this is the form of human life that ought to be lived: "gazing on beauty itself." In their current state, lovers tend to become so wrapped up in their boyfriends that they focus on their desire to be with them forever. But it's only after such lovers look beyond the trappings of physical beauty and gaze on beauty itself that they're able to give birth not just to "images of virtue…but to true virtue." Once he's given birth to and raised true virtue, a man "has the chance of becoming loved by the gods, and immortal."

The ascent to true virtue doesn't seem to be attainable by just anyone. It requires an extensive process of purification from the trappings of the senses. As long as one remains attached to mere "images of beauty" instead of the Form of beauty itself, it's impossible to produce the kind of virtue that leads to immortality. The restraint that Diotima describes here echoes the party attendees' earlier descriptions of Socrates as sober and uninterested in frivolous pursuits.

Socrates wraps up what Diotima taught him and so concludes his speech. He says that he's convinced of Diotima's teaching, and that there is no better partner in the **ascent** to immortality than Love. He tries to convince others of the same, and he praises Love at every opportunity.

Whereas Socrates had occupied the role of the learner in his dialogue with Diotima, now he returns to the role of guide, urging others toward Diotima's ladder. His eulogy of Love has ventured far beyond any of the other speakers's offerings in its philosophical sophistication.

212B-222B

While the guests are discussing Socrates's speech, there's suddenly a loud knocking on the door, the sound of revelers, and the noise of a flute-girl. Soon they hear Alcibiades's drunken voice in the courtyard, and Alcibiades is led in, wearing a garland on his head.

In contrast to the earlier dismissal of the flute-girl, creating a deliberately male-only, intellectually-oriented space—and in contrast to the loftiness of Socrates's speech—now the trappings of the outside world suddenly disrupt the gathering, marked by the drunkenness of the roguish political figure Alcibiades, who brings with him a more overt suggestion of sexuality. Alcibiades's garland is suggestive of the god Dionysus, who was associated with lack of restraint in drinking.

Alcibiades asks if he's allowed to join the party, even though he's very drunk, and promises to bestow his garland on the wisest and most beautiful man present. Everyone enthusiastically invites him in. He doesn't notice Socrates at first because of the ribbons he's wearing, which are blocking his vision. When he gives his garland to Agathon and notices Socrates, he says that Socrates has once again been lying in wait for him where he was least expected. Socrates comments that his love for Alcibiades has become a nuisance because Alcibiades is such a jealous lover.

Alcibiades and Socrates were well-known to have been lovers, a point that will be very significant for Alcibiades's forthcoming speech. The fact that the ribbons block Alcibiades's view of Socrates reinforces the idea that unrestrained frivolity can interfere with clear-eyed perception of wisdom.

Alcibiades ties some of his ribbons on Socrates. Then he "elects" himself master of ceremonies for the symposium and, because the other men aren't drunk enough, he fills a large vessel with unmixed wine. He adds to the rest of the company: "Not that my trick will have any effect on Socrates, gentlemen. However much you tell him to drink, he drinks without ever getting more drunk."

Alcibiades, in keeping with his reputation for disregarding social conventions, breaks taboos by appointing himself host of Agathon's symposium and not diluting the wine, as was proper. He also refers to Socrates's famed sobriety—Socrates is so advanced in his detachment from sensory vices that he doesn't have to make any special effort to avoid drunkenness, setting him outside the boundaries of classical Greek religion and social norms.

Eryximachus explains that evening's activity of giving eulogies in praise of love. Alcibiades ends up deciding to eulogize Socrates instead, telling the truth about his peculiarities. He compares Socrates to Marsyas the satyr, saying both are "insulting and abusive," like flute players who bewitch others by the power of their mouths.

The Greek word Alcibiades uses for "abusive," hubristes, has connotations of rape, with which satyrs were also associated. This usage is actually somewhat ironic, given Socrates's notorious sexual restraint. Flute-playing is a metaphor for Socrates's powers of speech.

Alcibiades says that anyone who hears Socrates speak or hears his words reported is spellbound by his rhetorical power. The same is true for Alcibiades himself; when Socrates speaks, "My heart pounds and tears flood out…[Socrates disturbed] my whole personality and made me dissatisfied with the slavish quality of my life." Rather than heeding this dissatisfaction, Alcibiades "neglects [himself] and instead [gets] involved in Athenian politics." Alcibiades goes on to say that Socrates is the only person in whose presence he feels shame. He agrees with what Socrates tells him to do, but he inevitably gets "carried away by the people's admiration."

Socrates was known to have tried to persuade Alcibiades to give up politics and pursue philosophy instead, but he was unable to guide Alcibiades toward becoming a better person. Alcibiades's words suggest that despite Socrates's strong rhetorical effect on him, he failed to be moved toward a higher pursuit of wisdom. Alcibiades's mention of shame also recalls Phaedrus's earlier claim that shame derived from love can be a useful motivation; Alcibiades's failure to change seems to indicate that that claim isn't valid.

Warming to his subject, Alcibiades continues that Socrates is "erotically attracted to beautiful boys," but if you were able to open him up, you'd discover that he's actually "full of moderation." He doesn't care about anyone's outward beauty or riches, but "spends his whole life pretending and playing with people."

Alcibiades presents Socrates as someone who toys with people, conveying interest in them but not actually needing to indulge his desires. Alcibiades finds Socrates's elevated way of life impossible to understand, hence his attributing it to irony or trickery rather than wisdom.

Alcibiades was once so impressed by Socrates's golden speech that he figured that if he gratified Socrates sexually, he'd be able to learn everything Socrates knows. He was therefore frustrated when he and Socrates spent a day alone together and even wrestled together in the gymnasium, but nothing sexual occurred. He even invited Socrates for dinner and made him spend the night after a long evening's conversation, but this ploy failed—Socrates "completely triumphed over [Alcibiades's] good looks" by refusing to sleep with him. Though humiliated, Alcibiades can't help admiring Socrates's self-control and tough-mindedness, feeling himself to be "more completely enslaved" to this man than ever.

Alcibiades's account of Socrates's invulnerability to his sexual charms has a humorous element, but it is also meant to show how soundly Plato rejects the type of sexual exchange Pausanias described earlier. Alcibiades is operating under the assumption that he can offer gratification in exchange for wisdom, but Socrates sees this as the wrong way of pursuing wisdom altogether. It also shows, again, Socrates's restraint; he's attained a level of wisdom that doesn't require a lower, bodily expression of love.

Sometime after this, Alcibiades and Socrates served together on an Athenian battle campaign. Alcibiades claims that Socrates endured the hardships of the battlefield better than anyone else did, even when the soldiers had to go without food. And yet, when they had a feast, "he was best able to enjoy it," and when they all drank, Socrates "beat us all at it," without getting drunk. He could also endure a bitterly cold winter while wearing thin clothing and no shoes. In another incident that Alcibiades relates, Socrates stood out in the open on the battlefield, contemplating a philosophical problem, from one dawn until the next, without moving.

Alcibiades's anecdotes are set during the Peloponnesian War, a lengthy conflict between Athens and Sparta which would still have been ongoing at the time the Symposium *is set. The anecdotes further illustrate Socrates's detachment from material things: he can enjoy them, endure them, or go without them altogether, all without overindulging or unduly suffering. The story of Socrates standing still and contemplating recalls the incident earlier in the evening of the dinner party, when Socrates lingered on a neighboring porch until he'd resolved a mental problem.*

Alcibiades concludes that Socrates is "like no other human being, either of the past or the present." He says that Socrates's discourses are difficult to understand at first, and they may even seem ridiculous, but if one takes the time to consider them, they'll find that "they're the most divine and contain the most images of virtue. They range over most—or rather all—of the subjects that you must examine if you're going to become a good person."

Despite Alcibiades's rather scornful tone at the outset of this speech, and his own inability to really understand or benefit from Socrates's teaching, he ends up vindicating Socrates. In this unlikely way, Plato portrays Socrates as the ideal philosopher.

222C-223D

After Alcibiades has finished his speech, there's some joking about his apparent love for Socrates, as well as some jostling for the opportunity to be eulogized by Socrates in turn. Soon, however, a noisy group of revelers barges into the party, "all order was abandoned," and "everyone was forced to drink vast amounts of wine." Aristodemus says that he fell asleep, and when he awoke the next morning, he saw Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes still drinking and discussing. After the other two drifted off to sleep, Socrates left the party and spent the rest of the day as he normally did, only going to bed that evening.

After Alcibiades's speech, the symposium dissolves into chaos. Socrates leaves the party and goes about his normal routine, unshaken by a night of heavy drinking and endless talk. He also departs alone, suggesting that nobody else is prepared to fully accept his teaching or follow his philosophical example for now.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*The Symposium*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Apr 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*The Symposium*." LitCharts LLC, April 6, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-symposium.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Symposium* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Plato. The Symposium. Penguin. 1999.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Plato. The Symposium. London: Penguin. 1999.