

Either/Or Study Guide

Either/Or by Søren Kierkegaard

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Plot Summary

Soren Kierkegaard is one of the prominent philosophical thinkers of the 19th century. This man is also famed for being the only Scandinavian to turn up in the international group of Modern European Philosophers of that century. The work summarized is a precious English translation. The work of translation had apparently begun as an almost guilty secret by a man named Lowrie. After he died, through his surviving wife his secluded efforts were revealed and the project of completing the work was continued. Thanks to that, there is the English edition of Either/Or, which consists solely of volume 2.

The author has made an effort to formulate a sophisticated look at marriage. There are two major elements involved. One of these is aesthetic, whereas another is ethical. Kierkegaard explores and theorizes regarding this social custom. His cultural context was so much more conservative than large tracts of contemporary America that he suffered a scandal and fled all the way to Berlin because he had become engaged to a woman and now wanted to break up with her instead of following through with the marriage. That this was seen as scandalous indicates that the culture was conservative.

There are two main parts to the text. The first is the Aesthetic Validation of Marriage. The second is called Equilibrium. The first is a lengthy discourse on multiple aspects of the marital relationship. This is done rather in terms of arguments in favor of it, with the recognition of arguments against it. The second is about other attributes of the conventional middle class man's life. Parts of this role have become familiar to modern women, sometimes voluntarily as a means to self-improvement, but other times due to troubles in relationships with men. Over all, Soren Kierkegaard gives an ethical account of modern life. He compares two different lifestyles. He calls one the aesthetic, and the other he describes as ethical. He argues in favor of marriage, overcoming a variety of objections and communicating with the reader about possible anxieties and other problems. Ultimately, he brings the minds of readers back to God. For believers this is inspiring whereas for nonbelievers it is apt to "chaff" like an overly starched tight collar.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 1, Preface & A Fragment of Life

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 1, Preface & A Fragment of Life Summary and Analysis

This work begins with some introductory material. There is a note from the translator Walter Lowrie. The editor for the edition used to create this summary is named Victor Eremita. The translator introduces readers to the author, Soren Kierkegaard. The "o" is actually the Scandinavian letter that has the diagonal line through it; this letter does not exist in the English alphabet. The translator informs readers that the translation began as a secret project by Walter Lowrie and that after his death the wife discovered the manuscript.

Following this, the work itself begins. It has the form of an epistle, opening with the almost shocking "Dear Friend," (p. 5). He makes it clear that he is writing about marriage. He then writes about messages from God. He relays the story of how King David was able to hear a parable from the Prophet Nathan and understood the message but failed to see that it had anything to do with him. Soren Kierkegaard explains to the envisioned recipient of the letter that the message was intended for King David. SK does not recount the parable. However, Kierkegaard asserts that this highly unusual and lengthy letter is intended for the reader. Marriage, morality and the related issues are meant to be both understood and applied by the reader, rather than understood as if they only applied to another.

There are attributes of the intended reader that are obvious. Those who fit the description will be pleased or may feel warned. The rest will immediately be aware that there is something that does not match or fit with the reality of themselves and that to which the work is directed. Women readers will notice that the intended audience is a man, a relatively young one, who has not seriously considered marriage. Kierkegaard enters upon a discussion of marriage. Kierkegaard then proceeds to write briefly about attraction and about how much this type of love is rooted in appearances and the aesthetic reactions. He divulges that a woman can fall in love with a man immediately from catching a glimpse of him through a window blind. A man can experience instant love by an equally fleeting glance from a woman. Soren takes this further and begins to write about a set of important, closely related principles. One of these is romantic love. Romantic love requires freedom, occurs naturally and has both eternal, religious elements and temporal earthly factors.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 2, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 2, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage Summary and Analysis

The author continues without any separation of chapters within the original text. He has introduced the topic of marriage. He has assumed that the reader is somehow resistant. Kierkegaard has brought in for discussion a set of attributes involved with marriage. One is communication about beauty and while he is not graphic about sex or sexual attraction as this point he does refer obliquely to it because he does write about "the sensuous aspect" of this. While in truth the sensuous includes a great deal more than the sexual, through doing this he has at least alluded to a subject matter which was at least as taboo or more so than found amongst the conservative environments today.

He begins to write about attitudes of mind that work against marriage. Transient, temporal love is one of these. The author may shock at least some readers by introducing another spurious idea which many will recognize, perhaps with horror, as all too often the contemporary state of affairs. One of the most prevalent errors of America in 2009 is brought up by Kierkegaard before the attitude had grown so widespread: marriage as a changeable civil contract. Herein he argues, the devotion of family life has been converted into a social arrangement that can be changed right along with one's lodgings or ownership of a house or other civil business concerns. He writes that the people living this way are practicing something immoral. Soren Kierkegaard writes that the men and women in such involvements with the constant threat that it is perfectly acceptable to simply leave for something better, or the hope of something better are going about marriage in a very wrong way indeed.

Next, the author writes about love and the lack thereof. He refers to the human conscience and claims that it is actually worse for an individual to be loved but no longer loving she [or he] who is doing the loving. Kierkegaard asserts that is worse than unrequited love; where one loves someone who does not give love in response or return. The reason for this is in part the distinction SK makes between the eternal and the temporal. The proper love for marriage includes an eternal component, and is determinedly familial. This type of love is religious. Many readers might feel the word spiritual is better suited; but this indicates a massive change in the culture.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 3, Aesthetic Validation of Marriage - First Love

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 3, Aesthetic Validation of Marriage - First Love Summary and Analysis

One important feature of love that the author has brought into the conversation is that of "first love." He writes of what a wonder this is. He also takes the trouble to show what happens to people who strive or struggle against marriage. One negative that can emerge, he writes, is that rather than continuing to honor and pay homage to first love, the attitude towards this joy changes. The approach taken turns into something derogatory; the first love is belittled and denigrated as if it was an immature and insufficient, inadequate first effort at love that has been trampled for the sake of a better one.

Kierkegaard puts forth the counter argument that first love, properly handled, does quite well to become the marriage love. In this respect, the author is gently informing readers that in some cases, it may be helpful for people to take the loves of young people, or any first love: should it come later in life, then so be it, seriously rather than as something to mock. Many readers have witnessed early loves being treated with disdain, "it is nothing but puppy love; it is fleeting and not to be taken seriously." Given what Kierkegaard has expressed when the attitude towards first love is made bad, he returns to it to show how a wholesome first love is in reality the perfect kind for a marriage. It is wholesome; there is the element of the eternal in it. It is properly viewed as sacred. It has hope that has not been hounded down and attacked by some sinister emotional equivalent of vicious hounds. Here he writes that although first love is changed by its becoming marriage, this is no error; this is a concentric change - an alteration of the order of it. When first love is transformed into married love, this is correct.

Kierkegaard takes this to the next level. He confronts the intended audience with his life as a bachelor and the sum total of his multifarious affairs. There is an edge of judgment on the part of the author about this. It would not be surprising if the audience flinches with a defensiveness. He then moves into a discussion of Christianity and spirit. He likens the two. However, he then provides a warning against "the flesh" and includes a definition of this. It is not so much the sensuous or any one thing, but is rather the attitude taken towards any quality or behavior of an individual that ruins it by making a matter of "the flesh" or of a "merely carnal nature."



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 4, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 4, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage Summary and Analysis

Here the author takes on the wedding ceremony. He is assuming a Danish Lutheran ceremony. He writes that there may well be a major difference between the way he really feels and what the wedding is like. One example is that he writes that his wife may be a woman to whom he submits wholeheartedly. Due to this, he has a rather bad reaction to the official vows that wrongly claim that he is supposed to be her leader. He writes that the vow regarding who should obey who is completely backwards: that he will obey his wife, and should but that for some reason the wedding vows state a role reversal of this.

Next, Kierkegaard writes about his feelings of devotion to her. He writes that these are wholehearted and entirely natural. This comes as a refreshing counterpoint to the claims made by many other men that their inclination is towards wanton promiscuity, but that this might be possible to contain. On the contrary, SK is offended that the Church would include this as part of the vows as if he would ever be or wish to be anything other than monogamous to his wife, the one woman whom he loves.

Finally, SK explains what it really is. He feels the Church is taking away his bride. He views the wedding ceremony as being more than "simple ceremony." He writes that during this, bizarre and unreasonably declarations are made about their relationship. Then, having sucked out much of her real vigor, the Church gives him back his wife, with the conclusion of the ceremony.

The author explains that selfishness is the real culprit. After this, he writes that the real purpose of marriage for a man, is the edification and improvement of his character. His ethical and moral natures can be effectively improved by living as a married man beyond what is possible to him while single. One reason is the children. Kierkegaard writes that the better able a man [and also for women] to recognize any children as blessings rather than burdens or curses, the better. This does something to people and affects their attitudes and behaviors in a number of ways.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 5, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 5, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage Summary and Analysis

Soren Kierkegaard continues. He is writing about marriage and many features of it. He is exploring moral concerns in relation to marriage. He also discusses morality with respect to a refusal or resistance against marriage as a way of life. At this point, he has asserted that the main purpose of marriage for a man is self-improvement. He now moves the discussion forward, by talking about motives for marriage. Material gain is one that is brought up; this can take two forms - one might be financial gain and another may well be many offspring. Bear in mind that while he has asserted that children are to be accepted into a family as a blessing he now also points out that it isn't really right for a man to marry a woman just to have her make him babies. Here, the author is delving into the morality of motivations for marriage.

One feature of Kierkegaard's time in history is the emergence of romantic love. This love was "freer" than what had at times been the case in earlier generations since this had to do with marrying from choice rather than marriage being a method of political, financial or religious alliances between families. Social status and strata are related to this problem. So to is the Romantic Movement in literature and culture. This movement was popular throughout Europe during the nineteenth century. New ideas about freedom with respect to love and changes in social policies emerged at this time. For those who had been born into generations of pre-arranged marriages devised by their elders, this came as a reaction against that. In some cases, it was about breaking down class barriers. In other cases, it turned out to be a nice idea, but rooted mainly in naivete or in the pain of unconventional or other lower class minority backgrounds - including forms of one parent homes, of families where a marriage had been broken or ceased to function.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 6, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 6, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage Summary and Analysis

The author continues on this lengthy tract about marriage. Here, he writes about three types of love. One is the love between friends, another is romantic love and finally he counts conjugal love. In the preceding chapter he went on to explain how he views marital love as a great opportunity for first love and romantic love to continue, but to operate at a new level. While continuing to develop this ethical work about marriage the author develops his narrative voice. As a writer, the quality of the work is good. Kierkegaard has devised a strong narrative voice at this point. The readers will clearly be able to tell whether or not he or she is part of the target audience. Female readers are not the target audience. This is obvious, so much so in fact that women readers may well feel actively strange about the whole thing. It can give female readers the sense of sneaking a peak at something that was designed for men. Other people who are not part of the target audience will be older men and all those who are already happily married. Only Christians are targeted as readers. The other quality is that SK wrote this from the perspective of being about seven years older than the reader. For many readers, they will simultaneously feel how much this isn't who he or she is and will also be well aware of how well the author has envisioned his reading audience.

Kierkegaard has mentioned the church before, in this discussion about the wedding ceremony. He continues this but he has introduced another important term: in this case he means "the congregation." "Let us now considerthis...congregation...Your life has surely brought you into touch not only but into intimate connection with several persons the remembrance of whom does not alarm you, does not disturb the ideal you cherish, whose names you utter aloud to yourself when you would prompt yourself to good deeds...Might it then disturb you to have such people as your confidants?" (p. 86). Twenty pages later, Kierkegaard is writing about the reality of marriage and how it may be compared to those ideas of the same thing crafted fancifully. Essentially, he has affectionately chastised the reader claiming that the poetic tendency within the reader is another culprit. He writes that many real marriages can and do survive and that it can be very helpful for participants to remain realistic in their outlook regarding what it might be like. His other main point here is that successful marriages do overcome temptations - be they to make one partner give up something highly important, or to wander off with an attractive alternative mate, or to give up as a way of getting rid of some problem.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 7, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 7, Aesthetic Validity of Marriage Summary and Analysis

"Let us now glance at the relation between romantic and conjugal love - for the relation between the natures made for conquest and for possession offers no difficulty at all. Romantic love remains abstract in itself" (p. 116). At this point there are still no chapter breaks for any divisions to the text other than paragraphs. The work is flowing like a pleasurable monologue. The structure of the work so far is as SK told the reader it would be from the beginning. It is a smooth ongoing discourse. He is advocating marriage. He is overcoming objections to it. He is showing how it is connected with pure things, wholesome matters, first love and romantic love.

He had written for a while on the connection between the private marriage and the wedding ceremony and the context of the community within which the marriage takes place. He warns the reader against being superstitious and advocates a sense of realism in order to understand the way that marital love really works. He sums up the conjugal virtues when he writes, "...conjugal love is....faithful, constant, humble, patient, long-suffering, indulgent, sincere, contented, vigilant, willing, joyful. All these virtues have the characteristic that they are inward qualifications of the individual" (p. 117).

The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage runs to page 129 of the text. Essentially, Kierkegaard has advocated the use of duty and realism within marriage hand-in-hand with romantic love and the purity of first love. The composition and combined use of factors such as these are how the author recommends that people not only get married, but actually stay that way. The entire document has been 120 pages in length. The delivery of the work has been clear enough for theologians and philosophers while being as palatable as a work of poetry or fiction.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 8, Equilibrium

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 8, Equilibrium Summary and Analysis

The next portion of the work is entitled Equilibrium. "Between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality." For the first time in this work, the author writes about "either/or." He explains that for him, this is a fairly straightforward system of making decisions. He writes that individuals are apt to suffer from regret regardless of if they choose "either" and when they choose "or" instead. During the first pages of this, SK also writes about each individual, or certainly the author, "is nothing." This he asserts is because a human being is defined with respect to relationships and that's all. When there are no relationships then there is no real being. This is a matter for legitimate debate and can certainly be subjected to a great deal more examination by readers. He becomes more difficult and writes of how there are instances where there is posited that there will be an unpleasant consequence irrespective of making a choice to "do this" or "do that." This is the problematic way that Either/Or can crop up. Next, SK moves on in the discussion to consider Either/Or and matters of choice. Either/Or is the dichotomy of choice. He uses is as the most agreeable means to express the awareness of the recognition of times to make decisions and that each choice plays out until another choice is made. For many, there are tensions that are felt in relation to these choices, and this tension is aptly expressed as Either/Or. He follows this description with more work that is closely enough related to it. He moves into a broader discussion of choice. Morality and ethics are often included in the decision-making process but on other occasions they are not. He includes a brief discussion of personality in this.

SK proposes an either/or for the reader. He proposes: you may be either a cleric/ or an actor. In real life another example of this was that Siddharta Buddha's birth chart apparently presented the case: you may be either an Emperor/ or a spiritual leader of great power. However, both of these cases are Either/Or not Both/And - the latter has been used by late 20th century and 21st century thinkers. Kierkegaard explains that release from enchantment, or to be freed of all of one's errors one may have to undo what had been done that was so effective. He uses the metaphor of a song that had enchanted an individual - to free themselves from the spell, the listener had to play the song backwards without making an error: by doing this, the music lost its power of the ones who had heard it. While this task might not be too intimidating to musicians, for those who don't have much experience playing musical instruments it can feel frighteningly hopeless.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 9, Equilibrium

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 9, Equilibrium Summary and Analysis

SK delves into philosophy. For him, philosophy is a mental intimate relationship to the past. He claims that contemplation can be useful when it enables regular people to take better care to make decisions that are rather right than wrong. He also complains that philosophy has made itself virtually useless as any kind of active endeavor. Kierkegaard would view the contemporary work in medical ethics as one of the view places where philosophy is actively and aggressively practiced in the present, but this was not the case during the time of his writing. At this point SK describes the point of view that he is using as belonging to a married man. He asserts that much of his life's pleasures derive from this state of affairs. He observes that the younger, single man's joys may seem much more exciting now, but that he should take care lest those same things turn out later on to not really be such effective sources of joy. Kierkegaard has also shown that he believes that there is something that transcends contradiction.

SK writes that love gives a man a harmonious aspect to his nature that might not be found otherwise. He writes that choosing causes a solemnity. He writes about a couple: a Count and a Countess who are renowned for their beauty. He explains that while this is not supposed to be a form of lifelong vanity, in the case of this one couple it actually is. They are high class and known as "the most handsome couple in all the land." Here there is something that sounds like a fairy tale but isn't. He writes that however wonderful this seems, the trouble with it is that it has locked the two into a temporal rather than eternal relationship with beauty. Then he writes about the importance of married love, and again asserts that he is a happy married man. After that he shows some knowledge of philosophy mainly through references to Epicurus and the Cynics.

The remainder of the first portion of Equilibrium is devoted to a description of the imaginary reader. Actual readers will feel the difference between themselves and the imagined person the author is directing the work to. He repeatedly asserts that this work is directed towards "you" and does apply "to you". This adds an eerie quality to the whole experience of the thing. Readers will feel "pegged" by some comments whereas others will very obviously not apply to themselves at all.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 10, Equilibrium

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 10, Equilibrium Summary and Analysis

The section of the book covered here begins with page 200. As in the case of the preceding work, there is no built in division such as a chapter or other headings or page breaks in the original book. The division found in the summary is artificial. The page opens while the author is deep into a discussion of repentance. Repentance is simply the activity of mending our ways or making small or large changes when we realize that we had done something wrong. Whatever the error was caused by - an emotional attitude, wrong information, spite, or hurts to which one was subjected setting off an attitude of retaliation, repentance is the process of altering one's approach to a given matter with the intention of improvement. In this context, this would often involve learning how to be a better mate, or to do better the next time, or to be more honest, or to stop hurting a loved one or relinquishing the need to be oppressive or something else. Whether it was neglecting to wash dishes or giving up murder, or abandoning deceit, repentance is a valuable activity.

He then widens the discussion about morality in more general terms. Included in this are problems relating to mysticism and other religious practices. He goes on to write that he views the ethical and the universal as being the same. He then explains that both of these are abstract. He then gets into duty, and how the personal life and the civic life reflect upon one another. Self knowledge is quite relevant during this discussion.

During the discussion of duties SK writes about how his father taught him. He writes that his father did not meddle in his son's studies at all. Studying, was his one genuine duty. His father instructed to come out third in his class at the end of it. SK writes that he felt his father's intention was to nurture independence and the progress of responsibility. This required just the right attention to relevant factors but nothing intrusive. This included such things as asking his son whether or not he actually had the time to devote to recreation or whether he had more work to do. Other than this, SK writes, his father minded his own business and let his son manage his own efforts.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 11, Equilibrium - Part 2

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 11, Equilibrium - Part 2 Summary and Analysis

The author gives some discourse regarding the value of the struggle of earning a living. While this varies in its degree of difficulty, he claims that it is ennobling and educative for the individuals who participate. Readers may find they have a variety of their own feelings about this. SK does admit that in many cases, men can be coaxed to confess that they will only work for what he calls "their daily bread" when they are not given an alternative. He writes also about money. Through doing so it is evident that he is writing from and for the middle class. He shows radical ignorance of the idle rich, or the not-so-idle rich, and he writes of poverty as if it were a frightful foreigner.

The author admits that he can be impatient with people - he is writing still to this younger man remember, who are unwilling or reluctant to work for their livings. He then apologizes to the imagined reader - the younger man, and goes on to explain how it is that it is only when individuals are willing to work that doing so can be something other than slavery. Readers who have heard the contemporary phrase "wage slave" will immediately see the point. He writes of melancholy and describes it as something from which the young man [character of the reader] suffers. He writes that this melancholy is the worst problem in the young man's life. SK asserts that this is true, and then explains that it will later prove to be the greatest gift that the same man has. He explains that it is imperative that the young man learn to manage this emotion. He writes that hiding it too much is essentially as bad as being consumed by it is. He writes that the solution is to experience and to ride out the pain involved; the real source of the melancholy.

SK writes that to be financially independent through work as part of adult life is noble enough of a task. He asks the young man to prepare himself to bear the criticisms of others when he does just this. In a way, SK is essentially writing that the conventional life is challenging enough, and that there is great value in this way of life. He is writing as a proponent of it, and writes to a man who is resisting it. Unlike those who would tirade against this, Soren Kierkegaard simply explains its virtues and encourages the reader; he also shows how many opportunities abound for the important work of cultivating the self from doing these basic things.



Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 12, Either/Or

Book 1, Either/Or : Chapter 12, Either/Or Summary and Analysis

Over all, Soren Kierkegaard has explained the conventional middle-class lifestyle for young men. He does not include any serious address of the female role in adult life. This should not be taken as an insult. Women and men do well to acknowledge the limit of the book and not pretend that this is really the same for all when in fact it is not. That being written, for modern working women, there is a great deal here worth knowing. The biggest source of relief is that Kierkegaard does not disparage marriage or family. He describes marriage as a means for a man to better himself. He writes that the kinds of joy that are found within marriage are many and while they not seem like much due to their subtlety and simplicity and docility that over the course of a lifetime these provide much that can make the real difference between being happy or unhappy as a lifestyle.

Kierkegaard provides readers with a surprisingly thorough analysis of the state of marriage. He clearly sets forth how this condition is advantageous for life. His vision of this is not particularly short-sighted, but it does not deny the power of any given moment. Included is a lengthy ethical review of marriage. This includes duty as a general topic within the lifestyle of matrimony. He explains that duty and a sense of it are both healthy. He makes it very clear that for men, the purpose of marriage is to provide conditions within which they can grow as individuals. While Kierkegaard does not give an account of his perception of a woman's role within marriage readers should understand that this was not intended as an insult.

The author is a fine writer, if the translator has been able to render the original style of the work. People reading the translation do need to be aware that a comparison has not been made between the present style and that of the original Danish. His creative powers show in the almost spooky capacity he has to give actual readers the sense that he has envisioned a very specific individual reader. The bad news is that many readers find they are not the young man to whom the work was directed. However, the quality of the writing shows through quite clearly. Soren Kierkegaard's theological and philosophical turns of mind show up just as clearly. His entire task of comparing the aesthetic lifestyle to the ethical is a bit of practical philosophy. The aesthetic life is not exactly the hedonistic approach but there are qualities about it that are similar. However, SK also shows that the ethical lifestyle is not devoid of pleasure, however much the other kind might try to complain that it is.



Either/Or : Chapter 13, Ultimatum and

Either/Or : Chapter 13, Ultimatum and Summary and Analysis

In the edition used to create this summary, there is another piece after the work called Equilibrium. It is titled Ultimatum. This work begins by describing itself as a new work after the previous set of letters. He tells the reader - this same young man - that he has received mail from an older friend who is a pastor in Jutland which has caused him to think of his other friend. He has enclosed a copy of a sermon in the letter to his friend. The sermon is titled: "The Edification Implied in the Thought That as Against God We Are Always in the Wrong." This sermon involves some of Jesus Christ's experiences in Jerusalem. He conducted a great deal of teaching and weeping there. Luke, referred to as St. Luke in The Ultimatum, proclaimed against people associated with the Temple who he regarded as being in fact, robbers. He grew unpopular with the city authorities as a direct consequence of the offensive nature of his preaching. Jerusalem is Christ's bride, a center point of all his endeavors and symbolic of the potential for the future success of his teachings.

Next, the sermon brings up the admonition that individuals and the reader do not have the right to "cavil against God." He explains that this indicates that the given individual is actually near and dear to God's heart, and this is a lofty not lowly position. He then explains that an individual does better to learn how he or she is wrong and God right, rather than trying to prove to God that he or she or you are correct and God is mistaken. Most readers may find this trivial but then again, maybe they don't. It can seem obviously true for some readers and perhaps mildly offensive for others. SK's pastor then writes that there is pain in being wrong. Not only that but admitting to being wrong is even more painful. The sermon then delves into the way people perceive and relate to their view of who is right and who is wrong. He uses the love between people first, and only then turns to God. He writes that for some reason, love of another tends to cause a person to be more likely to want to be wrong. This can even happen when one is correct, because the idea of the loved one being offensive is more disturbing than the simpler idea that one is wrong and the loved on is correct. After that, the parson shows this attitude can be taken towards God. The difference is that accepting God as "always right" is different due to the reality of His infallibility. Readers will notice how this can also be compared with parental authority.

The author explains that doubt is symptomatic of the finite. Every proper relationship is infinite, but the temporal relations are finite. In these relations it is more common to be partly right and sometimes wrong than it is to always be wrong with an infallible partner. In a way this is an effort to describe what happens whenever there is true unity of will. Unity of will leads to correct action. God's will is the perfect will. Humans have the free will and choice to go with this will or to struggle against it and be carried by it anyways.



Characters

Soren Kierkegaard

This is a Danish philosopher of the nineteenth century. He is exceptional from the European and North American philosophical perspectives because he participated successfully although he is a Scandinavian - such peoples normally "mind their own business" and keep to themselves in many international cultural activities. He worked from the Protestant Christian tradition which prevailed in his native culture. In this, he has successfully linked philosophy and theology.

Little to no information about his behavior and lifestyle is presented during the work as it might be in a biography or autobiography. However, it is hoped and believed that much about his personal values is reflected through this nonfiction writing.

This man was able to create a very clear point-of-view in terms of the narrative that is used in the course of the work. He also creates an imaginary reader, who is surprisingly detailed. Soren Kierkegaard is clearly a Christian. While there is no reason for this to come as any surprise it is evidently sincere and that shines through his entire book. *Either/Or* is just one of his published works. Through it, he espouses and explains Christian social values. The most important of these is to understand that for men, the purpose of marriage is to help them to improve their characters as individuals.

Walter Lowrie

This man has translated such a large portion of the book *Either/Or*, which is a two volume work that he is credited with having done the entire task. This man is presently deceased. The translation was performed in the 20th century. He was a scholar. He conducted much of the work in secret largely because he was humble or else simply protective. He may have intended to keep it secret until it was ready to be submitted to publishers but unfortunately died before this became a possibility.

This excellent scholar has made a great gift to humanity.

Character of the Reader

This is an odd entity. The reason for this is that the author has somehow created both ends of the dialogue. The reader is a young man. He is seven years younger than the narrative character. He is presumably Danish and 19th century. He is presumed to have at least some working knowledge of Christianity. He is not married. He has shown some reluctance or discomfort regarding this topic.

The reader is interested in love and romantic love. He has also been introduced to passions as something that can exist independently of love, or as an integrated part of



love. These, SK gives him the opportunity to explore and to think about a bit more than perhaps he has in the past.

This character is frequently directly mentioned throughout the book. This perspective is also the lens through which the others view the work. He is a reasonably intelligent fellow. The author is not condescending but is evidently attempting to teach him something.

God

God is an important entity in the book. During the entire book it is evident that when God is referred to as a human being, Jesus Christ is the entity in question. The remainder of the time, God is naturally inclusive of Jesus, but as Christ himself indicated he is the son and therefore it is possible to refer to God in a way that isn't the same as working with Jesus. As the target audience is assumed to be within the Christian world, the means of connecting with God is further assumed and strongly advised to be through Jesus Christ.

The power and infallibility of God is advanced throughout the course of the book. SK writes to readers that it is wise to follow God's advice. Any doubt about God is defined in the course of Kierkegaard's work as indicating that finitude has invaded a relationship that was meant to be infinite.

The Narrative Character

This is the character that the author uses throughout the two main portions of the book. This man is young, but not too young. He is seven years older than the reader. He is married and is very glad that he is. He is a Christian and a Dane. This is a bright, thinking 19th century man. One way this shows is some of the ways that he thinks, particularly his awareness regarding romantic love. This included ideas of increased freedom on the part of young people to marry whomever they liked - to choose their own mates rather than having them chosen for them.

This man mixes theological ideas, including the distinction between love and lust. Readers may find this familiar or they may be part of the school of 20th century thought where love has endeavored to be the constant companion of desire with habituated success. The author means to show how marriage is in fact the best way to give loving expression to the passions.

The narrative character is also at least somewhat versed in philosophy. He makes some distinctions between one type of philosophy and another. He furthers the differentiation process by making a criticism of the state of philosophy at the time of his writing the book.



First Love

This is actually incredibly important. The author delves into this very deeply. The first love is at once a relationship with another and an orientation. It is not the same as what readers know as the sexual orientation, but it is very much an orientation. The first love is not wounded nor scarred from prior experience. At the same time, it is a naive and innocent position. First love does not know what's coming, and what is coming varies. First love can be the everlasting love. In fact, SK educates readers by explaining that the first love taken as that very love that is found within marriage is very much right and "on track" with regard to the truth of what married love is meant to be and to be about.

First love obviously does not make "a person" in the usual sense. However, it is a condition found in a person that is of great significance. The author explains that this indicates the eternal quality of relationship.

The author also readily gets into the nasty realities of human behavior. People have been taught, sometimes, to denigrate and to even debase first love. He claims that in truth, first love is the superior or the equal of any love that follows it. He also writes that in many cases, the most fortunate know this and are with their first loves whereas others who make the mistake of making a mockery of their first love may find that they gain nothing by pursuing or hoping for a second one, or still more. SK makes it clear that it is a major mistake to debase or to disregard any individual's first love. Young, middle-aged or old, people may need to be cautious about tendencies to belittle another's affections.

Cain

This man is infamous for murdering his own brother. The story is that he was overcome by a fit of jealousy. He is the first generation of offspring born to Adam and Eve according to the Judaic tradition. He is mentioned unfortunately for this act. Eventually, he has a brother again, when his parents give birth to a son, but after he killed Abel, it was a long time coming. While there is more to Cain than the killing of his brother Abel, his reputation has been permanently marked by doing this.

Adam

This is the first man. He was created by God from an unspecified source. He is the first husband and first father. He starts out in the Garden of Paradise but because his wife is seduced by a serpent and he buys into the situation, following her lead even though she made a mistake both of them are banished from that same garden. He is mentioned in more than one location during the course of the book, but shows up mainly in the early portion.



Eve

This is the first woman of the official Judaic history of myths. Eve was produced from Adam, the first man. This may indicate a political change from a matriarchal or egalitarian culture to one of patriarchy. Her lineage is his lineage. She begins her life in a Garden of Paradise created by God in which they have freedom of action. She is seduced by another male entity, this one is known to posterity as a serpent. Serpents were prevalent as a symbol, but they were as apt to be signs of wisdom as of trouble in the ancient world. Here, the serpent was trouble, and he deceived Eve such that she went and partook of forbidden fruit. God forbade this, but the serpent encouraged and enticed her to go against God's recommendation. Due to this, she ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. She then lured her husband Adam into doing this. After Adam ate some of the same fruit, God turned up and the couple learned that they were in trouble. God cast them out of Paradise because of this.

Even continued on as Adam's mate and to his credit, Adam stuck with his wife Eve despite having to share in this punishment that resulted initially from her error. At the same time, the "original guilt" is known to have been the serpent's and everyone knows that Eve was actually tricked into making this mistake.

Scribe

This is another case where the role has been used as a replacement of the name. This is mentioned as a character every now and then during the course of the text. It is not frequent but occurs. Normally, the Scribe is mentioned by SK when he is discussing ancient texts and practices.

Epicurus

Epicurus is mentioned along with the Cynics during an early part of the book when Kierkegaard is critiquing philosophy. Where it should be a practice, he writes, it has been reduced to a work of history. Epicurean philosophy is that of moderation: Epicurus argued that excesses are the root of all trouble. This is true is the excess is ascetic and deprivation or over indulgence.



Objects/Places

Berlin

This German city is cited during the introduction. Soren Kierkegaard ran away from his girlfriend, all the way to Berlin. This occurred because he wanted to persuade her to break up with him despite their being engaged to be married to one another. Berlin is one of the major cities of the nation of Germany. Germany did not become one German nation as it is presently known until 1840 or thereabouts. However, that was simply an increased level of socio-political order. The German languages, peoples, religious practices, princes and free cities had been there prior to this emergence of the nation that included it all. Berlin was an important sight of trade then as it is now.

Jerusalem

This city is mentioned during the Ultimatum. At this juncture the context is a sermon by a parson; this may well be another character created by Soren Kierkegaard. Jerusalem comes up as one of the locations of Jesus Christ's teachings where in reality he provoked and irritated the local political leaders, admonishing them for their greed and improper means of obtaining funding - ergo, robbery of their own people.

Temple

This is a sight of worship. It can refer to a place in a church where there is an altar or it refers to "a Jewish church" "a synagogue." This is something mentioned a few times in the book.

Church

In this book, the Church usually means a Christian church. Sometimes it means the entire organization. However, in SK's context, the important distinction is that it is that he is likely to be referring to the Danish Christian Church as distinct from the Roman Catholic Church. Denmark is one of those countries where they decided they had better make their monarch the official head of the nation's body of churches. This may have been a defense against residual Romanism intimately associated with the Roman Catholic Church, as the clerics had all been double dipped as Roman officials.

Husband

Though not an object in the usual sense, the role of husband as a personal and social position is one of the main features of the entire book. This is both to gently encourage someone who is not trying this, to at least consider it. Fears are overcome, in the hopes



that the young man will see that being a husband and father is actually quite a good thing.

Denmark

Denmark is the Southernmost nation of Scandinavia. This peninsula which is "the South of the North" has had its own part to play in Europe for centuries. Its role in the book is that the author is from this country and lived in it throughout his life. Denmark is not explicitly mentioned during the book but is taken as a cultural presumption just as the majority of the summary readers will be taking the USA or Canada as their "cultural presumption."

Ecclesiastes

This is one book of The Bible. The author refers to it on page 126 during a part of the discussion where he is clarifying that duty is not meant to be the destruction of love at all.

The State

He refers to this as such also on page 126. He is describing both "The State" and "The Church" at once. He refers to both of these as legitimate public authorities which have the power to make him do certain things.

Letter

The entire work is designed as a set of two letters. In this sense, these mean a hand written, or otherwise assembled message designed to reach a specific individual. They can be strictly professional or they can be delivered for personal reasons or as a combination of these. The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage is one letter, albeit a quasi-fictional one. The other letter is Equilibrium.

Either/Or

While also not an object in itself, this dichotomy characterizes one main philosophical idea of the author's. In the worst cases, either/or means that given two courses of action, whichever is taken will yield severe consequences. In the best cases, either/or simply describes life's decisions as if they were forks in the road; it is easy enough to proceed down either road and whichever way is chosen the effects extend into the future.



Wedding Ceremony

The author writes about this during part of the first long letter. There is one of these. The author writes about his own personal bias that the official ceremony does not precisely express his personal beliefs about marriage. He cites obedience as one example. He feels that even if in truth he is to obey his wife if he has any hope of success at all, then there is something deeply deceptive about the official Christian ceremony in which the groom will be told that he is now in charge of his wife. He expresses that there is more to a wedding ceremony than "just the rite" - that there is some kind of magic to it, whether sociological or otherwise.



Themes

Marriage

Much of this work is an examination of marriage. It shows how marriage is a good thing. It strives to overcome many objections to it. The discourse is directed towards a mysterious yet almost discernible young man who has never seriously considered marriage. Either that, or when he has he has viewed it more with dismay or anxiety than with true joy. The narrative posture is that of the more mature man. This older fellow is seven years older than the reader. He is also married. He is very glad that he is married, rather than discontent within this situation.

Marriage is viewed as a means for a man to better himself in this book. Soren Kierkegaard highly recommends it, and he does so for this reason. To some this comes as a relief. To others, there may be some anxiety. Much of the work is devoted to exploring the nature of the love that one finds in a marriage. He goes to some lengths to show that romantic love and first love both have their proper place within the context of marriage.

Soren Kierkegaard explains that there are two elements also worthy of taking into consideration. One of these is that marriage is meant to be eternal. Those who take this spiritually are taking the author the right way. This is actually an incredibly important point about first love and about the eternal nature of marriage.

Marriage is also a source of many comforts and joys. Even though he readily admits that there are times when the happiness within married life may seem, not pale, but subtle when compared with the wilder excitements available, in the long run these same sources of joy make the the difference between a happy life and an unhappy one. These comforts include the sensuous parts and reveling in beauty. It also involves the kinds of security that can be involved with a permanent connection. In addition to this the arrival and growth of children is a definite blessing of marriage. Kierkegaard explains that part of the adult maturation process and learning is to fully realize and accept this as being the truth - that children are a real blessing. For those who know this, this may seem trivial but for those who still tremble in fear at the mere idea of having to contend with the arrival of babies, this is a crucial lesson.

Christian Thought in the 19th Century

SK is clearly a Christian thinker. This may come as no surprise at all or as a bit of a shock depending upon what people expected when they began to read the book. Theology is continually practiced. For many readers this is something that can be taken for granted. In other cases, Christian theology may be viewed as daunting, or dull. In this work, Kierkegaard shows how it can be exercised in the daily life of the reader. One way of practicing Christianity according to SK is to be married.



At the time that SK wrote this, Christianity and philosophy had a specific relationship with one another. Philosophy was practiced by both pagans and Christians, and later of course also Muslims. Once Judaism had developed the branch of it known as Christianity, and this had become well established, then it grew to overshadow and to control philosophy. Over the course of centuries, the educational system within Europe converted to Christianity. Later, the other main pathways to knowledge - science and philosophy asserted themselves along with the arts within an academic environment. This included the works of philosophers. This mass scale effort created conflict with the Catholic Church. Some of the conflict has been embodied by the Protestant Reformation which had had a few hundred years to settle in with respect to Europe. It was during the 1700s and 1800s that philosophers could be published, taught and even paid despite having drawn honest but blasphemous conclusions from their work. The purpose was not so much to rebel as it was to search relentlessly for the truth and to share the means and results of that search with others. Kierkegaard represents a generation that was finally able to acknowledge non Christian and nonreligious ideas. The difference this makes, is that his writing about Christian theological and ethical ideas is an actual choice. It is important for thinkers to know that he was not compelled to couch his philosophical ideas into Christian language with the same vigor as people of two, three or four centuries earlier.

Kierkegaard does a wonderful job of showing how a handful of important Christian ideas can be applied to love and marriage. Also important is that the experience is relatively painless. The author endeavors to "edify" to give benevolent advice and instruction. This is not the same as "to chastise." While he does this, the whole work is not devoted to putting the reader into a state of pain but is more directed towards the alleviation of pain and suffering.

Creative Writing and Point-of-View

The author is really a fine writer. This compliment has the limitation of referring to English translations of the work. He has a very powerful narrative voice. He writes intentionally from the perspective of a character. This is relatively rare for books of the kind that Kierkegaard has produced. Soren Kierkegaard does this to such an extent that the book resembles a play to a greater degree than most. It would be more akin to a novel with the idea that the narrator writes the novel from the perspective of one of the characters: however, SK has breached another general rule of creative writing. This book isn't a novel. Therefore, the point-of-view isn't quite as straightforward as having been the first person perspective for a novel. Then again, if publishers wanted to market this guidebook for marriage as a novel, they could do it. Shelf-stockers beware, this one can befuddle. The book is dedicated to nonfiction in terms of the principles and lifestyle under discussion. The narrative voice is never explicitly described as being a self-portrait of the author, or if it has been contrived by the author with the use of the standard "creative license" this is the way it resembles a play.

The author has also done something that is a bit akin to a play and that is to have formulated an entire character as his reader. The qualities are rather specific. The



reader is a man who is seven years younger than SK himself as the narrator. The man is not married nor has he ever been. The man is Danish. The man has at least heard of the Romantic Movement which had swept through Europe. He is familiar with Christianity and may or may not be dedicated to this. He has not seriously considered marriage but is old enough if he doesn't, he might "go astray." At times the author treats him as though he already has and is wondering whether or not there is any chance of getting him back.

Women's Rights

Soren Kierkegaard does put forth attitudes about women in this book. What is most notable and comes as a great relief after reading the works of men who don't even like women, is that Kierkegaard actually does. He writes boldly and without shame that "it is no wonder women want equal rights." He writes elsewhere that within the framework of marriage, the relationship between men and women has further opportunities to be worked out.

He writes that every man has both good and evil to offer and SK dares to advise that a man ought view his wife not only as a great means of personal betterment but also as an excellent partner-in-crime. He writes that while there are also power and leadership issues in most marriages that not every marriage needs be alike. He writes that despotism from either party is often more a source of trouble than one of success. He refers to the strength of women. Here, he is not just writing about pure musculature or the potential for it but the over all entity and character: the whole spirit of the entity.

The work is not dedicated exclusively to the women's movement. However, during a century when women's progress was heard of, there are some thinkers amongst the men of renown who mention it. Dostoyevsky is another example of 19th century men who acknowledge the well known effort by women to establish equal rights within the cultures they are writing in. The views of women presented by men in 19th century literature vary. While Hegel respected women, he falls short of Kierkegaard's view that women are the equals of men in value, and that society needs to be transformed to better express this. Readers may or may not be aware that Kierkegaard's view actually is Christian - Christ repeatedly advocated a better life for women as part of his teachings. While people continue to bicker vigorously regarding the social roles of women and men and the way these influence societal perceptions and attitudes regarding equality, the bottom line here is that SK is a friend of woman's rather than her enemy or oppressor.



Style

Perspective

The author is a 19th century man. He is a Dane of Scandinavia. Due to this, he might think of himself as a Southerner even though most will view him as a man of the far North. He is Christian man, of a Protestant country. The nation's religion is Lutheran. The politics of religion were worked out such that his monarch was also the head of the nation's clerics. While this does not suit North Americans who keep their heads of state and their chief clerics separate despite the evident mutual influence, it was viewed as the best solution for the monarchistic Danes of the era. Essentially, this meant that Denmark was independent of the Pope in Rome, Italy. Some might justifiably suggest that this is actually indicative of the demise of the Roman Empire and the victory of Gutenberg's printing press and those others who brought the Christian teachings into the common languages of the local people. Part of the misunderstanding in this case was caused by the change in the role and use of Latin. For centuries this was one of the best international and universal languages available to all humankind. As such, one can see why it would have been used by the Church and clerics. Obviously, for those unwilling or unable to develop knowledge of or even literacy in this language it ceases to be an asset at this point and becomes a liability.

Soren Kierkegaard conducted the majority of his writing as a young and middle aged man. He died at the early age of 42. He is knowledgeable and well educated, having completed graduate school training to be a scholar. He is aware of contemporary debate and with the work of the incredibly profound German Christian philosopher - Gottfried Wilhelm Hegel. He was all well enough versed in theology to be able to make respectable arguments. He was creative genius of his age. He was broad minded and at the same time his life and work to show just how much he was also a product of his culture and the time in history.

Tone

The tone of the work is in some respects complex yet in other regards quite simple. The author is clearly educating his audience. He is providing life instruction. He is working to allay the fears of a younger man. All of this makes the tone sympathetic and caring. The author is very creative. His exposition is clear and very pleasurable for readers. He is able to create an exceptionally personal tone to the work and yet the means he uses to achieve this remain elusive.

If there is any one thing that SK's writing is, it's smooth. The topics do change over the course of time, but there is a focus. The aesthetic validity of marriage shows that youthful ideas about what makes us happy can be found through marriage. This is essentially an enticement back into the wholesome, and away from the corrupted forms of the romantic view. These corruptions include attitudes such as denigrating first love.



Kierkegaard instead points out that the first love is quite real. The other difficulty has to do with the attitudes involved in including others. He draws out questions regarding why there are underlying suggestions of assumptions that the first one is apt to be "not good enough" but one found later "might be." This isn't really how it works, the author explains.

Explanation and description are both used extensively throughout the work. This is part of what keeps the quality of the work so personal. He writes as a more mature fellow giving a younger friend some benevolent advice. He attracts the readers high-mindedness by writing about romantic love, which is an important idea. All he does is gently point out to the reader that bringing this tender young love into a state of matrimony is probably not a mistake. In fact, within such a state, the whole thing can flourish.

Another aspect of the tone could be called "nurturing." The author does not resort to pretense in that the older man is just seven years senior to the reader. The other main difference is that he is versed in matrimony. At the time of writing he is happily living the married lifestyle.

Structure

The structure of the work is rather clear. There are three main sections of text. This is the closest thing to chapters that are found in this work. The first of these is The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage. It is followed by another large section known as Equilibrium. There is a shorter work after this, called the Ultimatum. These are surrounded by other factors. One of these is of course the introductory pieces.

The beginning of the book has a Translator's Preface. Within this, Walter Lowrie tells the true story of how the manuscript was first discovered. The sequence of events that were sparked off by the find are included. Following that is the Introduction by the Translator.

Much later, then, at the end of the book there is a little more. These are simply the Notes and the Index.

The book as a whole is fluid. Between the introductory materials and notes the rest has been intentionally designed as two very long letters. This has been done intentionally. The author is actually quite good at it. There is no avoiding SK's mastery of the personal and interpersonal. Because he has so clearly envisioned the reader, he has been able to craft the work at least as well as any of today's best direct marketing mailings. Unlike those, however, the message is book length and includes sophisticated yet clear ideas.



Quotes

"He explains that 'to choose oneself' is only another expression for the Socratic injunction 'to know oneself'" (p. xiii).

"Only after SK had returned to Copenhagen early in March 1842 was he completely free to devote himself to Either/Or, and presumably the whole of the first volume was written then, in about five months. The whole manuscript had to be copied by a scribe in order to preserve the secret of his authorship" (p. xiii).

"In conclusion, I must speak of the Sermon with which the book ends. It is described as an Ultimatum [originally in italics]. This means not merely a conclusion but a challenging conclusion" (p. xvi)

"My Friend, The lines upon which your eye first falls were written last" (p.5).

"Look you, my young friend, this is not the coquetry of the first days of love-making; it is not an essay in experimental eroticism, as when in the period of his engagement pretty much every man has proposed to himself and to his fiancée the question whether she been in love before, or whether he himself has loved anyone before; but this is the downright seriousness of life, and yet it is not cold, uncomely, unerotic, unpoetic. And truly I take it very much to heart that really loves me and that I really love her ... the point with me is to constantly renew the first love, and this again in such a way that for me it has just as much religious as aesthetic significance" (p. 9).

"What wonder then, that women want emancipation- one of the ugly phenomena of our age for which men are responsible. The eternal element in love becomes an object of derision...What I say here applies not only to a seducer here and there who sneaks about in the world like a beast of prey" (p. 19).

"The eternal, which (as has been shown above) is properly a part of every marriage, is not really present here...We have now seen how romantic love was built upon an illusion" (p. 24).

"You rage like a Herod from one child-murder to another. You are able, then, to talk without end about cowardly and unmanly it is to cling to the first, asserting that the truth is acquired, not in what is given" (p. 33).

"Then we read the words that 'God blessed them.' These words people completely overlook. And when in one place the Apostle Paul admonishes woman with a good deal of severity to 'learn in quietness with all subjection' and to 'be in quietness,' and thereupon, having stopped her mouth, he adds, to humiliate her still more, 'she shall be saved through child-bearing,' I truly never would have forgiven the Apostle for this base opinion, if he had not it alright again by adding, 'if they (i.e. the children) continue in faith and love and sanctification with sobriety'" (p. 59).



"I have only loved once and am still indescribably happy in this love" (p. 163).

"Every kind of love has its distinct characteristic, love for God has its absolute characteristic, its expression is repentance. And what is all other love in comparison with this?" (p. 183).

"He who strives for the daily bread sees at once that these passions fail him...The conflict for daily bread is ennobling and educative because it does not permit a man to deceive himself with regard to his own situation" (p. 238).



Topics for Discussion

Do you think Soren Kierkegaard distorts God in this work? Why or why not?

What is your favorite part of this book and why?

What is the main purpose of marriage for men according to Soren Kierkegaard in Either/Or?

What is Soren Kierkegaard's attitude to women?

What does SK see as the main objection to marriage?

Why is SK's book viewed as both philosophy and as literature?

Do you like the way that SK wrote this book - in the form of two gargantuan letters to a younger male friend? Why or why not.