Eros the Bittersweet Study Guide

Eros the Bittersweet by Anne Carson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Eros: The Bittersweet was written by Canadian poet of professor of Classics and comparative literature Anne Carson. Carson is an expert in ancient Greek literature, particularly poetry. As such, she employs her knowledge of the structure and purpose of, in particular, the Socratic dialogues and Greek lyric poetry to analyze the nature of love and the deep connection between love and linguistic devices like metaphors.

The two primary sources of analysis that are threaded throughout the book are Sappho's Fragment 31 and two Socratic dialogues, the Phaedrus and the Lysias. The beginning of the book focuses on Sappho, one of the great Greek lyric poets, being born somewhere between 630 and 612 B.C. Little of her poetry survives. Fragment 31 concerns the bittersweet nature of Eros. The Socratic dialogues the Lysias and the Phaedrus concern both the nature of love and the nature of language and their connection. However, many more ancient Greek pieces are analyzed.

Eros: The Bittersweet is primarily focused on explaining the nature of romantic love, or Eros. Carson's primary claim is that Eros is necessarily bittersweet, that it cannot be separated from its paradoxical combination of pleasure and pain. The lover only has Eros when she wants what she cannot have, and so when she faces love, she engages in a triangular relationship between the lover, the loved and the space between them.

The pleasure of love comes from desiring something that is distant and the pain comes from the realization, first, that one is separated from the beloved, second, that the lover has given part of herself away and wants it back, and third, that the love cannot last forever and seeks its own resolution. Fourth, there is a kind of falsity in love because it aims to make the possible actual by bringing the dream of Eros into reality. The problem is that the lover inevitably distorts and exaggerates the reality of the loved such that having the loved is a disappointment.

Carson argues that there is a deep analogy between the lover on the one hand and the writer and the reader on the other. She claims that when the writer writes, she tries to capture in words her imagination, bringing the possible back to the actual and finding both pleasure and disappointment in capturing the reality in her mind. The reader also lusts to finish a good book, but simultaneously does not want the book to end. She is compelled forward to the end of what she desires because she desires it.

Carson often analogizes all three phenomena to the nature of the metaphor, which imperfectly captures the real in a symbol. She focuses on the differences between oral and written communication in Greek culture to accentuate the connection she draws between love and language in classical Greek writings. Eros: The Bittersweet is a short book but packed with meaning; the reader will want to read the book with some knowledge of ancient Greek culture, philosophy and history in order to fully appreciate it.

Prologue, Chapters 1-6, Bittersweet, Gone, Ruse, Tactics, The Reach, Finding the Edge

Prologue, Chapters 1-6, Bittersweet, Gone, Ruse, Tactics, The Reach, Finding the Edge Summary and Analysis

Eros: The Bittersweet concerns the "delight we take in metaphor" and focuses on the function of meaning, the relationship between the normal and the conventions of communication. It also concerns why people love to fall in love, why beauty moves the mind. The lover suppresses the irrelevant.

Chapter 1, Bittersweet, notes that in Greek mythology, Sappho first called Eros, romantic love, "bittersweet." Experiencing Eros combines pleasure and pain but the pain is less obvious. Eros creeps up on individuals from outside, and nothing can stop it from approaching. It brings with it hate, and so the paradox in the "love-hate" relationship is born. This combination of love and hate is an enemy. Carson illustrates this theme with Greek poetry. Love and hate produce a number of "crises" that can be sensed and all require impossible decisions. The lover is divided between two states of mind and pulls between the good and the bad. The author wants to know why.

Chapter 2, Gone, claims that the question may have many answers. First, the lover wants what he does not have and often what is impossible to have. The game of achieving what is loved is often a kind of torture, and in fact, all human desire is rooted in this paradox where love and hate are motivating energies. The Greeks invented Eros to denote desiring something that is already gone, not something that is possessed.

In Chapter 3, Ruse, Eros, then, is a sort of lack, and this is obvious. The lack has a powerful effect on emotion and action. Some poetic illustrations of Eros depict it as jealousy, but the Greek term for jealousy also means "fervent pursuit", which is a "hot and corrosive" spiritual movement. In fact, jealousy does not denote the heart of Eros, neither do mere erotic responses nor praise. Carson illustrates these points by analyzing a poem of Sappho's. Sappho thinks desire is a kind of love triangle which is inherently a ruse, but this form of desire, this Eros, is not a ruse.

In fact, Eros involves three structural components—lover, beloved and the barrier between them. When these three elements are combined, lovers are both connected and held apart. In this relation, the distinction between what is and what is hoped for is revealed. The triangle in fact presents a ruse, the ruse of the heart and language that hides the deep desire of Eros. In Eros people do not cross the barrier, only desire. And thus, "Eros is a verb".

Chapter 4, Tactics, describes one ruse as the rival between the lover and the beloved. But it is the space the rival enters that has the power. Lovers who cannot cross the space throw things across it, such as declarations of love. Erotic "shame", or the resistance of admitting erotic attachment, also crosses the barrier. Carson argues that this form of shame is illustrated in Greek art and poetry. Again, Eros is a lack of. The code of the erotic, the way lovers speak across the space, expresses this lack.

Chapter 5, The Reach, argues that the space is essential to Eros; without it, desire ends. Sappho also illustrates this point in writing. Often the crossing of the space ends in disappointment. In response, lovers often resist crossing the space. They preserve the compound experience of love that explains how Eros's reach is manifested in action, through the beautiful embodied in its object, through being foiled in the attempt to achieve its object and the endlessness or timelessness of the desire.

Chapter 6, Finding the Edge, notes the Eros has trouble with boundaries because he not only pushes against them but only exists because of them. Eros enters between reach and resistance and between the fear of expressing unrequited love. Eros also manifests a tension when the lover tries to dissolve the bounds of flesh and self between two individuals and realizes this cannot be done. Often Eros will emanate from the lover to the beloved but reflect back to the lover and his lack. Most love poems focus on this lack, not the beloved. The want that Eros presents removed a part of the lover that the lover misses; the lover misses being whole and tries to recover what is lost. This is demonstrated in Aristophanes's description of lovers as people cut in half.

Chapters 7-12, Logic at the Edge, Archiolochos at Edge, Alphabetic Edge, What Does the Lover Want from Love?, Symbolon, A Novel Sense

Chapters 7-12, Logic at the Edge, Archiolochos at Edge, Alphabetic Edge, What Does the Lover Want from Love?, Symbolon, A Novel Sense Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7, Logic at the Edge, begins by arguing that when one desires another, she loses a part of herself because she only wants because the wanted has partaken in herself. The lover loses vital self. But in losing this part of the self, the lover notices her limits and realizes the nature of what she lost. The sweetness of Eros, therefore, comes from absence and pain. Carson then points out how puns, by mixing the meanings of words, are linguistic symbols of the mixing of self. Eros teaches a man about himself by directing him to the other. In this way the self is enlarged, which is unnerving and becomes ridiculous. Desire changes the lover; it alters his identity.

In Chapter 8, Losing the Edge, Carson argues that the self forms around desire and evolves with awareness of the self that results from desire. The lover often experiences a heightened sense of her own personality. For some poets, a change in the self is a loss of the self. The loss of self is often represented with metaphors of piercing, crushing and the like. Carson then transitions into an analysis of the Greek social conditions under which the idea of Eros arose. He notes that ancient cultures were often oral rather than literate countries and so had a different approach to expression revealed in their literature. Less inhibition of the senses is required, and this shapes the self.

Chapter 9, Archilochos at the Edge, notes that Archilochos, a lyric poet, benefitted from a revolution in literacy, which Carson then proceeds to analyze. From the analysis, one finds that Eros often leads powerful individuals to adopt a total vulnerability; Eros makes everyone vulnerable. Carson then argues that in an oral culture like the Greek culture, philosophers sometimes posited a universe where there was no space between things; interaction was constant and there were no edges that divided things. Eros leads one to desire such a world. The concept of an "edge", or a distinction between concepts and persons, is then analyzed. The entire chapter illustrates its main points by analyzing the writings of Archilochus. Writing often shows how personality is lost in translation, which illustrates the realization that the lover and the loved are not one.

Chapter 10, Alphabetic Edge, discusses the importance of the Greek alphabet which was an important novelty which helped humanity express its thought. The language was created by taking over the syllabic sign-system of the Phoenicians and changing it, but there was still a conceptual leap forward. As Carson analyzes the nature of the Greek alphabet, she analogizes Eros to the alphabet because of an ancient analogy between language as love and their shared element of breath. Eros emphasizes edges of human beings and spaces between them; words require consonants and their edges to make distinct words. The Greek alphabet was conceived as a system of outlines or edges, which makes it a good analogy with Eros. Carson argues that Eros operates by an analogous act of imagination and that this fact is astounding.

Chapter 11, What Does the Lover Want from Love?, claims that on the surface, the lover wants the beloved, but on a deeper level, this is not really true. Instead, she wants a new possible self. Eros helps the actual and ideal self meet. Eros has the symptom of simultaneous pleasure and pain; lack animates. It is no coincidence that the lack expressed by Eros is a lack between what we are and what we want to be. Again, Carson illustrates with a number of artists. Eros also produces a sense that one is about to realize something not realized before because the possibility of a new sort of self is revealed. There is an edge between the ideal self and actual self; knowing both at once is the "subterfuge" called Eros.

Chapter 12, Symbolon, argues that the sweetness and bitterness of Eros cannot be separated and many do not realize this. Carson analogizes the loving self with the thinking mind, which jumps into the unknown for understanding. And when one reaches into the unknown, one often loses sight of who one is. The mind is then split between the known and the unknown just as the lover is split. Eros and knowing become paradoxical, and the bitter and sweet intersect. The lover is arrested when they meet by the realization that she is not what she would like to be. Together, these two halves of identity have one meaning. The lover becomes a symbol because she is the projection of this divided sense of self.

Chapter 13-18, A Novel Sense, Something Paradoxical, My Page Makes Love, Letters, Letters, Folded Meanings, Bellerophon Is Quite Wrong After All

Chapter 13-18, A Novel Sense, Something Paradoxical, My Page Makes Love, Letters, Letters, Folded Meanings, Bellerophon Is Quite Wrong After All Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 13, A Novel Sense, Carson claims that imagination is the core of desire and lies at the heart of metaphor. Writing and reading also require imagination. There is an analogy between the question of what the lover wants from love and what the reader wants from reading. Novels are the answer, and Carson demonstrates this through an analysis of some Greek novels. Novels, like Eros, involve triangulation, employing dilemmas and contradictions. Aphrodite as a character in Greek novels represents Eros in bringing together bridge and groom. But while romantic heroes and heroines say they aim at marriage, they are often at odds with the novelist. The writer wants the story to end, but "not yet", and the reader feels the same way. The lover also wants consummation but doesn't want the love to end either. This tension produces bittersweetness.

Chapter 14, Something Paradoxical, notes that novel critics believe that paradox is the heart of the genre; novel characters often exhibit an emotional schizophrenia which leads to emotional schism. Carson illustrates with examples. The novelist tries to create pleasure and pain at once, as Eros does.

Chapter 15, My Page Makes Love, starts with some examples of the tie between novelist and Eros, focusing in particular on the novelist Longus in Daphnis and Chloe. Carson finds the triangular relation of Eros within it and believes that Longus is trying to give the reader an extended experience of metaphor that is like Eros. As the reader reads, her mind moves from characters and events to a more symbolic analytical level. The activity delights, but often results in feelings of loss. Exegesis, for instance, takes one away from being absorbed in the novel. But one meaning is composed out of these acts.

In Chapter 16, Letters, Letters exclaims that the Greek for'"letters" can refer both to alphabet characters and epistles. Novels contain both and offer two perspectives on desire. Carson then brings this theme out of Clitophon and Leucippe, a novel written by Achilles Tatius, and Heliodoros's novel Aethiopica. Both chagrin and delight is produced in these novels when the authors employ particular ruses to set up erotic triangles.

Chapter 17, Folded Meanings, argues that the ancients used writing and reading to produce privacy and secrecy, since reading and writing were so uncommon. But letters can still become a private code between the writer and the reader by producing meanings inaccessible to others. Writings often hide meanings in a way that spoken words do not. Meanings can thereby be "folded" in by writing. Private meanings of this sort were literal facts for ancient readers.

Chapter 18, Bellerophon Is Quite Wrong After All, argues that the story of Bellerophon's erotic triangles is ideal matter for a novel, as Homer clearly recognizes. Bellerophon was a young man the gods gifted with great beauty. King Proitos's wife, Anteia, becomes "maddened by desire" for him. This leads to Anteia to inflame her husband's jealousy, leading him to desire to kill the young man. Bellerophon is thereby a living metaphor for the space element of Eros, where Anteia desires him and Proitos wants to destroy him, a man who is deeply beautiful. Carson then completes the chapter by musing on the fact that Homer does not bring this element out in his story; she thinks, though, that the representation of Eros is one source of the novel's greatness.

Chapters 19-24, Realist, Ice-pleasure, Now Then, Erotikos Logos, The Sidestep, Damage to the Living

Chapters 19-24, Realist, Ice-pleasure, Now Then, Erotikos Logos, The Sidestep, Damage to the Living Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 19, Pursuit, Carson argues it is an old truth that utterance is erotic in general. A discourse forms an erotic edge between vowels and consonants. In both writing and loving, we never quite say what we mean, and those we love are not quite like we desire them. Eros is in between the imagined and the real. Reading and desiring teach us about edges. We wonder if what the reader wants from reading and the lover wants from loving are triangular experiences reaching for the unknown. When you desire the unknown, you perceive the edges of yourself. Since desire helps us find our edges, it helps us find ourselves, so Eros is in one sense desire for desire.

Chapter 20, Ice-Pleasure, argues that a desire, as it wants to bring the absent to the present, is also a desire to leave the present. When you arrive, the desire will be gone, and this produces a bittersweet realization. Carson illustrates in Sophocles's play The Lovers of Achilles, where love is compared to the child grasping at ice crystals, watching them melt in her hand. "Ice-pleasure" - that pleasure of holding the ice - produces a novelty that is undone. In fact, ice must melt for it to be desirable; otherwise it would not be interesting. Carson then describes the phenomenology of the suspense of love and ice-pleasure. Again, Eros contains a paradox and is thereby bittersweet.

In Chapter 21, Now Then, it is claimed that experiencing Eros involves studying ambiguities in time. Lovers are always waiting, as we often find in love unrequited. And so lovers think a lot about time. Desire increases as time progresses without contact. In fact, the lover would control time, but in this way Eros controls the lover. Some lyric poems are analyzed to analyze this point further. These poems describe the experience of the present that is affected by an echo of the past. Carson argues that reading and writing involve the same experiences, for when we read or write we have an experience of control that is really beyond us.

Chapter 22, Erotikos Logos, briefly analyzes the Lysias, a Platonic dialogue, where love and love of words are connected.

Chapter 23, The Sidestep, claims that the passage from the Lysias should remove preconceived notions about love and the speech Lysias gives within is subversive. Lysias claims that it is better to have an erotic experience with a nonlover than a lover because of how love ends, because those in love do not believe it will end. And yet love

always ends; it must end or it would not be worth pursuing. Carson illustrates this point through an extended analysis of the speech.

Chapter 24, Damage to the Living, argues that damage is the subject of the Platonic dialogue Phaedrus. Damage comes in two sorts in the dialogue, damage done by lovers due to their desire and the other done by writing and reading to communicate. Eros harms the beloved when the lover becomes controlling to freeze the lover in time. The writer does the same when she represents reality in words.

Chapters 25-30, Midas, Cicadas, Gardening for Fun and Profit, Something Serious Is Missing, Takeover, Read Me the Bit Again

Chapters 25-30, Midas, Cicadas, Gardening for Fun and Profit, Something Serious Is Missing, Takeover, Read Me the Bit Again Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 25, Midas, Carson points out that Lysias prefers the nonlover on moral grounds because he sidesteps the radical focus that Eros puts on the "now" in the lover's mind and thus avoids a loss of self-control. AId in this way, Midas is actually a good analogy to the lover, who is divided by his desire to touch and not to touch at the same time. The golden touch is a symbol of a perfect, self-destroying yet self-maintaining desire.

Chapter 26, Cicadas, points out that cicadas spend their entire lives in starvation, always pursuing their desires; they thereby represent the ultimate dilemma of the erotic. Eros force the lover to confront time with her own desire. Cicadas' lives are defined by their desire; so is the lover's. The nonlover avoids this by avoiding desire.

In Chapter 27, Gardening for Fun and Profit, Carson argues that gardeners are like cicadas, writers and lovers as well. They can manipulate and defy temporal conditions but are constantly undermined. Carson then analyzes the gardens of Adonis on this basis. Gardens simulate living discourse, but gardeners often try to freeze flowers in bloom and thereby are always desperate and disappointed.

Chapter 28, Something Serious Is Missing, argues that the lover asks time to give her the love that is endless when there is no such thing. It is the essence of Eros to die and so we desire the impossible; time reveals the impossibility. Love is often seen as a suspension of time because we long for it to be distinct from real and ordinary life.

In Chapter 29, Takeover, Carson continues her analysis of Plato's Lysias. Lysias thinks he can control all the risks and seductions of Eros by engaging in careful emotional calculus. If he thinks like the nonlover, he thinks she can maintain love, but by removing Eros from calculation, love is lost. Lovers desire self-control, but by loving, they inevitably lose it. Therefore, the Greek lyric corpus often represents love as an assault from without that controls the body. The nonlover avoids desire by taking no risks; but taking no risks means no Eros.

Chapter 30, Read Me the Bit Again, continues analyzing Lysias's speech. Socrates's examination of the speech leads him to argue that the love story begins when Eros enters you, and the biggest risk you take is when you take Eros on. In that moment, you see what you are, what you lack and what you could be. Lysias's speech eliminates this moment of time, the moment of mania. Lysias omits the now but Socrates thinks this cannot be done.

Chapter 31-34, Then Ends Where Now Begins, What a Difference a Wing Makes, What Is This Dialogue About?, Mythoplokos

Chapter 31-34, Then Ends Where Now Begins, What a Difference a Wing Makes, What Is This Dialogue About?, Mythoplokos Summary and Analysis

Chapter 31, Then Ends Where Now Begins, first claims that Eros changes the person drastically so as to seem like a different person, and should be described as a kind of madness. For the Greeks, change of self is the loss of self and is thought to be a great evil. For Socrates, however, erotic mania is valuable, but only in private life. Socrates and Lysias differ greatly over Socrates's embrace of the erotic attitude and Lysias's rejection of it. Plato, in the form of Socrates, understands the "wings" of Eros not as a form of control, but as having a natural root in the soul, taking us back to our home among the gods in our preexisting state of being pure soul. In Eros we glimpse the "beginning" of immortality that is a soul. This moment is a "now."

Chapter 32, What a Difference a Wing Makes, describes the difference between a mortal and an immortal in terms of the possession of wings. Lysias hates how Eros begins because he sees it as an end, but Socrates enjoys it because he thinks in the end it has no end. Wings denote endlessness. Nonetheless, for both, something is lost because ordinary life falls away. Carson claims that for the Greeks, gods see reality differently than mortals do, and Eros brings a picture of that perspective. This too is represented in Eros's wings in its anthropomorphized representation. However, Eros's presentation of the perspective of the gods is necessarily fleeting.

Chapter 33, What Is This Dialogue About?, continues to analyze the Phaedrus, claiming that it explores the dangers of controlled time. For Socrates, both language and love possess this danger because they must be lived out in time, though in a sense both strive for timelessness. Again, the tragedy of Eros is that it exists in the actual while necessarily striving for the possible, which is represented in many of the Greek lyric passages Carson has analyzed. Eros is the difference between the actual and the possible, for when you reach for it from the actual, it disappears. The Phaedrus, in the same way, is a dialogue that discredits written dialogues.

In Chapter 34, Mythoplokos, asks us to imagine a city where desire does not exist while people continue their ordinary activities. It is a city with no imagination; people think of only what they are already familiar with. Desire engages in fiction and falsification, what Aristotle calls phantasia. In lyric poems, novels and philosophical dialectic, imagination

is represented, as is desire. Again, in Sappho's fragment 31, an "erotic triangle" forms between Eros's three aspects, lover, beloved and space. Desire cannot be understood without this three place relation. Eros is a kind of story or imagining carried on between these elements in the lover's mind which contains both bitterness and delight.

Carson reads Greek texts as wooing both love and knowledge. Socrates sees love and knowledge as one, whereas Sappho keeps them apart. Carson argues that the mind contains both elements, generalizing commonalities from particulars all the while dividing things into classes. We impose sameness on difference and difference on sameness. Socrates places Eros in the meeting of the general and the particular. The philosopher and the poet both see Eros in terms of wings and flying because desire brings the heart from here to there and creates a story. Eros becomes a proposition that carries great risk, the same risk of reaching from the known to the unknown. Socrates thought the risk worth taking since he loved the very act of wooing. Carson thinks that we all are similarly in love.

Characters

Anne Carson

Anne Carson is the author of Eros: The Bittersweet. Born in 1950 in Toronto, Carson is a poet, translator, essay writer and a professor of classics and comparative literature at the University of Michigan. Little is publicly known about her private life, about which she reveals little. To date, Carson has written ten books, but her first book other than her dissertation was Eros: The Bittersweet. After the book was published, she soon became well-known in the international poetry community.

Eros: The Bittersweet displays Carson's varied talents all at once. First, she displays a deep known of ancient Greek literature, particularly of Greek poetry, but also of Greek philosophy in Plato and Aristotle, among others. She will often review the actual Greek text of whatever poem or passage she is analyzing and present her own translation of the text right after it. Carson displays a deep familiarity with her authors and is able to generalize about their works as a whole; consequently, she is knowledgeable enough to make a range of broad claims about the nature of Greek literary culture between the sixth and third centuries B.C. in particular.

It is clear that, despite her privacy, Carson is deeply passionate not only about her subject matter, but also about the mystery of Eros, her interest in which may indeed have come from her own life experience. Carson clearly finds the analysis of Eros exciting and draws powerful and dramatic conclusions from the arguments she gives.

The Lover

The primary character in Eros: The Bittersweet is the archetypal lover. While not a real person, the lover is supposed to represent the person who is beginning to fall in love and the one who pursues love until it is inevitably lost. Carson argues that, following the Greek poets and philosophers, the lover has a number of surprising properties. First, Eros changes the lover into a different person, not only because of emotional changes and a new obsessiveness with a single object but because the lover gives a part of herself to the loved and then strives to get it back.

The lover is also caught in generated a three place relation between herself, the loved and the space between. The space between lover and beloved is one that lover wants to cross but it is also one that the lover resists crossing about of fear of what she will find on the other side—both fear of whether the person they love measures up to their imagination and whether the love could truly last. Thus, ironically, in some sense, the lover desires the space between herself and the loved.

The lover, by seeking to traverse the space between herself and the loved, actually seeks to achieve a higher and more perfect form of herself. The unachieved loved represents the difference between the actual and the possible. Eros transforms one

from focusing on the actual to focusing on the possible, from being unhappy with what is to striving to achieve what is not but what seems always to be in reach. The distance between actual and possible enlivens the imagination and generates a new self-image.

The Loved

The loved is the object of affection of the lover. The lover often falsifies the true nature of the loved in part to increase the passion that she feels, which in turn increases the bitterness when she is confronted with reality.

Sappho

An Ancient Greek poet, born between 630 and 612 B.C. whose poems are left only to modernity in the form of fragments. Carson finds the theme of Eros's bittersweet quality in Sappho's Fragment 31 which she analyzes in detail.

Socrates

The fourth century B.C. father of philosophy, Plato's dialogues account for nearly all we know of his life of questions and dialogue. Carson analyzes Socrates's discussion of Lysias's speech in Plato's Phaedrus and makes other remarks about Socrates as well.

Plato

Socrates's greatest students, Plato wrote the Socratic dialogues in part to record the great philosophical achievements of his teacher.

Lysias

A speech writer in Ancient Greece whose speech by Socrates in Plato's Phaedrus and that Carson uses to illustrate some of her views about Eros.

Writers

Writers, like lovers, both seek to eliminate and hold onto the space between the actual and the possible; in their case, the space between what they have written and what they would like to express.

Readers

Readers, like writers, both want to finish a book that they love but also do not want to finish it such that when it ends, they too experience a form of bittersweetness that is Eros.

Bellerophon

A hero of Greek mythology who is hated by Proetus the king in Tiryns because his wife, Anteia, fell in love with him. Bellerophon represents the divided soul afflicted with Eros, feeling both pleasure (as with Anteia) and hatred (as with Proetus) at the same time.

Sophocles

An ancient Greek playwright and contemporary of Socrates, Sophocles's plays are discussed in Eros: The Bittersweet.

Aristotle

Plato's student and another one of history's great philosophers, some elements of Aristotle's philosophy are utilized in Eros: The Bittersweet, such as Aristotle's idea of man's natural desire for happiness.

Objects/Places

Eros

Eros is the Greek concept of love that Carson analyzes throughout the entire book. Carson argues that Eros is inevitably bittersweet, that it could not possibly be otherwise.

Bittersweetness

The necessary quality of Eros that makes it both wonderful and painful at the same time.

The Triangular Relation

The essential relation Eros creates between lover, loved and the space between them.

The Edge

The boundary between the lover and the loved that cannot be traversed.

The Greek Alphabet

The first alphabet capable of profound poetic expression and philosophical analysis.

Greek Lyric Poetry

Carson analyzes Greek lyric poetry in order to uncover the nature of Eros.

Sappho's Fragment 31

One of Sappho's more famous fragments, Carson uses it to analyze Eros.

Plato's Phaedrus

One of the Socratic dialogues where Socrates analyzes one of the Greek speechwriter Lysias's speech which leads to a disagreement over the nature of love.

Lysias's Speech

Lysias's speech argues that relationships should avoid love due to its various drawbacks.

Actual and Possible

The lover, reader and writer seek to bridge the actual and the possible but cannot successfully do so.

Time

Eros seeks timelessness and when it fails to achieve timelessness bitterness is produced.

'Now'

That period of the beginning of love that is in one way timeless.

Themes

Eros is Bittersweet

The title of the book "Eros: The Bittersweet" denotes its primary theme. Carson argues that the nature of Eros, or love, is that it is bittersweet. The sweetness or pleasure of love is obvious: it is wonderful to be in love and in many cases being in love is one of the most meaningful and sought after occurrences in modern (and perhaps ancient) life. The lover yearns for the beloved and hopefully receives that yearning in return.

However, Eros has a shadow, or a dark side that manifests in several ways. First, the lover confronts a space between her and the beloved that cannot be traversed for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact of their separate bodies and minds. Second, the lover's ideal image of the loved is always greater than the loved herself. Thus, Eros brings disappointment. In this way, the lover desires to retain the space between her and the beloved because she doesn't want the love that she feels to end.

Eros is bittersweet in another way as well. Carson argues that when one allows Eros to take over one's heart, she will inevitably give a part of herself to the loved and seek after it; she will also have a kind of identity crisis as Eros takes over her life. Further, Eros will bring disappointment because love cannot last forever.

Language and Love

As the book progresses, Carson introduces a deep analogy between language and love. As a literary analyst, Carson is prone to tie her understanding of love to the work that she loves and so the reader should not be surprised. However, Carson makes a compelling case that language and love have a certain analogy. One can understand the analogy as occurring in three ways.

First, language itself fails to capture reality entirely and the very structure of words, through consonants and vowels, manifest their own "edges" or divisions between expressed thoughts. Carson thinks the Greek alphabet in particular has this element and was among the first languages to achieve this capacity.

Second, the writer experiences a bittersweetness akin to the lover. Writers must cross the space between the actual and the possible, just as the lover does. She must attempt to turn what she imagines into words on a page and will inevitably imperfectly capture her subject matter. And so, on the one hand, the writer will experience joy in her writing but a shadow of disappointment will color her happiness.

Third, the reader experiences bittersweetness as well. Imagine reading an exciting book. On the one hand, you love the characters and the plot and can't wait to see how the book ends. On the other hand, you do not want the book to end; you want to have a timeless contact with the characters. But the book must come to an end and so the

pleasure of reading a good book is mixed with sadness, just as the experience of Eros is.

Is Eros Worthwhile?

Carson believes that Eros is dangerous. Many Greek poets described Eros as bringing a kind of madness onto the person that experiences it. Eros also takes an emotional toll on the lover because she gives up a part of herself and may not be able to get it back. It threatens the lover with emotional breakdown if her love is unrequited, her experience of the loved disappoints her or if and when the feeling of Eros comes to an end.

Carson illustrates the dangers with a number of texts, but she focuses on Plato's Phaedrus when a speechwriter named Lysias gives a speech on why Eros is to be avoided due to its great risks. Socrates, however, disagrees. He acknowledges its risks but thinks that they are worth taking. Socrates also disagrees with Lysias about the costs of Eros because he thinks that in one sense Eros can last forever, because in the moment of falling in love, the "now" one experiences a timelessness that represents the state prior to existence where the soul existed in its purest state.

Carson seems to clearly agree with Socrates that it is worth the risk to have Eros. Nothing in the world is without cost, and while there is a certain sadness in realizing that Eros has costs and involves great risks, very few people refuse to engage in Eros unless they have been terribly hurt and have lost their ability to trust others. Carson seems to admire Eros to love love, and she also thinks that the lover loves Eros as well.

Style

Perspective

Anne Carson is a Classics Professor at the University of Michigan, who also teaches comparative literature. She is also a poet, essay writer and translator of Greek poetry. In 2000, Carson landed a MacArthur "genius grant" fellowship, indicating a sharp, creative mind. Carson was fascinated by Greek poetry and classical literature generally from an early age and has become one of masters.

Carson's mastery is clearly demonstrated in the book, both in her work as a poetry and as a philosophical analyst. Carson comes to the table clearly enamored with the classical Greek poets and philosophers. She not only illustrates their conception of love from their writings, but seems to nearly wholeheartedly endorse not only their understanding of love but a universal conception of love that extends to the present day. Carson's primary bias is arguably her disposition to regard what Greek authors claimed about love over two thousand years ago is almost entirely valid today.

Carson's perspective is suffused with a duality between the rigorous analysis involved in reading philosophical texts like the Phaedrus and the literary analysis required to unpack Greek poetry in a manner accessible to the reader.

Carson seems to have an underlying argument in the book that is not entirely apparent. Carson's goal in Eros: The Bittersweet seems not only to be to analyze the nature of Eros but to actually convince the reader that it is worth one's while to let Eros into one's life.

Tone

Anne Carson has written a work of both philosophy and poetry in Eros: The Bittersweet; it is appropriate that she focused on both the poet and the philosopher's perspective on love. But as such, the book contains a tone that combines the lyric quality of the poet and the philosopher's focused element of dialectic and rigorous analysis.

As a poet, Carson is effusive emotional and writes as lyrically as a partly philosophical book can be. For instance, she will often try to sum up her philosophical analysis of the concept of Eros with pithy statements meant to represent deep truths, such as "Eros is a verb." She also expresses more romantic intensity about her subject than a modern analytic work of philosophy typically does. A book of philosophical and literary analysis is typically dry, and so Carson's effusive, lyrical tone is unusual in that respect.

Carson also has the tone of a poet when she reproduces Greek poetry in the book. She expresses admiration for the powerful emotional force of the work of the Greek writers she discusses. She is particularly enamored with Sappho and Socrates, both of whom she thinks are fascinating and beautiful individuals.

As a philosopher, Carson's analysis is careful and thoughtful. She makes an extended argument and illustrates a number of different facets of Eros that she combines effectively. The tone thereby takes on a particular sturdiness and clarity along with its lyrical and effusive aspects.

Structure

Eros: The Bittersweet is a short book comprised of many small chapters. The overarching structure of the book runs something like as follows: In the first several chapters, Carson explains the concept of Eros and the sense in which it is bittersweet. She introduces the triangular relationships between the lover, the loved and the space between and the essential boundary and distance between the lover and the loved. Carson engages the fragmented poems of Sappho more than any other near the beginning.

As the book progresses, Carson increases the degree of literary analysis she engages in while starting to draw her analogy between the bittersweetness of love and the bittersweetness experienced by the writer and the reader. She argues that even the alphabet and words themselves contain a bittersweet quality and argues that the written word inevitably leaves out what the imagination and spoken word express.

By the second half of the book, Carson, who had up until this point been largely analyzing poems, turns increasingly to analyzing Socratic dialogues and focuses on the "now", or timeless moment in love. She deepens the reader's understanding of the bittersweetness of love through the examples of King Midas and the Cicado and briefly analogizes Eros with gardening. By the last quarter of the book, Carson is focused on Plato's Phaedrus, a Socratic dialogue that contains a speech by a speechwriter named Lysias and Socrates's critique of it all of which concern the philosophy of love.

Throughout the book, despite its varying literary topics and analogies, Carson attempts to unpack the mysterious and paradoxical concept of Eros, particularly in Greek lyric poetry and the chapters can largely be seen in this light as a whole but the literary elements carry important significance in their own right.

Chapter structures typically contain analysis interspersed with printed poems, often first in Greek then English and analysis of the text followed by more explanation and general arguments.

Quotes

"The story is about the delight we take in metaphor." (
Prologue, xi

"The story concerns the reason why we love to fall in love."
Prologue, xi

"All human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies."
Chap. 2, p. 11

"Eros is a verb."
Chap. 3, p. 17

"Love does not happen without loss of vital self. The lover is the loser."
Chap. 7, p. 32

"The fact that Eros operates by means of an analogous act of imagination will soon be seen to be the most astounding thing about Eros."
Chap. 10, p. 61

"An edge between two images that cannot merge in a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of reality—one is actual, one is possible. To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called Eros."
Chap. 11, p. 69

"Let us superimpose on the question 'What does the lover want from love' the questions 'What does the reader want from reading'' What is the writer's desire?' novels are the answer."
Chap. 13, p. 78

"Bellerophon is a living metaphor for the blind point of Eros, carrying on his face (beauty) and in his hands (tablet) a meaning he does not decode."
Chap. 18, p. 104

"We are finally let to suspect that what the reader wants from reading and what the lover wants from love are experiences of very similar design. It is a necessarily triangular design, and it embodies a reach for the unknown."
Chap. 19, p. 109

"The action of Eros does harm to the beloved when the lover takes a certain controlling attitude, an attitude whose most striking feature is its determination to freeze the beloved in time."
Chap. 24, p. 130

"Perfect desire is perfect impasse."
Chap. 25, p. 136

"Something is missing from such a love affair, as life is missing from the garden, something essential: Eros."
Chap. 28, p. 146

"You perceive what you are, what you lack, what you could be."
Chap. 30, p. 153

"[Eros] never looks at you from the place from which you see him. Something moves in the space between. That is the most erotic thing about Eros."
Chap. 33, p. 167

"Eros is always a story in which lover, beloved and the difference between them interact. The interaction is a fiction arranged by the mind of the lover."
Chap. 34, p. 169

"[Eros] is a high-risk proposition, as Socrates saw quite clearly, to reach for the difference between known and unknown. He thought the risk worthwhile, because he was in love with the wooing itself. And who is not?"
Chap. 35, p. 173

Topics for Discussion

Why is Eros bittersweet? Explain in detail.

Explain the triangular relationship Carson thinks is produced by Eros; why are these three elements essential to one another?

What points does Carson draw about Eros from Sappho's Fragment 31?

What points does Carson draw about love and language from the two Socratic dialogues analyzed towards the end of the book?

Explain Carson's analogy between the lover and the writer/reader.

To what extent does Carson's analysis of Eros connect to your own experiences of romantic love? Without going into too much personal detail, explain as best you can.

Analyze two of Carson's arguments that Eros is bittersweet. Are they successful? Why or why not?