

Symposium Study Guide

Symposium by Plato

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Plot Summary

Apollodorus tells the story of a drinking party or symposium that occurs long ago. Socrates and Aristodemus go to a party given for Agathon, since Agathon has just won a contest for the performance of his tragedy. The men there talk and drink and then decide that each should give a speech in praise of the god, Love.

Phaedrus first gives a speech. He tells about the courage that a lover and his beloved have when they are going to battle together. Phaedrus gives the example of Achilles, who avenges his lover, Patroclus, though Achilles knows it will lead to his own death. Next Pausanias gives a speech and suggests conditions for a successful relationship between the lover and the beloved. He says that the relationship must focus on developing the personality and the mind of the beloved, the boyfriend. Relationships purely for physical gratification are wrong, although a boy who enters into such a relationship may do so believing it is to develop his mind. In this case, it is not the boy's fault. To get the higher level of relationship, the lover is socially encouraged, but the boy is socially discouraged to fall in love.

Aristophanes, the famous author of plays is supposed to speak next but has the hiccups; therefore, the next speech is that of Eryximachus, the doctor. Eryximachus says that the practice of medicine is governed by the god of Love. Love governs the way the body reacts and is regulated. If someone has diseases, whether they recover or not is also affected by love and love's effect on the body. A doctor encourages and gives love to what is healthy in a patient and discourages what is unhealthy. What is unhealthy in the patient is due to the wrong type of love. Then, Aristophanes tells a story that in the beginning, man is a creature of four legs with one head and two faces opposite each other. These creatures are a double male, a double female, or a male, female creature. The gods split them in two because they are too troublesome. Now the two halves want to reunite again, and that is the source of human love.

Socrates tells the lesson about love that he learned from the woman named Diotima. Socrates asks the same questions to Diotima in the story he tells, as Socrates has just asked Agathon. If love is not beautiful, does that mean it has to be ugly? Diotima tells Socrates that Love is the child of the god, Resource and the spirit, Poverty. Love is poor and tough, but it schemes to succeed and get the object of love. The purpose of love is to reproduce. Lesser men reproduce with women and have children. Intellectual men reproduce their ideas in younger men by dialogue, as Socrates does. Great men write laws and win battles, and become the "father" of their country, through love. As Socrates ends his speech, Alcibiades comes running into the house, drunk. He sees Socrates, and Alcibiades give a speech on the truth about Socrates.

Alcibiades claims that Socrates has assaulted him and mentally abused him. Alcibiades says that Socrates bewitches and seduces people with his speeches, like a seductive flute playing music. Socrates spends time around boys and young men and is excited by them, says Alcibiades. Socrates comes on by saying that he knows nothing, but this is all an act. Socrates really doesn't care if someone is beautiful or rich. Inside his mind,



Socrates is beautiful and full of wonderful ideas. So Alcibiades gets the idea of having Socrates seduce him, and in that way, make Socrates his own. Alcibiades brings Socrates home and tries his best but fails to seduce or be seduced by Socrates. The party ends in disorder, and the next morning Socrates is still engaged in dialogue with other men.



Part 1, line 172a to line 177e

Part 1, line 172a to line 177e Summary

The drinking party occurred a long time ago. Apollodorus has listened to Socrates every day for the last three years. The report about the party comes from Aristodemus, who is enamored of Socrates. The party is at Agathon's house, who just won a contest for his successful performance of the tragedy he writes. Apollodorus tells his companion a story.

Aristodemus meets Socrates, who is dressed up and wearing sandals. Aristodemus complains that he is an inferior man going to the better man's party, and that he isn't even invited but decides to go with Socrates to Agathon's house. Socrates drops behind, lost in his own thoughts. Agathon has a slave look for Socrates. Aristodemus feels better because Agathon has already invited him, but he didn't see him before to give him the invitation. Socrates is lost in his thoughts for a while, then comes into Agathon's house. The men talk about whether to get drunk. Socrates can either drink a lot, a little, or not at all and never seems drunk in any case. Eryximachus proposes that each man give a speech about love. He suggests love because Phaedrus complains that people make speeches about common topics but not love. The men agree and Socrates says that love is one subject that he knows something about. Since Socrates always says he knows nothing, for him to say he knows something is in itself amazing.

Part 1, line 172a to line 177e Analysis

In the time of Plato, Socrates' speeches and dialogues are remembered by his followers long after they take place. Socrates is dressed up and at first seems to blend in with the crowd. Socrates tries to be social, but when he gets thoughts from the world of philosophical forms, he has to stop and think them through until he returns to the party. Agathon just had his play performed before an audience of 30,000. Nevertheless, it is Socrates who is admired for his deep insights in his philosophical dialogues.

The men proceed to have a party and get drunk. Rather than waste their time getting drunk, Eryximachus proposes that they make speeches in praise of the god, Love. As the reader finds out, Love can be love of someone's body, sexual love, or it can be love of someone's mind. There is also the kind of love of general forms of ideas, such as beauty, wisdom and the good. There is also to be determined, the matter of what is a good love and what is a bad love.

The party includes the dramatist Aristophanes, who is known for his comedies and other plays, including a spoof of Socrates, as well as Agathon, who is also a distinguished playwright. The speeches from these three men, Socrates, Agathon and Aristophanes, are the strongest speeches. Other speeches are given at the party, but only two other speeches are remembered by Aristodemus, who is telling the tale.



Part 2, line 178a to 183d

Part 2, line 178a to 183d Summary

Phaedrus gives a speech about the power of love and what love does to the lover and the beloved, in this case both male. Generally, the old man, the lover, seeks the younger man, the beloved. When they go into a battle together, the lover would never let himself be disgraced in front of the beloved. They both tend to fight ferociously and to the death.

Achilles is the Greek hero, who fights and dies in the Trojan War. Achilles' mother says if he doesn't kill Hector, Achilles will live a long life. Achilles decides to avenge his dead lover, Patroclus. Phaedrus is sure that Achilles is the beloved because he is the younger man in the couple. For the beloved to avenge the death of his lover is a special honor and shows the strength of Achilles' character and love. When another lover Orpheus, goes to the world of the dead to try to fetch his wife, however, he is seen as a coward. He is not willing to die for her and thus is only shown a shadow of his wife. Orpheus is later killed in a dishonorable fashion. True love gives the lover and the beloved courage to face life and to give their life for the honor of their loved one.

Next, Pausanias gives his speech. Pausanias says that there are two kinds of love and two kinds of the goddess Aphrodite. There is heavenly love and common love. The older of the two goddesses is the daughter of Uranus and is not a mother. The younger is the daughter of the Zeus. Common love happens when a man seeks the physical enjoyment of a woman or a boy as his beloved. In the higher love, the man seeks boys who at least have the beginning of their beards and some intelligence. It's wrong to go after boys that are too young to know what they are doing and too young to learn philosophy. Some men want to spend their whole life with their beloved and avoid the convention of getting married to a woman. Pausanias sets conditions for when the relationship between the lover and the beloved is proper. The main quality is that the boy wants to have his mind developed and that the lover wants to develop the boy's (the beloved) mind, in addition to enjoying his body. The lover tries to spend time with the boy and even act in a slavish fashion, doing anything possible to gain the the beloved's favor. The boy is discouraged in going along with the affair and the boy's father often has someone watch the boy.

Part 2, line 178a to 183d Analysis

This speech by Pausanias seems a bit extreme. The idea of men running around chasing boys openly, and this being socially acceptable, is not something that the reader would approve of today. This extreme version may be due to Pausanias' own relationships with young men. There is a tradition of having boys and young men get educated from a teacher in philosophy and other subjects. How often this educational relationship gets turned into a sexual relationship in Ancient Greece is not known, but it



was thought to be fairly common. The problem with the bad sort of love is that it is based purely on physical attractiveness. As soon as the younger man becomes older and loses the bloom of youth, he is not attractive and is immediately abandoned by the older man, the lover.



Part 3, 184a to 190a

Part 3, 184a to 190a Summary

By delaying the onset of the relationship, it has a higher intellectual basis and love will continue and develop between the two. If a boy enters a relationship through deception, the boy is not to blame. Aristophanes, the famous author of plays is supposed to speak next but has the hiccups; therefore, Eryximachus, the doctor speaks. Eryximachus says love governs the way the body reacts and is regulated. Whether an ill person recovers or not is also affected by love's effect on the body. A doctor encourages and gives love to what is healthy in a patient. What is unhealthy in the patient is due to the wrong type of love. The doctor creates love between parts of the body that act against each other and cause disease. Music and athletics are influenced by love. Music moves from discord in sounds to harmony, like a relationship involving conflict versus one that is friendly. Parts of the body or notes of music are made harmonic through the right kind of love. The two kinds of love move from discord straight to harmony, but they do apply to music overall. Music consists of composition and rhythm, where which kind of love is operating needs to be taken into account. Musicians, or society as a whole should be careful to listen to music that is played in an orderly manner. The right kind of music promotes the right kind of love; there is danger in music that is too self-indulgent. Music that promotes quick pleasure is self-indulgent and the wrong kind of love.

The seasons of the year are influenced by love. When violent love dominates a season, there is bad weather and outbreaks of plant disease. Astronomy is the study on how love orders the stars. In turn, the study of astronomy tells people when the right time is to make certain sacrifices to the various gods. In religion and worship, violent love promotes disrespect for the gods. Love is associated with friendship, cooperation and well-ordered social relationships. Eryximachus is afraid that Aristophanes is going to joke about love in his speech. Aristophanes begins saying that love is the greatest god, but he has a completely different story about the origin of love.

Part 3, 184a to 190a Analysis

Eryximachus' speech is a significant break in the story. It relates love to the development of knowledge, medicine, astronomy and other types of science. This speech foreshadows Socrates speech on the real origin of love and its purpose. Eryximachus' speech is a significant break from the others, since it is not about men chasing women or boys, but rather is about the role of love in fostering harmony and cooperation. The parts of the body have to be made to be harmonic to cure a patient and make him healthy again. Love is the peaceful bringing together of elements that are normally against each other. In medicine, hot and cold, bitter and sweet have to be brought together. Presumably, the same could be said about cooking, metal-working, and performing many other arts and crafts. Music is the most vivid illustration of love bringing together dissident sounds and bringing them together in harmony.



Part 4, line 190a to 196a

Part 4, line 190a to 196a Summary

Aristophanes says that in the beginning, man is a creature with four legs, one head and two faces opposite each other. There are three types of these creatures— a double male, double female, and male-female, also known as the androgynous type. These creatures are so powerful they make war on the gods and the gods decide to divide the human beings into halves so they have to walk upright. The gods turn the human face around so they can see the gash where their other half used to be. The extra skin forms the belly button. Human beings are supposed to have a subconscious or unconscious memory of this. The gods have mercy and make some changes because they suffer greatly and may die out. The gods put the genitals in the front of their body. When a man and woman get together, they can have sex and reproduce, while previously the material for reproduction is dropped by them on the ground together. This way, the man and woman can enjoy their love together and have children. Two men can get together and return to their feeling as a double creature again.

The man-woman creatures and their descendants are mad about having heterosexual love and often are adulterers after marriage. The people from the double-man or double-woman creatures like to have relationships with their own sex and only marry because of social conventions. Males from the double-man creature like to be with men always and only marry for social reasons. This type of man, according to Aristophanes, is the best and bravest soldier. The men and boys want to be with one another and do not know why. Even after sex, they still love each other's company. If these males could become a double-man creature again, they would do so; therefore, love is the drive to regain a sense of oneness. Aristophanes comments that the purpose of this speech is not to make fun of Agathon and Pausanius.

There is an argument between Socrates and Agathon. Socrates says it is difficult to make an original speech about love after the wonderful speeches just given. Agathon answers that Socrates is trying to make him scared of speaking before such a high-minded, distinguished group of guests. They are interrupted by Pausanius, who says that he would rather continue the speeches in praise of love. Agathon now speaks about love. Agathon talks about the qualities of the God, Love, saying Love is always young and runs away from old age or anything tough or ugly. Love is young, dainty and flexible and can bend around men's minds. Love does not make a direct assault but wraps around someone without that person noticing, until it is too late.

Part 4, line 190a to 196a Analysis

The speeches on love are beginning to become entangled with the feelings that the men have toward each other. Aristophanes, as expected, makes a speech that makes fun of homosexual couples, and this may include Agathon and Pausanius. While the



story of the two-faced creatures is amusing and interesting, it brings very little light on the nature of love or the god, Love. In fact, he talks about love very little. Aristophanes merely ends his speech that if people make their sacrifice and worship of the gods, the gods will allow the original two-faced creatures to reunite when they are enjoying the love of the two halves. This story is the basis of the saying of a man or a woman calling their spouse "my other half" or "my better half."

Agathon's speech is a much more in-depth look at what he thinks about love and the god, Love. Love is described as a young and dainty god, who sneaks around and easily, by persuasion, gets what he wants. Agathon's extreme praise of the god, Love and his insistence that there is nothing violent or rough about love, seems a bit for theatrical effect. Agathon is after all, the newly-awarded playwright.



Part 5, line 196a to 202a

Part 5, line 196a to 202a Summary

Agathon disagrees with Phaedrus that Love comes from the oldest god and instead says that Love is the youngest of all the gods. Everything about Love is soft and tender. Agathon quotes a passage from the poet Homer "but her feet are sensitive, to the ground, she never draws close, but walks on the heads of men." Notice Agathon changes the gender of Love to male. Love also tends to go to the soft and tender parts of the body. Love is associated with the bloom of youth, springtime, and the blossoming of flowers. Since Love is young and gentle, it always wins by persuasion, and it is never forced. Paradoxically, though Love is young, he is also a master. He masters all desires. Love is the strongest of all the desires. Even though Love is soft and sweet, Love also can conquer all by persuasion and is the bravest of Gods. Love can capture the God Ares, who is the bravest, most warlike God.

Since Agathon is a dramatist and a poet, he thanks Love for being the inspirer of the best poetry. Love also turns people who never were poets before into poets. Indeed, even the Gods with skills are inspired by Love, the Muses in music, the Gods of ironwork and others in their crafts. Love brings people together in festivals and parties. Love compels people and Gods to do the right thing and gives people joy and fills their lives with everything good and desirable, and removes bad things from their lives.

Socrates is the next man to speak about Love. He praises Agathon's speech for recommending love to everyone and having an especially dazzling ending. Socrates adds some biting irony, saying he makes the mistake of thinking his speech is supposed to be about the truth. To Socrates, the other speeches sound nice, but are full of lies and rubbish. Socrates asks permission to tell the truth about love, even though it will be a far less impressive speech than the one before. Socrates is compelled to tell the truth, no matter who is offended by it.

Socrates then asks Phaedrus if he can ask Agathon a few questions. Socrates asks Agathon that just as someone is the son of a father and mother, or someone is the brother of a brother or sister, is Love the love of something or nothing? Agathon answers that love is the love of something. Socrates and Agathon agree that love is the love of something the lover wants, since the lover desires something he does not have or is struggling to keep. The lover, even if he has the beloved, wants to continue to have her or him in the future. In all these cases, the desire of the lover is directed to what he or she does not have, or may not have in the future and to what he needs. Since the lover loves what he needs and does not have, he also lacks the beautiful and the good in general, since the beautiful is also good. The lover wants to possess the beloved, the beautiful and in general, the Good. Socrates then tells the story of the lesson about love that he learned from the woman named Diotima, who is a very wise woman. Socrates asks the same questions to Diotima in the story he tells. If love is not beautiful, does that mean it has to be ugly?



Part 5, line 196a to 202a Analysis

Agathon presents love as the romantic ideal. The god, Love, to him is never forceful, always nice and sweet. Due to Agathon's extreme sugar coating of the concept of love, he sets himself up for Socrates' attack through a series of questions. Since love is always seeking the beautiful and the good, in order to possess them, can he have the beautiful, asks Socrates. Agathon agrees that love cannot possess these qualities and must be different than what Agathon has just described as love.

Socrates shows in his story about the god, Love that Love is not even a god, since the gods are all beautiful and love is not. Love is seeking what it does not have, including beauty. Love is not a god; therefore, love is a great spirit. Sometimes Love becomes strong, but then suddenly love can die. Then in a different place or with different people, Love comes back, since he has a partially-immortal quality from his father, Resource.



Part 6, line 202a to 208a

Part 6, line 202a to 208a Summary

If Love is dainty and beautiful, that would be against the idea that love always searches for the beautiful. It is the same thing about the search for wisdom—someone searching for wisdom is not ignorant. He is something between ignorant and wisdom. Diotima says that the one involved has right opinions but does not know the reason why his opinions are right. In the same way, Love is not beautiful or ugly; it is somewhere between the two. Diotima proves to Socrates that Love is not a God, but a spirit, which is something between a mortal and a God. Spirits send messages and act as intermediaries between human beings and Gods. Diotima explains that Love cannot be a God, since all the Gods are beautiful and happy, and Love is neither. Spirits connect the men to gods, so the whole universe is interconnected. Spirits help in sacrifices, prayers, fortune-telling and dreams, and all other methods of communication between humans and the gods.

Diotima tells the story of the origin of the spirit, Love. Love's mother is a spirit, Poverty, while his father is a god, named Resource. The gods have a drunken party at Aphrodite's birth and Resource gets drunk on nectar; Poverty sleeps with him and becomes pregnant with Resource's child, who is Love. Love is also a follower of the beautiful goddess Aphrodite, since Love is conceived at Aphrodite's birth. Love takes after both parents. Like Poverty, he is poor and tough and sleeps in the streets and the fields. Like Resource, Love is conniving and scheming to get what he wants. Sometimes Love grows big and becomes strong, but then after he can quickly die. Since his father is a god, Love comes back to life again at the first opportunity. So Love is not a man who dies, or an immortal god; he is somewhere in between.

Love is like right-opinion, in that love is neither wise nor ignorant. The confusing point is that Love is what the lover feels. The lover wants what is beautiful, and good—his beloved. Love wants to possess what is beautiful and good and so on, and then he is happy. There can be many kinds of love; there is the lover who wants to have the beloved, and there is the beloved that wants to be had by the lover. Other people can love other things such as money and many other things. The most general way to say this is that love is the desire to have the good, and to have it forever and for always.

Next Socrates asks Diotima, why there must be Love, and what is its function in the world? Diotima answers that Love is the way that people unite to give birth to the beautiful and to become immortal. Just as Love is part mortal and part god, it is the route for human beings to taste immortality. By looking at beauty, women are helped to give birth. When a man and a woman get together, this excitement of being in love makes them want to reproduce and have a child. That is one of the routes to immortality. Birds and beasts, as well, protect their young and often would rather starve in order to first feed their young. Beasts will risk their lives to protect their offspring.



Part 6, line 202a to 208a Analysis

The reader can see in this speech about love, the toughness of Socrates. Socrates knows that the spirit, Love exists and that it is necessary, but he does not speak about its sweetness and gentleness. Socrates realizes with the help of instruction from the woman, Diotima, that love is rough and full of cunning and tricks. Love is not even a god, since a god is immortal and the spirit Love flares up sometimes, suddenly dies, and then can come back in another form or to another person. Love seeks to reproduce what is beautiful and in this way be immortal. Men and women share in immortality by having children. The person whose mind is developed seeks to go beyond sexual love and reproduce ideas in other human beings. This does not mean such a person is not sexual, it only means that he or she has other goals involving intellectual development and the spreading of ideas.



Part 7, line 208a to 214a

Part 7, line 208a to 214a Summary

When a person lives over a period of time, he keeps changing. He or she goes from being a baby, to a youth who is learning about life, to one starting a family, to someone who survives to be old and finally to death. At each point in life, a person can look back and see what s/he has achieved. This is also related to the drive for immortality, and what each person can achieve in their lifetime. When a man receives an honor, he usually loves being honored. He dreams that his name and deeds will be remembered for a long time, maybe forever, or in any case, long after he is gone. People fight in wars, to the death, because they think that either their names, or at least their heroic deeds to fight for their country, will be remembered. For example the ancient tale of the courage of Achilles is remembered until this day. Most men express their "pregnancy" by loving a woman and having a child and thus share in immortality. Other men are pregnant in their minds and want to spread their ideas to other human beings. The man is pregnant with ideas, such as how to best run a city and the nation. This is also how authors, play-writers, and poets give birth to immortal offspring. Everyone remembers Homer for his beautiful works such as the Iliad and the Odyssey.

Socrates is actually describing his own activities. He is attracted to young men with minds he can help develop. The young men want to share dialogues and knowledge with Socrates. This is the source of the Platonic Dialogues that have been written down. Other people are known for "fathering" laws, as is Solon, who writes the laws of Athens, and protects citizens from enslavement through being overwhelmed by debt obligations. The fine laws, achievements, and inventions of such men are remembered. People usually ignore what happens to these hero's children, or whether they have any. People remember their ideas and achievements instead.

So how does a young man or woman develop his or her ideas and become a philosopher, with the help of Love? Diotima says that there is a way to do this. First, when the person is young, s/he is attracted to one person, and has a dialogue with that person. Then the young man or woman notices that many people are attractive and s/he is not tied down to one person. After a while, this potential philosopher can figure out that beautiful minds are much more important than beautiful bodies. At this point, the young person sees a huge sea of beautiful minds and beautiful ideas waiting to be developed. S/he can gain knowledge from these minds and spread ideas to them. Therefore, the young philosopher goes from loving boys and young men who are attractive, to knowing about the idealized form of attractiveness and beauty. He then progresses to the idealized form of learning, and the form of the practice of learning. This is something that Socrates calls in other dialogues, the hypothesis of the higher hypothesis. The young philosopher gets to the point that he can look on the qualities of beauty, knowledge and wisdom themselves. With his love of beauty, he can help reproduce these ideas he has in the mind of others. That way, he transmits his ideas and contributes to making these ideas immortal. The young philosopher can understand



and spread, not only forms and images of beauty, virtue, and wisdom, but true virtue, beauty and wisdom. This is what the power of the god, Love is to Socrates. Love is the ability to go beyond attractive people and images and learn to love and transmit the highest ideas of government, politics, and virtue.

At this point, there is a sudden disruption, as Alcibiades comes to Agathon's house. Alcibiades is very drunk and demands to see Agathon. Alcibiades comes to put a garland on the head of Agathon, the winner of a prize. Alcibiades is invited to join the party, as drunk as he is. He lies down on the couch next to Agathon and then suddenly sees Socrates. Alcibiades complains that Socrates is sneaking up on him. Socrates counters that Alcibiades has such a crush on him (Socrates) that Socrates is not allowed to even talk any more to any other nice young men.

Part 7, line 208a to 214a Analysis

Socrates deals with some of the same ideas that Eryximachus deals with, in terms of love and the change of a person over time. The difference is that Socrates first introduces love's role in reproducing the human species, actually also mentioned by Aristophanes. Finally, there are some men who are more intent on reproducing their ideas in others. Since these ideas can change history or start new nations, they have a power to be immortal that is far greater than merely having children.

After the speech is over, Alcibiades comes in and claims that Socrates in some way abused him. Later, it becomes clear that there is no sexual relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades. Socrates uses terminology like that of a lover and saying that he loves somebody, in an ironic way, since Socrates is really interested in their mind. Socrates and Alcibiades actually have a teacher to student-type relationship. If anything, that fact only increases Alcibiades' jealousy toward Socrates when Socrates talks to other young men.



Part 8, line 214a to 220a

Part 8, line 214a to 220a Summary

Alcibiades proceeds to have everyone drink more and to make sure that all the men are drunk as he is already. Eryximachus objects to all this drinking without any the making of speeches or singing. Eryximachus tells Alcibiades that they are all making speeches in praise of Love. Alcibiades answers that instead, he wants to make a speech in praise of Socrates. After Socrates objects, worrying that something nasty will be said, Alcibiades assures Socrates that he will say nothing but the truth, and so Socrates agrees to hear the speech.

Alcibiades compares Socrates to "statues of Silenus," which are statues with statues of the gods inside them. Alcibiades also compares Socrates to Marsyas, the Satyr. Alcibiades claims that Socrates has assaulted him and mentally abused him. Alcibiades says that Socrates bewitches and seduces people with his speeches, like seductive flute playing music. Alcibiades is mad because Socrates has made him realize that he has to change and that his way of life is wrong. Socrates urges Alcibiades to better himself before continuing his political efforts. Socrates makes Alcibiades feel ashamed of himself. For this reason, Alcibiades is both attracted to Socrates, but is also extremely resentful of him. Socrates hangs around boys and young men and is excited by them, says Alcibiades. Socrates comes on by saying that he knows nothing, but this is all an act. Socrates really doesn't care if someone is beautiful or rich or not.

Inside his mind, Socrates is beautiful and full of wonderful ideas. So Alcibiades gets the idea of having Socrates seduce him, and in that way, make Socrates his own. Alcibiades thinks that he has no ideas, but he has the beauty of youth, and he will make an exchange with Socrates. Alcibiades arranges to be alone with Socrates, and gives Socrates lots of opportunities to make Alcibiades his boyfriend. Since Socrates continues his usual philosophical discussions with Alcibiades, Alcibiades decides on using more direct measures to get his way, and show his love for Socrates.

Alcibiades invites Socrates over to dinner twice. Finally, on the second time, Alcibiades prolongs their conversation until it is too late for Socrates to go home, and has Socrates sleep in his room. Alcibiades prepares to gratify Socrates. Alcibiades realizes that what he does in this case is extreme. He asks that only high-minded people who understand philosophy listen to him tell of the extreme measures he uses. The incredible part of Alcibiades' story is that at no point did Socrates get upset or become hostile to Alcibiades. Socrates explains to Alcibiades that such a bargain as Alcibiades' body for Socrates' wisdom may actually be a bad bargain for Alcibiades after all. Socrates asks if Alcibiades is sure that his (Socrates') wisdom is really that valuable. Socrates says that he will do what is best for both of them in personal as well as philosophical matters. At this point, Alcibiades thinks he is getting somewhere, and jumps on Socrates, hugs him and sleeps with him. Nevertheless, Alcibiades is disappointed because nothing really happens.



After this incident, Alcibiades feels humiliated. Alcibiades has knowingly acted in a low fashion, trying to degrade Socrates down to Alcibiades' level. Alcibiades realizes that he cannot bribe or corrupt Socrates in any way at all. Alcibiades' riches and good-looks are useless in controlling Socrates. After Alcibiades participates in an Athenian military campaign with Socrates, he is amazed by Socrates' toughness. Socrates bears with the sometimes lack of food on the campaign better than anyone else. Yet, Socrates is also known for not allowing feasting and drinking to affect him either.

Part 8, line 214a to 220a Analysis

Alcibiades complains about Socrates' usual style. Socrates begins as a simple man asking questions to the young men he engages in a dialogue. He then finds contradictions in the answers he gets and after a long fight, wins discussions, or leaves the young men totally confused. Alcibiades' charge that Socrates has bewitched him foreshadows Socrates' trial, where Socrates is accused of corrupting the youth. Alcibiades admits that Socrates has a truly beautiful mind. That is the reason that Alcibiades plots to possess Socrates, if necessary by giving himself to Socrates, sexually. Not only does this not work, but Alcibiades' scheming and low methods are totally exposed. Socrates is shown to be right in quoting the speech from Diotima. In order to win the love of Socrates, Alcibiades is caught using every trick that he can, but in this case his strategy is unsuccessful, because first his wealth and then his good looks cannot tempt Socrates.



Part 9, line 220a to line 223d

Part 9, line 220a to line 223d Summary

Socrates on a military campaign can bear the winter cold better than anyone else on the expedition. He appears not to suffer from the cold even when barefoot. As usual, when on the campaign, Socrates would suddenly get an idea and stand in silence thinking to himself. Socrates would stay up all night long and then continue to march the next day as if he has had a good night's sleep. Socrates rescues Alcibiades in battle, and then allows the Athenian generals to give the medal that he wins to Alcibiades because Alcibiades has a higher social standing in Athens. At the time, the Athenians are in retreat, and Alcibiades finds that Socrates is capable of handling himself well in that situation, too.

Alcibiades finds Socrates' courage and toughness to be incredible. Likewise, Alcibiades finds it amazing that Socrates can appear to know nothing and then engage people in deep philosophical dialogues about truth and the nature of the universe. Socrates talks about craftsmen and their virtues, and compares them to the virtues necessary for the citizen, statesman and politician. Alcibiades ends his speech saying that he praises Socrates, but warns Agathon to beware of the way Socrates deceives young men and makes them think that he loves them and is their lover. Socrates responds that Alcibiades must really be sober. Alcibiades has made this whole speech, says Socrates, just to create problems between Socrates and Agathon. This is because Alcibiades does not want Socrates to love anyone but him.

Agathon agrees with Socrates that Alcibiades' motive is to disrupt their relationship. Then Agathon comes and lies down next to Socrates. Alcibiades tries to have Agathon lie down between him and Socrates, but Socrates stops this, saying it is the rule to praise the person on one's right. It is now Agathon's turn to be praised by Socrates. The next morning, Socrates is seen chatting with two other men from the party on whether the same author can write plays that are tragedies and comedies.

Part 9, line 220a to line 223d Analysis

It is shown that Socrates is not harsh with Alcibiades and his little trick but can easily ignore it. By Socrates being able to ignore Alcibiades' attempt to seduce him, Alcibiades is further confused. When on a military campaign and serious difficulties happen, Socrates can deal with them, too, and in the process, he saves Alcibiades' life. The thing that gets Alcibiades so angry is that Socrates does not care about petty things such as who gets a military medal, or who is beautiful, handsome or rich. Socrates is dedicated to philosophical discourse and solving such problems as, what is virtue, for the sake of humanity and the good. Of course, finding out what are virtue, wisdom, the good and the beautiful are not just interesting academic issues; they are often life and death problems. What is the use of having a better craftsman at work, if the state itself



is allowed to collapse? Can virtue be taught? Athens is a city that faces wars and invasions and answers are needed on what to do to protect the city. This point is referenced in the scenes mentioned about Socrates and Alcibiades in battle. Socrates also has a more light-hearted side, such as discussing what is better art and drama and who can produce it.



Characters

Socrates

Socrates is the famed Greek philosopher, who is Plato, the author's teacher. In this dialogue, Socrates is in his element, talking with his fellow citizens at a drinking party. Socrates is not shocked by the abandonment by which some of his fellow party-goers chase boys and young men for sexual favors. Nevertheless, by the end of the dialogue, the reader is sure that Socrates has a higher goal of spreading ideas and the good. Love to Socrates is not a god at all, but a great spirit who has a purpose. The purpose of love is to bring people together to reproduce the beautiful and the good and share in immortality.

Socrates is surprised when his sometimes student, Alcibiades, shows up. Socrates is charged by Alcibiades with misrepresenting himself to the handsome young men of Athens. He pretends, according to Alcibiades, to want to be their lover and be attracted by their good looks as well as by their minds and riches. In fact, Socrates could care less if the young men are handsome. Instead, Socrates wants to initiate them into the mysteries of his philosophy. This is too much for Alcibiades, who claims that Socrates ends up acting like the beloved, even though he is the older man, and the young men end up pursuing him. Alcibiades ends his long speech by warning Agathon that Socrates will play the same game with Agathon. Socrates counters that Alcibiades' speech is a ploy, and the whole purpose of the speech is to get Agathon mad at Socrates. Indeed, Alcibiades seems to want Socrates all for himself.

Agathon

Agathon wins a prize for his production of his play. He has a party to celebrate his victory at his house, the scene of the Symposium. Agathon is apparently in a relationship with Pausanius, but he is also a good friend and student of Socrates. Unlike some of the previous speeches, Agathon makes an honest attempt to characterize the god, Love. Agathon says that Love is soft and sweet and gentle. In a way, the speech is comical since no one could seriously believe such a fairytale-like explanation of love. From what we hear about love in Athens, it is hard to believe that love is always persuasive and soft, and never violent and treacherous.

However, after Agathon answers some questions by Socrates, Agathon realizes that he knows little about love at all. After Alcibiades' speech, Agathon refuses to take the bait from Alcibiades and does not get mad at Socrates. Instead, Socrates is supposed to get a chance to make a speech in praise of Agathon. Agathon highly enjoys Socrates' company and does not seem to be worried about what sort of tricks Socrates will play on him.



Aristophanes

Aristophanes is an ironic playwright and poet. A famous work of his, the *Clouds*, makes fun of Socrates by showing Socrates off in daydreams most of the time. Aristophanes' speech about love is really very ironic and a joke intended at the expense of all male couples, like Agathon and Pausanias. Aristophanes denies this after making the speech, just to draw attention to what he just did. Aristophanes says that love is what happens when the two former halves of the double-headed creature get together again. This is why such male-male or male-female pairs, according to Aristophanes, want to stay together, inseparable for their whole lives. Their love seems to have little intellectual aspect at all, since love is a purely physical force in Aristophanes' story.

Alcibiades

Alcibiades runs into the *Symposium*, drunk, shortly after Socrates finishes his speech. He accuses Socrates of deceiving him and resents that Socrates will not be his lover. Alcibiades tries to gain possession of Socrates by offering Socrates his riches and his good looks. Some of the things that Alcibiades accuses Socrates of, are later part of the criminal indictment against Socrates. Alcibiades also serves in an Athenian military campaign with Socrates and is impressed with Socrates' bravery. Alcibiades cannot abandon his obsession with Socrates and is jealous whenever Socrates talks to Agathon or other young men.

Phaedrus

Phaedrus gives the first speech in praise of the god, Love. Phaedrus emphasizes that love gives the lover and the beloved the courage to fight to the death. His main example is the warrior Achilles, who kills Hector in revenge of the death of his lover Patroclus. Phaedrus makes the point that Achilles was young and beautiful and had to be the beloved, not the lover in the relationship. Phaedrus also says that Love is the most ancient of the gods.

Pausanias

Pausanias gives a detailed description of the love between an adult male, the lover, and a young man or boy, the beloved. He describes that a good love of such a combination, is based on an educational relationship, and a bad love, is based purely on physical love. Pausanias gives a detailed explanation of attitudes of Athenian society to the lover and the beloved in relationships between men and young men or boys.



Eryximachus

Eryximachus is a doctor. He gives a speech on love showing its relationship to medicine and music and other arts and sciences. His connection of love to intellectual achievement foreshadows Socrates' speech.

Diotima

Diotima is a woman who teaches Socrates about love.

Apollodorus

Apollodorus is a man who tells the story of the Symposium (or the drinking party) to his companions.

Aristodemus

Aristodemus is the main source of the information about the Symposium.

Achilles

Achilles is a hero of the Trojan War, who is mentioned as someone who died for the one he loved.

Patroclus

Patroclus is said to be Achilles' lover, who is killed in the Trojan War.

Slaves, and a flute girl

Slaves and a flute girl assist the guests at Agathon's house.

Resource

Resource is a god, who is the father of the spirit Love.

Poverty

Poverty is a spirit, who is the mother of the spirit, Love.



Love

Love is described as a god, a goddess and a great spirit. The men at the Symposium give speeches on their thoughts about what love is.

Zeus

Zeus is the king of the gods.



Objects/Places

Athens

Athens is the leading city in Ancient Greece. In Agathon's house in Athens is where the Symposium takes place.

Agathon's house

The Symposium takes place in Agathon's house.

The two-faced human being

The two-faced human being is described in Aristophanes' speech. These creatures can be double-male, double-female, or male-female, also called androgynous.

Hades

Hades is the underworld, where the spirits of the dead are taken.

Towns in Greece, City-States

Although Greece is not at the time one country, these city-states which speak Greek are mentioned: Sparta, Elis, Boetia, and others.

The Persian Empire

The Persian Empire, ruled by the Persians, is the great empire to the east of Greece.

Symposium

A symposium is a kind of drinking party, where people give speeches on a topic.

Statues of Silenus

The statues of Silenus are described by Alcibiades. They are statues with other statues of the gods concealed inside them.



The Ancient Greeks

The Ancient Greeks are the first people to examine and write down philosophy, in an abstract form. They study philosophy independent of religion. Their civilization thrived around the 3rd century BC.

The Ancient Greek Philosophers

The Ancient Greek philosophers not only include Socrates, but also many "sophists," those who claim to have knowledge, such as Protagoras. Many of them can be found in Plato's dialogues.

The Greek Gods

The Greek gods include the king of the gods, Zeus, and Aphrodite, sometimes called the goddess of love, sometimes the goddess of lust or beauty. Forces and qualities can have their own gods, such as the god "Resource."

Spirits

Spirits are neither gods nor mortal human beings. They are in between mortality and immortality, as the Spirit, Love is described by Socrates. They die and then reappear and serve as messengers between human beings and the gods.



Themes

What is Love?

There are many explanations given by the speakers in the dialogue about what is love. Love is referred to as a god or spirit, but this is the way the Greeks speak about all forces in nature. One explanation says that love is based purely on physical attraction. Another explanation is that common love exists, but it is common and inferior to the higher love based on cooperation to develop the lover and beloved's mind. Love is a force and a reason that makes people do their best and be willing to even fight and die. It is also shown in many of the speeches that there are certain social rules and expectations in matters of love. Even where men fall in love with young men or boys, this is allowed in some instances but not allowed or discouraged in others. The purpose of love is also discussed. Is love just something that is amusing and nice to enjoy, or is it a necessary force in the universe? Love is necessary to reproduce the species and also reproduce and spread ideas. Love can be used as an explanation of why some objects attract and others repel each other. Love can be seen as the reason why music is composed a certain way, and medicine is made to make people healthy. Love is a powerful force that makes animals and human beings reproduce. Love is also shown as a motive for ideas to be spread to other people, through the love of what is good, and the desire to spread this good to other people.

Socratic Irony

There are many jokes and ironic statements in all the speeches in "The Symposium." The first speech refers to the bravery of the hero Achilles and says this is due to his love for his slain lover. The fact that Achilles is killed for the revenge of his lover is surprising, in that that Achilles is the younger, and therefore, submissive man in the relationship. This is contrary to the usual (at that time) stereotype of a submissive man, who normally would not take the aggressive stance of revenging a lover and being a hero. The reader must ask if such a statement is made seriously, or is it in jest? Yet, given the mores of Greek culture at that time, the statement could very well have been meant to be taken seriously. When the story is told about the two-faced human beings, this is difficult to be taken seriously. The reader is forced to decide if this is something serious or a joke. But again, when considering the Greek culture and the open acceptance of homosexuality, then most likely the story about the two-faced humans is a metaphor, which is intended to be taken seriously by the listeners. Often, a point can be made much more strongly by forcing a reader to recognize that it is an ironic point. The point made is opposite in some cases to what is openly said. The reader is forced to think and examine his or her own assumptions, instead of just taking every argument as reasonable at face value. An argument can be made in a reasonable form, but when the reader looks it again, it can be easily shown to be absurd. Do people have fundamental assumptions that are absurd? Do people want to believe that love is soft and nice all the time, because it



makes them feel better to have such a belief? Socratic irony uses plausible sounding statements to say things that are often obviously unbelievable.

Discovering Truth through Dialogue

Learning can become very dry when it is a matter of merely memorizing names and statements. To learn something by reading a dialogue can be much more amusing and reasonable. The style of a dialogue lets the reader compare different arguments and decide which one is true. In the dialogue, "The Symposium," a number of different arguments are put forward. Since Socrates' speech is portrayed as the most reasonable, it is assumed to be the right argument. However, one can decide and make an argument for why one of the other arguments given is more correct, and Socrates' argument is wrong. By giving people a choice, a book based on dialogue is much more stimulating intellectually than a book listing facts. By learning the "Socratic method," one is forced to be more careful about proving their arguments. In one example, a character asks that he be allowed to give a speech that may be upsetting to another character, in this case Alcibiades asking Socrates the right to speak. Alcibiades demands the right to speak based on his statement that he wants to tell the truth about Socrates. Whether Alcibiades what Alcibiades says is actually the truth is another question—perhaps the most that can be said is that it is the truth as Alcibiades sees it.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of the story begins in the first person, from the point of view of Apollodorus. Apollodorus is discussing with his companions the story of the Symposium that taken place years ago and then tells the story. After a brief introduction, the point of view shifts to the third person in the telling of the actual story. In addition, there is so much dialogue in the story that it could be performed as a play and put on in front of an audience. Long speeches are included with few breaks. Many of the speeches are addressed to "you" or another person directly and have a familiar way of speech and an intimate feel. Some of the speeches are made from a more formal point of view, as if they would be written down and circulated publicly. This is the case particularly with Agathon's speech, which has a polished, rhetorical style. Since the story of the Symposium is told by a character, Apollodorus, as he is walking with his companion, the book is really a story within a story. When Socrates tells the tale that Diotima told him, it becomes a story within a story that is within a story. This sounds confusing, but in the book, this method works well.

Setting

The setting is Agathon's house in Athens, in Ancient Greece. Agathon has won a prize for his play's performance and his victory is being celebrated at the Symposium, the drinking party. Socrates is a friend of Agathon and an accepted member of Greek society. Agathon has a leading role in society and has just put on a play before thousands of people. With him at the party are Aristophanes, another leading playwright, Eryximachus, a doctor, and other leading citizens. At the same time, the speech at the end of the book given by Alcibiades, foreshadows some of the difficulties omtp which Socrates is heading. Alcibiades' charges against Socrates are not meant to be an indictment, but they include such ideas as "deceiving the youth" and other charges that are soon to be taken up by Socrates' enemies. Despite democracy existing in Athens, it is a society dominated by an aristocracy, and slavery still exists. Though the participants are described as being in one house through most of the book, they describe events such as the Athenian retreat in a military campaign, and myths of the Greek gods as written by Homer, Hesiod and other authors.

Language and Meaning

Evaluating the language of the book can be difficult, since it is so dependent on how "The Symposium" is translated. The Penguin Classic edition, translated by Christopher Gill is rather easy to read in modern English. Other translations, such as the one by Benjamin Jowett, on the Internet, are more difficult. Much of the argument about love concerns relationships between men and boys. Since today, such relationships are



generally illegal, this type of argument can be difficult to follow because of the cultural differences between then and now. When the reader thinks about these relationships, it is best to keep these differences in mores in mind. Perhaps the readers can create their own analogies for understanding the love relationships read about in *The Symposium* by comparing them to the type of love with which they themselves feel most comfortable. After all, love affects not only man-woman relationships, but also family relationships and friendship.

Platonic ideas in general are difficult to understand, since they are taken from the whole of society and then applied to the individual. The platonic forms are general ideas of the truthful and the beautiful, not specific examples. When Socrates talks about wisdom, the good or even the beautiful, this is not a question of individual preference. What is the good is determined by what is good for the whole society, the city-state and all of mankind. Instead of taking the existence of love for granted, Socrates in his speech asks, what is the purpose of love? Only by looking at what is good for society as a whole does Socrates' ideas make sense.

Structure

The dialogue forms a single whole, with no chapter divisions. The dialogue is broken up for this guide into nine relatively-equal sections. The first scene is where Apollodorus speaks to his companions about the Symposium, which happens long ago, and the beginning of the Symposium. The next scene begins with two introductory speeches on the Greek view of love between people, by Phaedrus and Pausanias. Eryximachus' speech is a shift toward looking at the role of love in a universal sense. Aristophanes' speech is an ironic description of love as a physical force. Agathon delivers the classic romantic view of love as something sweet, delicate and romantic. Socrates gives a stinging rebuttal to this and shows love's role in giving people a sense of immortality. Finally, Alcibiades' sudden entry throws the whole issue of love back into question, with a recount of the behavior of Socrates himself. So there is an introduction, then six speeches on love, and the dialogue ends with the story of how Socrates affects a young man, Alcibiades. In a sense, after the speech on love, the reader is given a practical example of the power of love and what it does to Alcibiades and Socrates.



Quotes

"Socrates sat down and said 'How splendid it would be Agathon, if wisdom was the sort of thing that could flow from the fuller to the emptier of us when we touch each other, like water, which flows through a piece of wool from a fuller cup to an emptier one.'" (Line 175c)

"Take the case of a man in love who is caught acting disgracefully or undergoing something disgraceful because he fails to defend himself out of cowardice. I think it would cause him more pain to be seen in this situation by his boyfriend, than by his father, his friends or anyone else" (Line 178e)

"Aeschylus talks nonsense when he says that Achilles was Patroclus' lover: he was more beautiful than Patroclus (indeed he was the most beautiful of all the heroes), and was still beardless, as well as much younger than Patroclus, as Homer tells us." (Line 180a)

"The aim of our practice is to test lovers thoroughly and in the right way, to ensure that boys gratify one type, but keep away from the other." (Line 184a)

"But perhaps what he had in mind was that musical expertise creates harmony by replacing a previous divergence between high and low notes with agreement. Surely there can be no harmony between high and low while they are still divergent. ...Music, in its turn, is knowledge of the forms of love in connection with harmony and rhythm." (Line 187b)

"Each one had four hands and the same number of legs, and two identical faces on a circular neck. They had one head for both faces, which were turned in opposite directions, four ears, two sets of genitals, and everything else was as you would imagine from what I've said so far." (Line 190a)

"While they are boys, because they are slices of the male gender, they are attracted to men and enjoy sleeping with men and being embraced by them. These are the best of their generation, both as boys and young men, because they are naturally the bravest." (Line 192a)



"So he is very young and sensitive, and is fluid in shape as well. Otherwise, if he was tough, he couldn't envelop someone's mind completely or pass unnoticed at first entry into it and then out of it."

(Line 196a)

"I was so naïve that I thought that you should tell the truth about the subject of the eulogy; I thought this should be the basis from which to select the finest features and present them in a way that showed the subject at its best."

(Line 198d)

"It's having right opinions without being able to give reasons for having them. Don't you realize that this isn't knowing, because you don't have knowledge unless you can give the reasons; but it isn't ignorance either, because ignorance has no contact with the truth? Right opinion, of course, has this kind of status, falling between understanding and ignorance."

(Line 202a)

"On the other hand, taking after his father, he schemes to get hold of beautiful and good things. He's brave and impetuous and intense; a formidable hunter, always weaving tricks; he desires knowledge and is resourceful in getting it; a lifelong lover of wisdom; clever at using magic, drugs and sophistry."

(Line 203d)

"And why is reproduction the object of love? Because reproduction is the closest mortals come to being permanently alive and immortal."

(Line 207a)

"People look enviously at Homer and Hesiod and other good poets, because of the kind of children they have left behind them, which provide them with immortal fame and remembrance by being immortal themselves."

(Line 209d)

"Socrates said, 'Agathon, please protect me. What a nuisance my love for this man has become! Ever since I started loving him, I haven't been able to look at or talk to a single attractive man without his getting so jealous and resentful that he goes crazy and shouts at me and almost beats me up.'"

(Line 213d)

"He's the only person in whose company I've had an experience you might think me



incapable off—feeling shame with someone; I only feel shame in his company."
(Line 216b)

"I'm calling you that because you've become the jury in the case of Socrates' arrogance! I swear to you by the gods, and by the goddesses, that when I got up next morning, I had no more slept with Socrates than if I'd been sleeping with my father or my elder brother.
(Line 219d)

Topics for Discussion

Discuss dialogue. All six of the speakers have different views on what is love. Some sound very sincere while others, like Aristophanes' speech, are ironic and humorous. Does one have to choose which one of the explanations of love to believe, or are the explanations complementary? Socrates' speech sounds the most convincing, but does that contradict the other arguments?

Alcibiades feels that he has learned much and enjoys his association with Socrates. Then, why is he so resentful of Socrates? Does Alcibiades want to get Socrates' approval? Is he trying to control Socrates?

Greek society, to varying degrees, approves of relationships between men and boys around the age of puberty (age 12-15), including sexual activity. Does this make the discussion on what is love more difficult to understand? Does it seem to be a comical discussion or even a somewhat obscene discussion? Can the reader generalize the discussion on love to more conventional love relationships? Is the idea conveyed of love's role in such idealized forms as the good, the beautiful, and so on?

Agathon presents a view of love that is highly romantic. His vision of love is full of gentleness, sweetness and flowers. Is this an image of love that many people have? Agathon, after being questioned by Socrates, admits his view of love is wrong. Is this a fair discussion? Does Socrates bully Agathon in some way to get Agathon to abandon his opinion?

The story Socrates gives of Diotima's explanation of love has a ring of truth. The reader may know of times when love is rough, tricky, and full of scheming. However, does the reader wholly agree with Diotima's explanation of love? Is Diotima's explanation a form of rationale for Socrates' theory of forms and love of ideas?

Phaedrus and Pausanias have similar points of view on the god, Love. They believe in the power of love to make men and women brave and face death for the glory of their beloved. Is this generally true? Or are their theories a way of promoting their glorification of man-boy relationships?

Eryximachus shows the relationship of love to harmony in music and understanding science and medicine. Both Eryximachus and Socrates show the necessity of love in the world. Does Eryximachus' theory foreshadow Socrates' theory of love?

Discuss Point of View. The story of the Symposium is told from the first person by Apollodorus. Apollodorus then tells the story from the third person point of view, since he is not actually at the drinking party. However, the characters address each other as "you," and there is an intimate dialogue. Could this story be performed as a play? Would it lose a lot in that form, or would it be even more dramatic?