CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

# The Symposium

**Plato** · *c. 385 BC* · *Benjamin Jowett translation*

A friend asks Apollodorus to retell a famous dinner party at the house of the poet Agathon, held the day after his first victory in the theater. The guests agree to praise Love in turn, and each speech adds a new idea. Then Socrates tells what the wise woman Diotima taught him, and the drunken Alcibiades bursts in to praise Socrates himself. The work asks what love is, and what it is for.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

## What is love, and where does it lead the soul?

The speakers in turn call love a god of courage, of law, of health, of wholeness. Socrates answers that love is a longing for the good and the beautiful, and for what lasts. Diotima says the lover climbs from loving one body to loving the beauty of souls, of laws, of knowledge, and at last to beauty itself. Alcibiades shows how hard it is to live up to that climb.

KEY CHARACTERS

**Apollodorus**
*The narrator, who retells the story.*

**Aristodemus**
*The companion who went to the party with Socrates.*

**Phaedrus**
*The first speaker, who praises love as ancient and brave.*

**Pausanias**
*He divides heavenly love from common love.*

**Eryximachus**
*The physician who sets the order of speeches.*

**Aristophanes**
*The comic poet who tells of the split humans.*

**Agathon**
*The host, a tragic poet, celebrating his victory.*

**Socrates**
*The philosopher who reports Diotima.*

**Diotima**
*The wise woman of Mantinea.*

**Alcibiades**
*The brilliant, drunken guest who praises Socrates.*

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

### The Frame

OPENING OF THE DIALOGUE

*Apollodorus is stopped on the road to Athens and asked about the party. He had the story from Aristodemus, who went with Socrates, and he has told it once before.*

- The party took place years earlier, the day after Agathon's victory.
- Socrates arrives late, after standing still in thought on the way.
- Agathon welcomes Aristodemus, who came uninvited.
- The guests, tired from the night before, agree to drink little and talk.

02

### Praise of Love Begins

PHAEDRUS AND PAUSANIAS

*Eryximachus proposes that each guest give a speech in praise of Love. Phaedrus speaks first, then Pausanias.*

- Phaedrus says Love is among the oldest gods and inspires honor and courage.
- He points to lovers who would die for those they love.
- Pausanias separates a heavenly love from a common love.
- He says love is good only when it leads to virtue.

03

### The Physician and the Comic Poet

ERYXIMACHUS AND ARISTOPHANES

*Aristophanes has the hiccups, so Eryximachus speaks before him. Then Aristophanes tells his story of the first human beings.*

- Eryximachus sees love as a harmony found in medicine, music and the seasons.
- Aristophanes says the first people were round, with two faces and four hands.
- Zeus cut them in two, and each half goes looking for the other.
- Love, he says, is the name for the desire for wholeness.

04

### Agathon's Speech

THE HOST

*Agathon praises Love in a graceful style. He first describes what Love is, and then what Love does.*

- He says Love is young, tender and beautiful.
- He ascribes to Love justice, temperance, courage and wisdom.
- The speech is much admired, and the room applauds.
- Socrates says he is unable to follow such a speech.

05

### Socrates and Diotima

SOCRATES' SPEECH

*Socrates questions Agathon, then says he will tell what Diotima of Mantinea once taught him. Love, she said, is not a god but a spirit between mortal and immortal.*

- Love is the child of Plenty and Poverty.
- Love desires the good and wants to possess it always.
- Lovers seek to bring forth beauty in body and in soul.
- Diotima describes steps from one beautiful body to beauty itself.

06

### Alcibiades Arrives

THE LAST SPEECH

*A crowd of revelers enters with Alcibiades, who is drunk. He is asked to praise Love and instead praises Socrates.*

- He compares Socrates to statues of Silenus that open to show gods inside.
- He tells of Socrates' endurance and courage on campaign.
- He says Socrates was not moved by his own beauty.
- Socrates answers, and more revelers arrive.

07

### Morning

THE CLOSE

*The party breaks up in disorder. Aristodemus wakes late and finds three still talking.*

- Agathon, Aristophanes and Socrates are talking about comedy and tragedy.
- Socrates argues that the same writer might master both.
- One by one they fall asleep.
- Socrates goes about his day as usual.

Love · Beauty · Wholeness · Wisdom · Virtue · Ascent

## What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Notice how the party is told at second hand, through two narrators.
2. Compare what each speaker says Love is, and what each leaves out.
3. Ask whether Aristophanes' story and Diotima's account agree.
4. Follow the steps Diotima describes from one beautiful body to beauty itself.
5. Ask what Alcibiades' speech shows about the gap between talking about virtue and living it.
6. Read with a teacher: the dialogue speaks frankly of love between men and the guests are drinking.

**Summaries** are original to Classics Library. Read the Benjamin Jowett translation (Project Gutenberg #1600), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-symposium/.