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**The Influence of Plato's Symposium:  
Love and Beauty Throughout Media & Culture**

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***Abstract***

The Ancient Greek philosopher Plato is unquestionably one of the most influential writers of philosophy in history. Through his various writings and works, Plato influenced the entire world's ways of thinking and discussion. In his dialogue *The Symposium*, Plato explores the humanistic complexities of love, beauty, and desire and shows various approaches to these topics, from mythological ideas to complex philosophical thought. *The Symposium* has managed to stretch far beyond the world of ancient Greece and has influenced the works of many different authors, artists, and writers. From Shakespeare in Renaissance-era England, to Freudian thought, the idea of Platonic Love, and to German artists of the 19th Century, the influence of the dialogue is one that is impossible to ignore.

## ***Introduction***

In his dialogue, *Symposium*, Plato explores complex ideas of the nature of love, desire, and beauty. Written during the height of classical antiquity, around 385-370 BCE, Plato's dialogue represents various parts of Athenian society. The text displays many different Athenian nobles and thinkers engaging in a philosophical discussion during a symposium, a Greek social gathering where wine, poetry, and intellectual discourse were often present. The different philosophers that are present at the symposium are asked to deliver speeches in praise of Eros, the Greek god of love, and through these speeches, Plato is able to delve into a deep discussion of the complexities surrounding love and desire.

*Symposium* provides valuable insight into values at the time of Plato, and themes present within the dialogue are still incredibly relevant today. The source has been referenced, read, and used throughout the history of humanity and in many different places across the world. Overall, *Symposium* has managed to become an incredibly influential work, impacting portrayals of love and beauty in different forms of media by inspiring many poets, writers, artists, and playwrights across the globe and throughout time.

## ***The Life and Time of Plato***

The time period that shaped Plato's life was around the mid-4th century BCE and was an age of vast complexities. Athens, where Plato was from, was a vibrant city-state, known for its many vast cultural and intellectual achievements, and was one of the earliest democracies in the world. It was considered the very center of philosophical and intellectual discourse in the West and became the birthplace of many cultures, ideas, and ways of thought. Plato was born into a very powerful aristocratic family around 427 BCE, and he grew up with many privileges compared to others at his time. Despite this, he also grew up during a time of immense conflict in Athens; for much of his life Athens had been at war with Sparta, and had been in the midst of the Peloponnesian War.<sup>1</sup> Plato had also been a student of Socrates, another very influential Greek philosopher, who influenced many of Plato's ideas, and prompted Plato to include Socrates as a character and speaker in many of his dialogues.

As a young man, Plato became a devoted student of Socrates, engaging in many philosophical discussions and debates. Through working with him, Plato came to focus more on

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<sup>1</sup> Benson, Hugh H. *A Companion to Plato*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell Pub., 2006, 2

issues of morals and ethics.<sup>2</sup> However, following Socrates's execution in 399 BC, Plato left Athens and supposedly found refuge in Egypt, though historical accounts find that it was more likely in a town in Sicily called Syracuse.<sup>3</sup> There, he was the guest of Dionysus the First, a well-known tyrant and the ruler of Syracuse. Due to Plato's "frank speaking" which Dionysus did not appreciate, he ended up being briefly sold into slavery, though after ending up in the slave markets in Aegina, he was bought free by Anniceris of Cyrene.<sup>4</sup>

Plato eventually returned to Athens in the 380s BCE and would remain there for the rest of his life. There he established his own philosophical school, known as the Academy.<sup>5</sup> The Academy served as a center for philosophical inquiry and education, attracting students from all across Greece and the Mediterranean. The school was named after the Greek mythological character, Academus, and since then, many schools, colleges, and places of learning have been referenced as such.<sup>6</sup> It was within this intellectual community that Plato composed many of his most famous works, such as *The Republic*, and where he came up with many theories, such as his famous theory of forms. While there he also wrote *The Symposium*, which reflected his deep engagement with the philosophical questions and debates of his time while working in the Academy.

### ***The Symposium***

The Text as a whole is a dialogue, and features the conversations of many different characters conversing with each other on ideas of love and beauty. It is set during a banquet, or symposium, and is attended by several prominent Athenian figures and thinkers, including Socrates, Aristophanes, and Alcibiades. The banquet had been hosted by Agathon, a poet, and the story is told by Apollodorus who recalls the events of the dinner to a friend, as he had heard about it from Aristodemus. At the banquet at Agathon's home, Agathon challenges everyone present to give a speech in praise of the Greek god of love, Eros, and that it will be judged by the god Dionysus.

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<sup>2</sup> Moore, Edward. *Plato*. Tirril [England: Humanities-Ebooks, 2007], 10

<sup>3</sup> Mason, Andrew S. *Plato*. Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2010. doi:10.4324/9781315711638, 5

<sup>4</sup> Benson, *Companion to Plato*, 6

<sup>5</sup> Benson, *Companion to Plato*, 7

<sup>6</sup> Mason, *Plato*, 6

The discourse starts with Phaedrus, a wealthy aristocrat who praises love and affirms that it is a “Mighty God” and is the oldest and most honored of gods, emphasizing love’s role in inspiring people, especially in ways of courage. He states that “love will make men dare to die for their beloved,”<sup>7</sup> and references acts of this that have been found in mythology, such as Alcestis and Admetus, and Achilles and Patroclus. Pausanias, a legal expert, follows Phaedrus by saying that there are multiple types of love: Common love, which is associated with physical desires, and Heavenly love, which is more focused on intellectual and spiritual connections. He states that not all loves are able to be equally praised and that those of connections outside desire are more respectable.

Eryximachus, a physician, who is often depicted as a bit foolish, speaks next and broadens the discussion by saying that love operates not only within human relationships but also everywhere in the universe, and is a cosmic idea, and for this reason, it should be cherished and protected. He states that love has an influence on everything from health and music to astronomy, and that it must be kept in balance in order for harmony within the world to occur. Aristophanes, a comic playwright of the Athenian era, speaks next where he explains a mythological narrative that humans were once double-bodied beings but were divided in half by the gods, leading to the difference of gender. Love, therefore, became the quest for reunification with one’s lost other half, driving individuals to seek unity and find wholeness, and explaining why many feel “whole” with a certain partner.

Finally, Socrates, a renowned philosopher who is present in many of Plato's works, makes his speech. Socrates questions earlier notions of love and chooses to describe his experiences and knowledge learned from Diotima, an incredibly wise woman and priestess, who served as his mentor in matters of love. From Diotima, Socrates learned that love is not exactly a god, but is more of a spiritual thing, and that is produced through the exchanging of ideas or through physical love and beauty. Diotima also describes the ascent, or ladder that allows one to go from a physical to a spiritual state and that love can allow one to do so, and become a more spiritually connected, knowledgeable, and truthful person.

The Dialogue ends with members of the party becoming more and more intoxicated, and the party begins to disperse as the night progresses. Most of the discourses on love come to an

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, Benjamin Jowett, and Plato. *Symposium and Phaedrus*. New York: Dover Publications, 7

end and most people fall asleep or start to leave. Finally, in the morning Socrates rises and departs to the Lyceum, where he continues on with his day and discourse.

The dialogue and discourses between the different philosophers, writers, and artists, in *The Symposium* showcases the many different ideas of love. Its ideas range from mythology all the way to philosophy and allow for heavy debate and discussion. All of the different ideas present have allowed the work to become incredibly influential as it explores one of humanity's most common theme: Love, and it has influenced many throughout history and all across the globe.

### ***Interpretations***

The nature of the text of *Symposium* is a philosophical dialogue, mostly involving characters engaging in conversations, often presenting different viewpoints on philosophical questions/discussions. Plato's intended audience was most likely the educated people of Athens, given its intricate discussions and references to cultural and intellectual trends. However, it is also important to note that *The Symposium* is also a literary work, and isn't a historical account of anything specifically, thus its main purpose is more to convey philosophical ideas rather than facts.

*Symposium* allows historians to view many of Plato's different ideas, through his use of long stretches of dialogue in which he explores his own ideas of love and beauty. One of the most important points in *The Symposium* is Plato's concept of love as a pathway to higher understanding and spiritual enlightenment. He states through Aristophanes's dialogue that "The desire and the pursuit of the whole is called love".<sup>8</sup> This quote highlights Plato's belief that love is not merely an emotion or desire, but rather a guiding principle. Using this principle, he states that through love individuals are able to become "whole" and strive for higher ideals and lead a more fulfilling life. Love becomes an incentive for personal growth and moral development, inspiring individuals to strive for virtue, wisdom, and a deeper connection to becoming transcendent and whole, showcasing the importance of love.

Another crucial idea in *Symposium* is the concept of beauty as a reflection of higher truths and ideals. Plato explores this notion through the character of Diotima, who presents a series of dialogues on the nature of love and beauty. Diotima's dialogue suggests that beauty

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<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Symposium and Phaedrus*, 18

serves as a pathway to understanding deeper philosophical truths, and through her dialogue she uses the concept of a ladder to explain her notion of love, stating that:

“And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.”<sup>9</sup>

Diotima shows the idea of a ladder of love, where one ascends to the contemplation of absolute beauty, which can then lead one to deeper philosophical ideas and truths. These ideas are profound and have become incredibly influential in Platonism and in various portrayals and ideas of love.

### ***Symposium's Influence on Writing and Thought Through Time***

*Symposium* has managed to exert a large influence on art and writing throughout history, spanning across various cultures and times. Its philosophical explorations of love have remained a very constant theme in many different forms of media and have inspired countless artists, writers, and thinkers to engage with its themes and ideas. A good example of this can be found in the works of Shakespeare.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout his plays, Shakespeare often grappled with themes of love and beauty, drawing inspiration from the philosophical ideas put forth in Plato's *Symposium*. In addition to his plays, Shakespeare's sonnets also delve into the complexities of love and desire. During Shakespeare's time, Plato's work had not been very well read in Europe, though his works were eventually translated from Ancient Greek to Latin (by Marsilio Ficino) and made available to the public.<sup>11</sup> Through this Shakespeare was able to read and reflect on them, even letting them influence many of his works. *Symposium* in particular can be seen in Shakespeare's Sonnet 116:

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments, love is not love

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<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Symposium and Phaedrus*, 33

<sup>10</sup> William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an English playwright and poet whose works have had a profound impact on literature and drama. He wrote many famous plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, and has influenced modern English, media and life in many ways.

<sup>11</sup> Gray, Ronald D. *Shakespeare on Love the Sonnets and Plays in Relation to Plato's Symposium, Alchemy, Christianity and Renaissance Neo-Platonism*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2011, 2



Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove.  
 O no, it is an ever-fixed mark  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken. Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips  
 and cheeks Within his bending sickle's compass come,  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom:  
 If this be error and upon me proved, I never write, nor no man ever loved."<sup>12</sup>

This passage can connect to Plato's ideas in *Symposium* depicting love as an incredibly powerful force that can withstand hardship and continue on through trial. Shakespeare's references to Plato can also be well seen in the quote,

"How have you made division of yourself? An apple cleft in two is not more twin than these two creatures" (5.1.221-2)<sup>13</sup>

This quote comes from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and is reflected in *the Symposium*.<sup>14</sup> As during Aristophanes's monologue, he tells a story of when human beings who were of both male and female gender were sliced in half like they were apples, and became either male or female, which Shakespeare very directly references in his writing.<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare referenced ideas of love in *Symposium* in many of his other plays as well, such as in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* where he portrays many different kinds of love, such as romantic and divine, such as Plato does in *The Symposium*.

*Symposium*, after being translated into Latin and eventually Italian, introduced Plato's views of love and beauty to Renaissance Europe which inspired many artists and poets, and brought about the phrase "platonic love." Ideas and images drawn from *The Symposium* appear in many other writings such as in *Forbidden Colors* by Yukio Mishima, E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, and *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf.<sup>16</sup> Different romantic era artists and poets, such as Lord Byron, John Keats, and Mary Shelly were also influenced by Plato, and his ideas presented in *The Symposium*. In 1818, Percy Shelley translated *The Symposium*, and used it to draw from and

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<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare. "Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds" from *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS*. London: G. Eld for T. T. William Aspley, 1609

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. *Twelfth Night*. Boston ; New York :Houghton Mifflin, 1928

<sup>14</sup> Gray, *Shakespeare on Love*, 6

<sup>15</sup> Gray, *Shakespeare on Love*, 6

<sup>16</sup> Leshner, J. H. (James H.), Debra Nails, and Frisbee C. C. (Frisbee Candida Cheyenne) Sheffield. *Plato's Symposium : Issues in Interpretation and Reception*. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 2006

write many of his poems. This translation had a large impact on the view of Plato in England during the 19th century and contributed largely to Neoplatonic ideas and thought.<sup>17</sup>

Enlightenment writers and thinkers were also to a great degree influenced by Plato and his works. Mary Wollstonecraft, an English philosopher, writer, and one of the most influential catalysts of the feminist movement often referenced and was influenced by platonic ideas of love in her works. In her work *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft quotes Plato and *The Symposium* to support her own concepts of love and often used Plato to explain notions of love and its connotations.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung used Plato's understanding of eros or "passionate desire" within *Symposium* in their work to expand and flesh out many of their ideas.<sup>19</sup> Freud even ended up using these ideas as the model for his concept of the libido and used *Symposium* to help aid in his ideas and development of his theories.<sup>20</sup> Freud claimed in his writings that the concept of sexuality through psychoanalytic processes was very similar to the Ideas of Eros found in Plato's works and *Symposium*, highlighting the dialogue's far-reaching impact and influence.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Influence on Art***

The influence of Plato's *Symposium* on art is profound, as shown by the numerous paintings and sketches that depict scenes and characters from the dialogue. Artists throughout history have been inspired by the philosophical themes explored in the text, and have incorporated them into their art to convey deeper meanings and insights. Scenes, themes, and ideas from *Symposium* often appear in different art through time, displayed by different works by many artists such as Peter Paul Rubens, Botticelli, Anselm Feuerbach, and Jean-Baptiste Regnault.<sup>22</sup>

For example, 19th-century artist Feuerbach in his painting *Das Gastmahl des Platon*, portrays a scene from *Symposium*. In this artwork, Feuerbach shows the ambiance of the

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<sup>17</sup>Nelson, Stephanie. "Shelley and Plato's Symposium: The Poet's Revenge." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 14, no. 1/2 (2007): 100–129. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25691148>

<sup>18</sup>Péter, Ágnes. "Who Is at the Helm? Mary Wollstonecraft's Contribution to the Romantic Construct of the Imagination." *Neohelicon (Budapest)* 50, no. 2 (2023): 613–34. doi:10.1007/s11059-023-00706-9.

<sup>19</sup>Leshner, *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, 533

<sup>20</sup>Leshner, *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, 533

<sup>21</sup>Sandford, Stella. "Sexually Ambiguous: Eros and Sexuality in Plato and Freud." *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 11, no. 3 (2006): 43–59. doi:10.1080/09697250601048507.

<sup>22</sup>Leshner, *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, 534

philosophical gathering described in *Symposium*, showing the different characters engaged in their conversations about love and beauty. Feuerbach's painting offers a visual interpretation of both the intellectual and emotional dynamics portrayed during the symposium. The painting gives the audiences a view into the world of ancient Greece and visually portrays the *Symposium*. By capturing the essence of *Symposium* in visual form, Feuerbach's artwork contributes to a deeper understanding of the philosophical themes explored within it. This portrayal of *The Symposium* shows the writings its influence throughout time and space, as it has managed to expand its reach all the way to Germany over 2000 years after the dialogue was written.

Plato's ideas can be seen in even more famous paintings, such as those of Botticelli.<sup>23</sup> Many of Botticelli's works are full of Neoplatonic ideas, which were heavily influenced by *The Symposium*.<sup>24</sup> One notable example is Botticelli's famous painting *The Birth of Venus*, which showcases different themes of beauty, love, and spiritual awakening. The painting features the goddess Venus emerging out from the sea, where she is surrounded by divine beings and creatures. This image embodies the platonic belief in the transcendent nature of beauty and its ability to inspire one to grow and become a better version of oneself, a key part of *the Symposium*.

Even today, Plato's ideas of love and beauty can be found in different forms of art and media. Ideas of love can be found in almost any song, movie, book, musical, or form of media. Recently the popular rock musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* uses elements of *The Symposium* to tell the story of an East German rockstar and singer. In the Musical, Hedwig Robinson is inspired by the story within Atriphane's speech, describing the origins of humans, and how they were split in half by the gods. This story drives Hedwig to search for her other half, an idea that comes from *the Symposium*.

The influence of Plato's ideas and *Symposium* on art cannot be discredited. Artists have long taken inspiration from his thoughts about love, beauty, and philosophy and used it in their work. They have used these ideas to create paintings, sculptures, poetry, and other artworks, and

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<sup>23</sup> Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) was a famous Italian painter of the early Renaissance era in Europe. His art often featured symbolic imagery and themes, reflecting the cultural and philosophical ideals of the Renaissance, such as humanism or neoplatonism.

<sup>24</sup> Doel, Marieke van den. *Ficino and Fantasy : Imagination in Renaissance Art and Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo*. Leiden ; Brill, 2022, 15

have influenced many artistic movements, such as Neoplatonism, romanticism, and surrealism through their various works.

## **Conclusion**

Plato's *Symposium* remains an incredibly valuable source of knowledge that explores timeless ideas and themes that have continued to be present in many different cultures. Though it was written over thousands of years ago, its teaching and ideas have remained in our world, and continue to be discussed. Its universal teachings on the nature of love, and the concept of beauty have become incredibly influential in many realms, affecting artists, education, writers, philosophers, and human ideas of love. From the philosophical debates of Athens to the paintings of the Renaissance, and Shakespeare's plays, the influence of *Symposium* can be seen through the ages and across the globe. Today, its ideas of love continue to influence writers, as stories about Plato's idea of love can be found in a plethora of modern literature, movies, and shows.

*The Symposium* stands out as one of the most influential works on the topic of love, and its universal ideas of love as a journey and its portrayal as a strong force, have strongly shaped philosophical thought and cultural ideals, from literature to psychology. Through different modern songs, romance novels, films, and more that all portray ideas of love, *Symposium* still resonates, perpetuating the idea of enduring love.

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