

# 1 Approaching the literature of love

- What are the earliest sources for the literature of love?
- How did Plato define the nature of love?
- How has the Bible influenced the ways writers write about love?
- Who are the key medieval and Renaissance figures in the literature of love?

Authors – poets, dramatists, philosophers, novelists and letter writers – have always looked to their predecessors to help them understand and explain the emotions and the experiences of love. So too have readers. The literature of the past continues to influence the literature of the present as strongly as ever, and this literature is not insular: the metaphors, images and archetypes that constantly recur in English literary writing are drawn from all over Europe and beyond. Approaching the literature of love therefore needs to start by revisiting some of the key writers and key texts of European literature.

## Plato

Plato, the Greek philosopher who lived c. 429–347 BC, founded the Academy, a school of philosophical enquiry, in Athens. Socrates was his teacher, and Plato in turn taught Aristotle. Great truths about what love is are thrashed out in a series of Dialogues in which Socrates takes the lead as teacher and mentor. In order to shape the listener's understanding, the imagery is helpfully physical, visceral and humorous. Two of the most famous Dialogues are the *Symposium*, a post-dinner party conversation, and *Phaedrus*, a country ramble.

### Platonic love: the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*

Our 21st-century understanding of a 'platonic' relationship is, usually, of a heterosexual friendship, high-minded and non-physical. It was the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino who introduced the term *Amor Platonicus* to define Platonic love as love of the divine. However, extracts from the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* reveal that Platonic love in 5th-century Athens BC meant love between men, often an older and much younger man, that sexual intercourse might have been included, and that true love is a desire for the transcendent good. Four extended metaphors or analogies help readers to understand the nature of this love.

The first analogy occurs in the *Symposium*. Aristophanes, 'a writer of comedies', delights the guests with his own creation myth, a metaphorical 'spin' (literally) on our universal quest for the perfect partner:

In the beginning, there were three sexes, male, female and hermaphrodite: male, the offspring of the sun, female of the earth, and the hermaphrodite, or half and half, the moon. They were circular to match their parents. 'Each human being formed a complete whole, with four hands, four legs and two faces'. When they ran they 'rolled along at high speed, like people doing cartwheels'. Zeus punished their audacity in attempting to attack the gods, by chopping these rotund beings in half 'like someone slicing vegetables for pickling'. Once they were split in half, they clung desperately to their 'other half' until they withered and died from weariness and hunger. Zeus had compassion on these wretched creatures, and made sure that their genitals were functioning properly so that they could get together. This is why we feel love for others: we are literally searching for our 'other half'.

(translated by Tom Griffith, 1988)

The comedy in this charming myth emphasises its purpose: the pursuit of physical completeness. Aristophanes concludes by calling this *eros* or desire. This love is mortal and finite. It both objectifies the beloved and desires to possess.

Plato enlarges our understanding of the nature of *eros* through Socrates, who reports the wise teachings of Diotima. She questions whether lovers are simply people in search of their other half, and instead introduces a moral dimension: 'Love is the desire for the permanent possession of the good.' We may crave immortality, physically through the production of children, or mentally and spiritually through our thoughts and intellectual achievements. These may be great poems or our deeds of justice, as good citizens. The image of a ladder, the second analogy, is introduced in the *Symposium* by Diotima in a mystical speech on the Ascent of Love. She envisages

... climbing from the love of one person to the love of two; from two to love of all physical beauty; from physical beauty to beauty in human behaviour; thence to beauty in subjects of study; from them he arrives finally at that branch of knowledge which studies nothing but ultimate beauty. Then at last he understands what true beauty is ... He will see divine beauty in its unique essence ... It exists for all time, by itself and with itself, unique. All other forms of beauty derive from it.

The third metaphor, a vivid pictorial image of desire, occurs in *Phaedrus*. The young man, Phaedrus, is in dialogue with Socrates. He is profoundly impressed by

a magnificent speech he has just heard which claims that, paradoxically, you should have a physical relationship with someone who doesn't love you, because all lovers are absurd and irrational – mad! However, Socrates proves that love is actually a good thing. It may be madness but it is a good type of madness.

Therefore, by means of an extended analogy, Plato provides a model for the operation of love:

The soul is made up of three elements; the tripartite soul. The chariot is the body, and the charioteer is the reasoning part of the soul. The charioteer controls two horses, one good and one bad. The good horse is described as 'well proportioned, with a high neck. It is restrained and modest, has never felt the whip and is easy to control.' On the other hand the bad horse is a 'jumble of parts'. It is 'slow to obey even whip and spur together and is the companion of excess and boasting'. The good horse represents the noble, emotional, high-minded side of the soul or desire, whereas the bad horse is basic physical appetite: 'When the charioteer first sees the face he loves, warming his whole soul with the sight, he begins to be filled with tickling and pains of desire.' The two horses react in utterly contradictory ways. 'The good horse is modest, controlled and restrained whereas the bad horse charges violently forward to possess the beloved and has to be vigorously restrained.'

The charioteer sees the radiant image of the divine reflected in the beauty of the young man. Numinous imagery is used; he is *dazzled*: the sight fills him with *fear*; 'he falls back, overcome with *awe*'. A ferociously bloody power struggle then ensues between the 'bad' horse and the charioteer. Eventually, the bad horse is humbled and the way is paved for the lover to 'worship' the boy.

Finally, a fourth analogy develops this idea.

When a man sees beauty here, in this life, he is reminded of true beauty. He grows wings, and stands there fluttering them, eager to fly upwards, but unable to do so. Yet still he looks upwards, as birds do, and takes no notice of what is below; and so he is accused of being mad.

Why is he rooted to the spot? Socrates' conclusion is comforting: 'Of all forms of divine possession, this is the best – and has the best origins – both for him who has it and for him who shares in it. It is this madness which the lover of beauty must experience if he is to be called a lover.' He is dimly aware of the perfect beauty he has seen in heaven, unencumbered with a body, in the **World of Forms**. He begins to grow wings of desire. Plato equates the physical discomfort of growing wings with that of cutting teeth. The transcendent is rooted in the body.

## Plato's influence

Plato continues to be hugely influential in Western literature. As we have seen, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* explore, through dialogue, the relationship between beauty, desire and love. Earthly beauty is a pale shadow of absolute perfect beauty. Therefore the Platonic lover worships the beauty of his mistress so that he may adore her soul. Plato's influence is to be seen in the courtly love tradition, Petrarchan love poetry, Renaissance and metaphysical poetry, particularly Shakespeare's sonnets and the poetry of John Donne. Indeed, much of Donne's poetry is influenced by Platonic thought. In 'The Good Morrow', the poet celebrates the true maturity of his love in Platonic terms, echoing the World of Forms:

If ever any beauty I did see,  
 Which I desired and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

The first movement of composer John Adam's *Harmonium* (1980) is a setting of another Donne poem. Adams states: 'I settled on three poems of transcendental vision. "Negative Love" examines the qualities of various forms of love, ascending in the manner of Plato's *Symposium*, from the carnal to the divine.'

- ▶ Compare 'Negative Love' with 'No Platonique Love' by William Cartwright (Part 3, pages 77 and 78). Which do you consider comes closer to Platonic thinking?

## The Bible

The Bible has been one of the most important sources for writers and artists depicting different facets of love: platonic, spiritual and sexual. Every aspect of love is to be found in its pages: Adam and Eve as 'one flesh', the fraternal love of David and Jonathan and the poetic eroticism of the *Song of Songs*. In the New Testament the Virgin Mary, Jesus' mother, weeps at the foot of the Cross and Christ's own sacrifice demonstrates God's love for humankind. This sacrificial love, a love which gives freely of itself, and which yearns for the good of the other is called *agape*; it is distinct from *eros*, the love which desires both possession of, and union with, the beloved.

Bible narratives have provided Western literature with a language of love. They have influenced writers as diverse as Milton in the 17th century after the English Civil War, and American playwright Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*, see Part 2, page 43) writing at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1990s.

## The Old Testament

### Adam and Eve

Adam means 'earth' in Hebrew, as, according to Genesis Chapters 2 and 3, he was created from 'the dust of the ground'; Eve means 'life' as she is the mother of all living things. She was formed from one of Adam's ribs.

And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife and were not ashamed.

(Genesis 2, 23–25)

Adam and Eve cultivate Eden, the garden of earthly delights. After being tempted by the serpent into disobeying God by eating 'of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil', they plunge into fruitless mutual recrimination: 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat,' Adam complains. They lose their immortality and an angel with a fiery sword drives them from Eden, their paradise on earth. Eve and her female descendants have to suffer the pangs of childbirth; Adam must work 'in the sweat of his face', until he returns 'unto the ground'.

In this story, Adam at first displays a proudly possessive intimacy through the repetition of 'bone' and 'flesh'. However, he later coldly dissociates himself from Eve, calling her 'the woman whom thou gavest to be with me'. In Book 9 of his **epic** poem *Paradise Lost* (published 1667) John Milton describes the romantic love of Adam and Eve, which is put to the test after Satan, in the guise of a serpent, has deceived Eve. Adam, as yet unfallen, meets flushed and intoxicated Eve after she has eaten the forbidden fruit.

- ▶ How does Adam express his love for Eve during this encounter? What connects Milton's writing with the depiction of Adam and Eve in Genesis? (See Part 3, page 78.)

### 'One flesh'

The Marriage Service, in *The Book of Common Prayer*, contains this phrase from Genesis: 'these two, man and wife, shall become one flesh'. Writers from Donne onwards have explored this mystery:

But as all several souls contain  
 Mixture of things, they know not what,  
 Love, these mixed souls doth mix again,  
 And makes both one, each this and that.

(from John Donne 'The Extasie')

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'My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath ... I am  
 Heathcliff – he's always, always in my mind – not as a pleasure, any  
 more than I am always a pleasure to myself – but as my own being.'  
 (from *Wuthering Heights*)

'The Extasie' defines the union as a mystical–alchemical process, with Love as the alchemist (reflected in the logical precision of the lines), whereas Cathy speaks about her love for Heathcliff as something sublime, elemental and eternal. W.H. Auden, in the poem 'Lullaby' (1937), hints that lovers may, fleetingly, experience union of body and soul:

Soul and body have no bounds:  
 To lovers as they lie upon  
 Her tolerant enchanted slope  
 In their ordinary swoon,  
 Grave the vision Venus sends  
 Of supernatural sympathy  
 Universal love and hope.

## David and Jonathan

Another major story from the Old Testament, to which writers on love have returned again and again, is the story of David and Jonathan. David, on learning that Jonathan and his father King Saul have been killed fighting the Philistines, enemies of the Israelites, utters this elegy:

The beauty of Israel is slain upon the high places: how are the mighty fallen ... Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions ...

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.  
 (II Samuel 1, vv.19, 23, 26)

Dying on the battlefield gives Saul and Jonathan undying honour. David elevates them into personified 'Beauty': eagles and lions have an archetypal nobility. The last sentence reads as a personal lament. Jonathan's love for the speaker David is a memory – in the past tense; David's distress will be ever present.

In 'Dirge for two Veterans', the American poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892) presents the death of a father and son during the Civil War as an American version of Saul and Jonathan:

For the son is brought with the father,  
 In the foremost ranks of the fierce assault they fell,  
 Two veterans, son and father, dropped together,  
 And the double grave awaits them.

And his lyric 'Reconciliation' (1881) conveys something of the sorrow David might have felt:

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,  
 Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly  
 lost,  
 That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly  
 Wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world;  
 For my enemy is dead, a man as divine as myself is dead,  
 I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin – I draw near,  
 Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

Note the symmetry between the overarching sky, the 'Word over all' and the kiss that the speaker gently bestows on his enemy.

- ▶ How does the speaker communicate grief? In what ways does this poem draw on the language of David's lament?

George Eliot ends her novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) with the sentence 'In their death they were not divided.' This is written on the tombstone of the drowned brother and sister, Maggie and Tom Tulliver, who 'had gone down in an embrace never to be parted'. Thus George Eliot implies that love is present at the very moment of death, whereas Whitman's poem implies that death confers a universal brotherhood on man.

- ▶ What examples of close male friendship in the time of war can you find which echo the David and Jonathan story? For example, consider the relationship between Stephen and Jack in Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* or Owen and Sassoon in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*.

### **The Song of Songs**

Also known as the *Song of Solomon*, this Old Testament book reads as a collection of love poems where God is never mentioned. It has been interpreted allegorically first as the relationship between God and Israel, and then between Christ and his Church. The collection can stand alone as an ecstatic celebration of the joy of passionate human love. (See the extract in Part 3, page 80.) In describing each other, the bridegroom and his bride repeatedly use the **blazon**, later seen in Petrarchan poetry:

Behold, thou art fair, my love: behold thou are fair, thou hast doves'  
 eyes within thy locks.  
 Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy  
 temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks.  
 Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed  
 among the lilies. ('The Bride', 4, vv. 1 and 3)

His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires. His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold.

(‘The Bridegroom’, 5 vv.14–15)

The lovers are about to make love. The eroticism is provocative:

My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him. I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock. I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone: my soul failed when he spake ...

(5 vv.4–6)

Desire is aroused by being deferred. The joy of lovemaking is celebrated: ‘His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me.’ Every sense is awakened; the beloved is ‘perfumed with wine and frankincense ... the voice of the turtle dove is heard in the land: Thy lips, oh my spouse, drop as the honeycomb; honey and milk are under thy tongue.’ Finally, the writer acknowledges that love will transcend death. ‘Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thy arm, for love is as strong as death. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.’

Many writers, including Shakespeare, George Herbert, Swinburne, Robert Graves and D.H. Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, have been influenced by the *Song of Songs*.

- ▶ Compare the blazon of the male beloved in *Song of Songs* with Cleopatra’s description of her beloved Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* (see Part 5, page 116). What is the effect of Cleopatra’s hyperbole? Is either passage realistic?

## The New Testament

The four Gospels in the New Testament narrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In St John’s Gospel, Christ gives a new commandment, to replace the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament: ‘This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’ (John 15, vv.12–13). Some of Christ’s parables paint pictures of this selfless and self-giving love, or *agape*. The Good Samaritan tends the injured traveller, left beaten and dying at the side of the road; the father rejoices at the return of the Prodigal Son, who had squandered his inheritance, ending up homeless and destitute, before returning to his family to ask forgiveness. The image of the Good Shepherd, who is prepared to lay down his life for his sheep, is used to describe Christ’s love for his people.



## The Virgin Mary

Mary is the mother of Jesus. St Luke's Gospel describes how she becomes pregnant, conceiving through the power of the Holy Spirit: 'And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son.' The moment when the divine becomes human is called the Incarnation – literally, the putting on of flesh. This mystery is given poetic form in this medieval lyric:

He cam also stille  
 To his mother's bower  
 As dew in April  
 That falleth on the flower.

The 'stille'ness evokes awe at the miraculous silent conception. The image of the 'dew in April', as well as approximating chronologically to the time of the Annunciation and the beginning of Mary's pregnancy, also suggests the renewal of spring. 'Dew' typologically is Christ, 'the flower' Mary.

Mary's tender devotion to the Christ Child has been represented in art from medieval times onwards. The Madonna cherishes the baby Jesus in her arms, in the stable in Bethlehem. Michelangelo sculpted the Pietà, to be seen in St Peter's Rome, a harrowing depiction of Mary cradling the dead body of her son after his corpse had been brought down from the Cross. Types or symbols of Mary in medieval poetry and art include the fountain, the door, the lily among thorns, the rose without a thorn, the star of the sea, the enclosed garden and, wonderfully, the chaste virgin, the tamer of the unicorn. The *Song of Songs* (see page 14, above) provides sources for much of this imagery.

In *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) American playwright Tennessee Williams uses 'the lovely fragility of glass' to represent the virginal innocence of the vulnerable Laura, who is associated in several ways with Mary. In his production notes Williams writes: 'The light on Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious saints or madonnas.'

Like Mary, the unicorn tamer, Laura cherishes her miraculous glass unicorn, her pride and joy. And at the conclusion of the play, her brother Tom's words remind the audience of Laura's haunting innocence:

I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow. Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes. Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger – anything that can blow your candles out!  
 [Laura bends over the candles]

For nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles,  
 Laura – and so goodbye ...  
 [*She blows the candles out.*]

- What is the effect of the religious imagery? How does the writer equate Laura with the Virgin Mary?

## Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene appears in the New Testament as a follower of Christ, after he cast out her evil demons. She has been conflated with the Biblical woman taken in adultery who, in penitence, washed Jesus' feet with her hair and whose sins were forgiven. Certainly Mary was present at the foot of the Cross, attended the burial, and most significantly was the first to encounter the Risen Christ on Easter Morning. The painting by Titian, *Noli Me Tangere* ('Do Not Touch Me', 1514), in the National Gallery, depicts this encounter. The painting is full of reciprocal desire. Christ leans tenderly towards Mary Magdalene, who is kneeling on the ground. Mary yearns to touch Christ who has 'not yet risen to My Father'. Desire is appropriate if it has its proper object, which in this story must be God. This passionate desire for God is seen in the writings of medieval mystics such as Richard Rolle (1300–1349) and Julian of Norwich (1343–1413):

Christ is our clothing. In his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us for love, and he will never let us go.

(Julian of Norwich *Revelations of Divine Love*)

Michèle Roberts' novel *The Wild Girl* (1984) is a fictional account of an imagined relationship between Mary Magdalene and Christ. The metaphysical poet Richard Crashaw (1612–1649) depicted the sorrows of Mary in his poem, 'St Mary Magdalene, or the Weeper'. The extravagant metaphysical conceits which preface the poem are typical of his baroque, emotional style:

Lo, where a Wounded Heart with bleeding Eyes conspire,  
 Is she a Flaming fountain, or a weeping fire?

## Ovid

Two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Ovid was banished from the centre of his world, Rome, to an obscure outpost of the Roman Empire, Tomis, on the Black Sea. Ovid always yearned to return to Rome but he died in exile, ten years later in AD 18.

Ovid's love poetry may be categorised according to genre: the *Amores*, or love **elegies**; the *Heroides*, verse letters; the didactic sex guide *Ars Amatoria*, and his epic poem, *Metamorphoses*. He has been described as 'Rome's great expert on love'.