

# Eros (concept)

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**Eros** (pronounced /ˈɪrɒs/ or English pronunciation: /ˈɛrɒs/; Ἔρως *érōs*), also called **marital love**, is passionate love, with sensual desire and longing. The Modern Greek word "*erotas*" means "Intimate Love". The term *erotic* is derived from *eros*.

## Eros in the Greco-Roman tradition

In the classical world, the phenomenon of love was generally understood as a kind of madness or, as the Greeks put it, *theia mania* ("madness from the gods").<sup>[1]</sup> This love passion was described through an elaborate metaphoric and mythological psychological schema involving "love's arrows" or "love darts", the source of which was often given as the mythological Eros or Cupid,<sup>[2]</sup> sometimes by other mythological deities (such as Rumor<sup>[3]</sup>). At times, the source of the arrows was said to be the image of the beautiful love object itself. If these arrows were to arrive at the lover's eyes, they would then travel to and 'pierce' or 'wound' his or her heart and overwhelm him/her with desire and longing (love sickness). The image of the "arrow's wound" was sometimes used to create oxymorons and rhetorical antithesis concerning its pleasure and pain.

"Love at first sight" was explained as a sudden and immediate beguiling of the lover through the action of these processes, but was not the only mode of entering into passionate love in classical texts. At times the passion could occur after the initial meeting, as, for example, in Phaedra's letter (IV) to Hippolytus in Ovid's *Heroides*: "That time I went to Eleusis... it was then most of all (though you had pleased me before) that piercing love lodged in my deepest bones."<sup>[4]</sup> At times, the passion could precede the first glimpse, as in Paris' letter (XVI) to Helen of Troy in the same work, where Paris says that his love for her came upon him before he had set eyes on her: "...you were my heart's desire before you were known to me. I beheld your features with my soul ere I saw them with my eyes; rumour, that told me of you, was the first to deal my wound."<sup>[5]</sup>

Whether by "first sight" or by other routes, the passionate love concept of the classical authors often had disastrous results. In the event that the loved object was cruel or uninterested, this desire was shown to drive the lover into a state of depression, causing lamentation and illness. Occasionally, the loved objects — because of their sublime beauty — were depicted as unwitting ensnares of lovers (their beauty is a "divine curse" that inspires men to kidnap them or try to rape them).<sup>[6]</sup> Stories in which unwitting men catch sight of the naked body of Diana the huntress (and sometimes Venus) lead to similar ravages (as in the tale of Actaeon).

The classical conception of love's arrows were elaborated upon by the Provençal troubadour poets of southern France in the twelfth century and became part of the European courtly love tradition. In particular, a glimpse of the woman's eyes was said to be the source of the love dart.<sup>[7]</sup> In some medieval texts, the gaze of a beautiful woman is compared to the sight of a basilisk.

These images continued to be circulated and elaborated upon in the Renaissance and Baroque literature<sup>[8]</sup> and pictorial imagery. Boccaccio for example, in his *Il Filostrato* mixes the tradition of the eye's darts with the metaphor of Cupid's arrow.<sup>[9]</sup> "Nor did he (Troilus) who was so wise shortly before... perceive that Love with his darts dwelt within the rays of those lovely eyes... nor notice the arrow that sped to his heart."<sup>[10]</sup>

The oxymorons and rhetorical antithesis concerning the pleasure and pain from love's dart continued through the 17th century, as, for example, in the classically inspired images of *If Love's a Sweet Passion* from Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* (act 3):

If Love's a Sweet Passion, why does it torment?  
 If a Bitter, oh tell me whence comes my content?  
 Since I suffer with pleasure, why should I complain,  
 Or grieve at my Fate, when I know 'tis in vain?  
 Yet so pleasing the Pain is, so soft is the Dart,

That at once it both wounds me, and Tickles my Heart.

## Eros in Plato's philosophy

Plato refined the concept of eros. Although eros is initially felt for a person, with contemplation it becomes an appreciation of the beauty within that person, or even becomes appreciation of beauty itself. Plato does not talk of physical attraction as a necessary part of love, hence the use of the word platonic to mean, "without physical attraction". Plato also said Eros helps the soul remember beauty, and contributes to an understanding of spiritual truth. Lovers and philosophers are all inspired to tell the truth by eros, the god of love. The most famous ancient work on the subject of *eros* is Plato's *Symposium*, a dialogue among seven men (including Alcibiades), reclining in a Greek symposium, in which Socrates reveals his knowledge about the nature of *eros*, inspired by the teaching of Diotima of Mantinea. Eros, in the Socratic logos, can be defined as the longing for wholeness or completeness, a daemon whose aim is to reach wisdom without ever owning her and is used to describe fulfillment between man/woman and man/Gods.

Plato considers eros to be philosophy, the love or desire of wisdom. Wisdom is the greatest of virtues and eros is the desire for the greatest of goods. Eros is, therefore, the desire for wisdom. Philosophy literally translates to a love of wisdom. It is important to note that Plato does not suggest that love must be for something physically "beautiful". In fact the greatest of goods will be eternal and physical beauty is in no way eternal. Yet, to achieve possession of the beloved's inner beauty and goodness will fulfill their need and emptiness to produce happiness. Happiness is the experience of knowing that you are participating in the good.<sup>[11]</sup>

Thomas Jay Oord defines eros as intentional response to promote overall well-being by enhancing or appreciating what is valuable or good.

## Eros and Sigmund Freud

In Freudian psychology, Eros, also referred to in terms of *libido*, *libidinal energy* or *love*, is the life instinct innate in all humans. It is the desire to create life and favours productivity and construction. In later psychoanalytic theory, Eros battles against the destructive death instinct of Thanatos (death instinct or death drive); whereas in early psychanalytic writings, instincts from the Eros were opposed by forces from the ego.

In *The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis*<sup>[12]</sup>, Freud explains that the psychoanalytic concept of sexual energy is more in line with the Platonic view of Eros, as expressed in the Symposium, than with the common use of the word sex as related primarily to genital activity. He mentions philosophers like Schopenhauer that have already pointed to the importance of sexual life. He then goes on to confront his adversaries for ignoring such great precursors and for tainting his whole theory of Eros with a *pansexual* tendency. He finally writes that his theory naturally explains this collective misunderstanding as a predictable resistance to the acknowledgement of sexual activity in childhood and the Oedipus complex.

German philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse appropriated the concept for his highly influential 1955 work *Eros and Civilization*.

## Eros and Carl Jung

In Carl Jung's analytical psychology, *logos* is used for the masculine principle of rationality, in contrast to its female counterpart, eros:

Woman's psychology is founded on the principle of *Eros*, the great binder and loosener, whereas from ancient times the ruling principle ascribed to man is *Logos*. The concept of *Eros* could be expressed in modern terms as psychic relatedness, and that of *Logos* as objective interest.<sup>[13]</sup>

This points to his theory of the anima/animus syzygy of the male and female psyches. According to Jung, men possess the anima in their unconscious, and this is a caricature of the feminine *eros*. It is a part of personal individuation for men to confront their anima, by accepting *eros* (a trait pushed out of phalocratic society). Also intrinsic to this is the ability to see beyond the projected ego and assimilate this into our conscious being. This is *eros*, as it is the 'desire for wholeness,' which is necessary for us to become in-tune with our selves. By understanding 'passionate love' and the 'desire for wholeness' as 'psychic relatedness,' Jung also demonstrates that the desire for love is a desire for interconnection and interaction with other sentient beings.

## See also

- The Greek god Eros
- Love styles
- *The Four Loves*
- Greek words for love
- Limerence, a modern term describing the infatuation and romantic desires commonly associated with *eros*.
- Eroticism
- Greek love

## References and notes

- [1] Tallis, Frank (February 2005). "Crazy for You" ([http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive\\_home.cfm?volumeID=18&editionID=115&ArticleID=809](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive_home.cfm?volumeID=18&editionID=115&ArticleID=809)). *The Psychologist* **18** (2). .
- [2] See, for example, the *Amores* and the *Heroides* of Ovid which frequently refer to the overwhelming passion caused by Cupid's darts.
- [3] See Ovid's letter from Paris, below.
- [4] Ovid. *Heroides and Amores*. Translated by Grant Showerman. Second edition revised by G.P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, IV, 67-70, p 49. ISBN 0-674-99045-5
- [5] Ovid. *Heroides and Amores*. Translated by Grant Showerman. Second edition revised by G.P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, XVI, 36-38, pp. 199-201. ISBN 0-674-99045-5
- [6] For more on these tropes in the Ancient Greek novel, see Françoise Létoublon, *Les Lieux communs du roman: Stéréotypes grecs d'aventure et d'amour*, Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1993. ISBN 90-04-09724-4.
- [7] See the introduction by Nathaniel Edward Griffin to *The Filostrato* of Giovanni Boccaccio (New York: Bilbo and Tannen, no date. ISBN 0-8196-0817-X): "This doctrine of the immediate visual perception of one's lady as a prerequisite to the birth of love originated among the *beaux esprits* de Provence. [...] According to this description, love originates upon the eyes of the lady when encountered by those of her future lover. The love thus generated is conveyed on bright beams of light from her eyes to his, through which it passes to take up its abode in his heart." (p.76, note 2)
- [8] For a full discussion of the scene of "love at first sight" in fiction, see Jean Rousset, *"Leurs yeux se rencontrèrent" : la scène de première vue dans le roman*, Paris: José Corti, 1981.
- [9] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Filostrato* (see *supra*): "In the description of the enamourment of Troilus is a singular blending of the Provençal conception of the eyes as the birthplace of love with the classical idea of the God of Love with his bows and quiver..." (p.77, note 2)
- [10] *Ibid.*, canto 1, strophe 29; translation by Nathaniel Edward Griffin and Arthur Beckwith Myrick, p. 147.
- [11] Plato. Symposium. 199c5-212c
- [12] Freud, S. (1925). The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis.
- [13] Carl Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 65, ISBN 0710095228.

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