Phaedrus

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PLATO

Plato is one of the most important philosophers who ever lived, and his thought has influenced the entire subsequent Western philosophical tradition. He was born into an aristocratic Greek family, along with two brothers and a sister. The young Aristocles was said to have been given his nickname, Plato, by his wrestling coach (*platon* means "broad" in Greek). According to tradition, in his youth Plato wanted to become a playwright, but in his late teens or early 20s heard Socrates teaching in the marketplace and decided to devote his life to philosophy. Plato continued to study under Socrates until the age of 28, in 399 B.C., when the older philosopher was tried and executed for impiety. After this, Plato spent time traveling around the Mediterranean before settling down in Athens to write and establish his Academy, the predecessor of the modern university; Aristotle became his most famous student. The Academy persisted until 86 B.C. Plato also invented the dialogue, a literary form which depicts a conversation between one or more characters. Some of his most famous dialogues (he wrote more than 20) include *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *The Symposium*, and *The Republic*. Plato died at the age of 81.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In Plato's day, rhetoric was becoming popular in elite Athenian circles—both listening to speeches and training in specialized schools, such as Isocrates's school of rhetoric, founded shortly before Plato's own Academy. The sophists, itinerant teachers of rhetoric, claimed to be able to impart a comprehensive body of knowledge—a claim which Plato and Socrates noticeably resist throughout Plato's dialogues, including in *Phaedrus*, where Socrates claims more than once to "know nothing." The ongoing debate over the role of rhetoric in education, and as an aspect of wisdom, is prominent in *Phaedrus*. Equally hard to miss in *Phaedrus* is the existence of homoerotic relationships between older men and their teenaged protégées; in aristocratic classical Greece, such relationships were accepted as a stage in a young man's development into a mature citizen. Finally, Plato's own influence as a philosopher made both an immediate and ongoing cultural impact—his most famous Academy student, Aristotle, became the tutor of the young Alexander the Great, and Plato's writings basically launched the academic discipline of philosophy, from antiquity through the middle ages and down to the present day.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Plato further develops his theory of the soul in Book IV of his most famous work, *The Republic*, in which he describes three distinct parts of the soul corresponding to the three classes of society. Plato's account of the preexistence of the soul in *Phaedrus* influenced early Christian thinker Origen (185-254), who borrows and adapts this idea in his *On First Principles*, a foundational work for the subsequent Christian theological tradition. Aristotle, who studied under Plato at his Academy, built off of Plato's views on speech in his treatise *On Rhetoric*, perhaps the most important work on the art of persuasion up to modern times.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Phaedrus*
- **When Written:** 380s-370s B.C.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** 380s-370s B.C.
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Platonic dialogue
- **Setting:** c. 418-416 B.C., outside the city of Athens, along the banks of the Ilissus River
- **Climax:** Socrates's second speech on love and the soul
- **Antagonist:** Lysias (and poor speakers/writers in general)
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Phaedrus on Love. Phaedrus also appears as a character in *The Symposium*—again as a young, enthusiastic student of rhetoric—offering a brief and relatively unsophisticated speech in praise of the god Love amidst a roomful of Athens' cultural giants.

"Phaedrus" on Zen. A character called Phaedrus, named after this text, appears in Robert Pirsig's 1974 novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. The narrator applies the name Phaedrus to the consciousness that occupied his body before he experienced a psychotic break while studying ancient philosophy at the University of Chicago.

PLOT SUMMARY

The philosopher Socrates encounters Phaedrus, a young student of rhetoric, outside the Athens city walls. When he learns that Phaedrus has just come from hearing Lysias, a famous orator, Socrates is interested in hearing Lysias's speech for himself. He persuades Phaedrus, who's carrying a copy of

Lysias's speech, to read it aloud.

Lysias's speech is addressed to a young man, arguing that it's better to have a sexual relationship with someone who's not in love with you than with someone who is. A primary reason for this, according to Lysias, is that people in love aren't in their right mind, and they act under the compulsion of madness rather than according to free choice. Lysias also tries to persuade his listener that the long-term social advantages are greater when a relationship is grounded in friendship rather than passion.

When Phaedrus sees that Socrates isn't impressed with Lysias's speech, he prevails upon his friend to deliver his own speech in response. Though he's not enthusiastic about doing so, Socrates agrees and gives a speech parodying Lysias's. Like Lysias, Socrates speaks as a man trying to persuade a younger man to sleep with him even though they're not in love. He defines love as a form of madness that occurs when desire overpowers one's better judgment. This madness causes lovers to deprive their beloved of good things out of jealousy, even keeping them from philosophy, that source of greatest happiness. Love eventually spends itself and fizzles out, leaving both men in a worse condition than they were before.

After Socrates finishes his speech and is about to leave, he senses a supernatural nudge warning him that his words have displeased the gods by slandering Eros, the god of love. Socrates starts over with a second speech. He completely changes tactics by arguing that it's wrong to reject the advances of a lover on the ground of the lover's madness. When madness is given by the gods, it is a praiseworthy thing. The very best "madness" is love.

In defense of this idea, Socrates gives an elaborate explanation of the nature of the soul. He describes the soul metaphorically as a winged chariot driven by two **horses**, one noble and one filled with lowly desires. Souls that can control their "horses" attain the summit of heaven and glimpse eternal realities, but most are dragged back toward earth by the lowly horse. Those who can remember their soul's glimpse of eternal beauty in an earlier existence are constantly oriented heavenward, making average people assume they're mad.

Socrates goes on to explain that the philosophically inclined soul will work hard to restrain his "bad" horse through self-control and remembrance of heavenly beauty. With lots of practice, the lowly horse is eventually subdued, and the lover enjoys a passionate relationship with his beloved, but it's focused on the beauties of philosophy, not on sex. Only this kind of relationship orients someone's soul heavenward; thus, there are greater benefits in a relationship with one who's in love with you than with someone who isn't.

Socrates and Phaedrus then discuss rhetoric and the difference between good and bad speaking, since Phaedrus admits that Socrates's second speech is superior to Lysias's speech, but he can't explain why. Socrates begins by establishing that rhetoric must be concerned with the truth, not just with what appears to be persuasive. Next, he explains that, if rhetoric is a "leading of the soul by means of speech," then it's important for a speaker to understand the nature of the soul.

Together they examine Lysias's speech and discuss Lysias's failure to properly define his subject from the beginning. Socrates explains that precise definition is important and is connected to the philosophical practice of dialectic—of clarifying a topic through step-by-step inquiry. He shows how he carefully divided up the topic of "madness" in his own speech in order to lead his audience through his argument that love is a desirable form of madness. He also argues for the indispensability of the soul to the practice of rhetoric; no one who has merely mastered rhetorical skills can claim to be an expert in the art of rhetoric unless he knows how to apply rhetorical remedies to specific souls in specific contexts.

Finally, Socrates and Phaedrus discuss the propriety of writing speeches. Writing is a relatively new and ambivalent technology in Socrates's eyes—it promotes the appearance of wisdom while undercutting the reality of it. This is because writing is silent and lifeless, unable to respond to inquiry or challenge. Philosophical dialectic is superior, because it's adapted to each specific soul and, through interaction, guides that soul toward wisdom.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Socrates – Socrates (c. 470 B.C.–399 B.C.) was Plato's teacher and appears as a main character in many of Plato's dialogues, including *Phaedrus*. Though he left no writings of his own, he is considered the founder of Western philosophy. He was executed for alleged impiety at the end of his life. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates is roughly in his 50s, and he has a long conversation about love and rhetoric with the young student Phaedrus. He describes himself as "sick with passion for hearing people speak," which he refers to as the practice of philosophical dialectic. In this dialogue, he offers one speech parodying Lysias's views on love, then a longer speech defending love as a type of god-given madness that, rightly channeled, leads to a philosophical life. He also explores the nature of the soul at length and subsequently argues that a thorough knowledge of the soul is indispensable to the science of rhetoric.

Phaedrus – Phaedrus is an Athenian student of rhetoric in his 20s, passionate about hearing speeches. At the beginning of the dialogue, he is mostly preoccupied with the superficial characteristics of speeches—especially Lysias's speech on love, which he's trying to memorize. Socrates is concerned that Phaedrus will end up modeling himself too much on Lysias, both in form and ideas. Through dialectic, however, Phaedrus

gradually acknowledges the superiority of Socrates's approach, recognizing that speeches must be concerned with creating wisdom and beauty in people's souls and not simply with external tools of persuasion.

Lysias – Lysias is a celebrity speechwriter and speaker whom Phaedrus has just come from hearing at the beginning of *Phaedrus*. Phaedrus describes him as "the cleverest of present writers." Though Lysias himself does not appear or speak in the dialogue, Phaedrus reads aloud to Socrates a copy of Lysias's latest speech, which argues that it's best to pursue a sexual relationship with someone who isn't in love with you. Socrates disapproves of the speech and Phaedrus's enthusiasm for it, and he offers a speech in response that overturns Lysias's argument. Together, Socrates and Phaedrus dissect and critique Lysias's lack of concern for the truth as evidenced by his speech. By the end of the dialogue, Socrates has demonstrated that Lysias stands for the worst tendencies of contemporary rhetoric and that philosophical dialectic is a superior approach.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Theuth – Theuth (or Thoth) is an Egyptian god who is said to have discovered letters and writing. Near the end of *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells a story about Theuth's discovery, ultimately disproving his claim that letters are "an elixir of memory."

Thamus – Thamus is an Egyptian king who appears in Socrates's story about the god Theuth's discovery of letters. Socrates has Thamus argue with Theuth's contention that letters (i.e writing) are a revolutionary memory aid.

TERMS

Speech/Logos – The term "logos" in Greek can have many shades of meaning—it can refer to words, speeches, talking, everyday discussion, and philosophical discourse. Frequently used throughout *Phaedrus*, the word is used at various times in each of these ways, sometimes with intentional wordplay. For example, at the beginning of the dialogue, **Socrates** describes himself as someone "sick with passion for hearing people speak." **Phaedrus**, fresh from listening to a compelling speech, thinks that Socrates is talking about sharing his enjoyment of the art of rhetoric, but Socrates is referring more specifically to dialectic, the philosophical conversation method he loves. As Phaedrus goes on, Socrates uses this latter meaning—focused on philosophical questioning and discovery—to guide Phaedrus away from his more surface-level appreciation of words and towards a deeper delight in discussion that's aimed at wisdom and beautifying the soul.

Love/Eros – This term can be complicated in Greek philosophy, and even within a single work of Plato's, because of its various shades of meaning. Love or *eros* can refer to passionate sexual desire; it can refer to the Greek god of love, Eros ("Cupid," in Roman religion); and it can refer to a longing for higher goods like justice and beauty. In *Phaedrus*, **Lysias**'s and **Socrates**'s' first two speeches are concerned with the first of these meanings—both argue that love is a form of madness that should be avoided in sexual relationships. Yet later, when Socrates realizes he's dishonored the god Eros by speaking this way, he gives a second speech that focuses on the latter meaning of love—that is, love as the pursuit of the vision of eternal beauty. Ultimately, he argues that this philosophical type of love characterizes the highest human relationships, and consequently that the divinely-given "madness" of love should be embraced rather than avoided.

Dialectic – Dialectic is the teaching method **Socrates** uses throughout Plato's dialogues. It's used throughout much of *Phaedrus*, as Socrates asks **Phaedrus** questions about the nature of various subjects like love, speech, and writing. The goal of dialectic is not to impart knowledge, but to create wisdom in the soul of both participants by asking questions, recognizing what one doesn't know, and drawing conclusions about the nature of reality. When Phaedrus and Socrates discuss rhetoric, Socrates argues that dialectic is inherent to good speaking, because it's concerned with defining and breaking down concepts in order to clearly understand their nature. He also argues that dialectic is superior to written speeches or books, because it's tailored to specific souls—that is, it is a living conversation instead of a speechless document.

Sophists – Sophists were itinerant teachers common in Greece in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. Though sophists could be hired to teach aristocratic young men a variety of subjects, rhetoric was the most common area of expertise. There was a stigma attached to sophists as peddlers of wisdom, not legitimate educators; **Phaedrus** remarks that the speechwriters of the day, like **Lysias**, feared being dismissed as mere "sophists."

Muses – In ancient Greek mythology, the Muses were goddesses who inspired poetry, songs, and other literature and art. In *Phaedrus*, **Socrates** calls upon the Muses to help him make his speech, and he mentions the Muses' inspiration of poetry as a praiseworthy form of "madness."

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE SOUL'S STRUGGLE FOR WISDOM

In *Phaedrus*, the ancient philosopher Socrates uses an extended metaphor to describe the human soul as "a winged pair of **horses** and their charioteer." He explains that, while gods' horses are of good stock, everyone else's "horses" are of mixed stock—one of the horses is noble and good, while the other has the opposite nature. "Perfectly winged" souls sail above the earth and govern the cosmos, but souls who have lost their wings fall to earth and take on mortal bodies. Socrates then offers a myth explaining how souls become wingless and the struggle they must endure to become winged again. Through this elaborate mythmaking, Plato rejects a deterministic view of human destiny (meaning that all events and choices a person makes are predetermined and cannot be changed) and argues that, by way of philosophy, souls must continually strive to look beyond earthly beauties to eternal, heavenly beauty; in essence, people must seek to extricate themselves from their base desires, represented by the "bad" horse at the helm of their soul-chariot. Furthermore, by setting their sights on the eternal and steeping themselves in philosophy, humans can determine the course and quality of their lives—and even their afterlives.

Socrates explains that all human beings face an uphill battle between noble and base desires—the latter constantly dragging them away from contemplation of truth. In the myth that Socrates weaves, the chariots of the gods happily circle the heavens, carrying out their appointed duties. When the gods travel to "the summit of the arch of heaven" for divine banquets, they have an easy journey because of their well-balanced chariots; however, human souls face a difficult contest. Although souls have one "good" horse and one "bad" one, this doesn't mean balance or equilibrium; each soul's "bad" horse constantly weighs them down and inclines them back towards earth, if the bad horse has not been sufficiently subdued by the good one.

Souls that succeed in not being pulled back down to earth stand on the outer edge of heaven and enjoy the view, gazing on ultimate truth and the knowledge of things as they really are. Most souls, however, don't enjoy this full vision of reality because they're forced to constantly wrestle with their wayward horse—the soul's chariot "now rises, now sinks, and because of the force exerted by its horses" gets an incomplete picture of truth. Many souls don't even make it that far; amidst the jostling with other charioteers, they become maimed, their wings broken. The latter don't achieve any vision of reality, "and afterwards feed on what only appears to nourish them"—that is, earthly things that only appear to be good, beautiful, and wise, but pale in comparison to eternal beauties. This part of Socrates's myth explains that one must constantly battle against one's baser desires if one hopes to contemplate genuine truth; for most people, the distractions of the world make this fight prohibitively difficult.

Depending on its ability to achieve a vision of reality (that is, if it succeeds in reaching the outskirts of heaven and beholding ultimate truth), each soul determines the form it will occupy in its next existence, or next circuit around the heavens. Souls that are weighed down and unable to gain a vision of reality will be planted in the seed of humans occupying various stations in life—"the one that saw most shall be planted in the seed of a man who will become a lover of wisdom [a philosopher]"; the subsequent levels include kings, athletes, physicians, mystics, and successively less respectable stations, all the way down to demagogues and tyrants. "Among all these kinds," Socrates says, "whoever lives justly receives a better portion, whoever lives unjustly receives a worse." Thus, the key to regaining one's wings is to remember the beauty one has seen while following the gods around the rim of heaven: "Hence it is with justice that only the thought of the philosopher becomes winged; for so far as it can [be]," it is close to divinity. If a philosopher uses earthly reminders of beauty to raise him up again to ultimate beauty, "he alone achieves real perfection."

This achievement doesn't *look* like perfection to most people. Because such a philosopher "[stands] aside from human concerns, and [comes] close to the divine, he is admonished by the many for being disturbed, when his real state is one of possession [by the gods], which goes unrecognized by the many." In other words, one who is in the process of regaining his soul's wings breaks social conventions, appearing unconcerned by the things that occupy average people. Every soul theoretically has the ability to regain its wings, because no one would have attained the nobility of the human form if they hadn't approached the highest heavens in a previous existence; yet few people have "sufficient memory" to clearly recall and understand the heavenly truth that earthly beauties reflect.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato isn't necessarily trying to provide a *literal* explanation for how human souls came to occupy their current status. In essence, he suggests that every human being has the capacity to contemplate wisdom, but all will face a difficult battle against their own base desires, the myriad distractions of earthly life, and the disapproval of an uncomprehending society. Nevertheless, it's a battle worth waging in order to regain one's "wings" and share with the gods in the vision of eternal beauty.

LOVE AND MADNESS

Phaedrus, a young student of rhetoric, has just come from hearing famous speechwriter Lysias deliver a speech at a friend's house. When he and philosopher Socrates later cross paths, Socrates asks to hear Lysias's speech from Phaedrus. In his speech, Lysias makes a sensible, straightforward argument that young men should resist the advances of men who are in love with them, preferring relationships with men who *don't* love them, since the latter aren't driven mad by desire. Overturning the

conventional meaning of "madness," Socrates in turn argues the opposite of Lysias. By presenting Socrates's argument in this way, Plato argues that the god-given "madness" of love actually orients people toward a philosophical life and thus turns their attentions toward eternal truth rather than the things of this earthly world.

Lysias argues that a young man should prefer a relationship with a man who doesn't love him to a relationship with a man who does. Yet many of Lysias's arguments are heavily based on self-interest. He argues that it makes more sense to "grant favors not to those who stand in great need of them [i.e., those in love] but to those who are most able to pay [you] back," and "not to the sort who will take advantage of your youthful beauty but to the ones who will share their own advantages with you when you become older." Young men, he argues, should be mindful of how they can gain from any sexual relationship with an older man.

According to Lysias, even as young men safeguard self-interest, they should also know that a man in love suffers from clouded judgment and does things he wouldn't normally do. A man in love, for example, is more likely to develop a physical passion for a lover and later find out things he dislikes about that person, whereas if the affair is conducted on the basis of friendship instead of love, friendship is likely to remain once passion is spent. Lovers also tend to become upset over meaningless things and to praise things about their lover that don't actually deserve praise.

In other words, if people in love "know they are out of their mind but cannot control themselves," then how, "when they come to their senses, could they approve of the decisions they make when in this condition?" In Lysias's estimation, being in love—and thus "out of one's senses"—is invariably seen as a bad thing that obscures the truth and compromises a young man's future.

Though Socrates initially responds to Lysias's speech with his own speech praising "sense and sanity" over "love and madness," he senses a supernatural nudge to try again and to praise the god Love more piously. Changing his approach, Socrates argues that if madness were a bad thing, it might be true that one shouldn't gratify a man in love on the grounds of his "madness." However, the gods' greatest gifts come through madness, and the greatest of these gifts is "love [which] is … sent from the gods to help lover and beloved."

Socrates's argument revolves around his metaphor of the soul as a chariot led by two **horses**—the first horse good and noble, the second one bad, constantly dragging the soul downward and away from the vision of true beauty that leads to immortality. Some don't resist the "bad horse" driving their soul's "chariot," because they forget to look beyond their lover's earthly beauty "to beauty itself, when he gazes on its namesake here," and they animalistically surrender themselves to shameless worldly pleasure. It may seem like such a man experiences madness when he does so, but he's really just out of his senses.

However, the soul that remembers true beauty—eternal beauty—continually battles with these two "horses" when in the presence of a beautiful lover. The more often the "bad horse" is forcibly subdued by restraint, accompanied by the remembrance of true beauty, the more passion becomes tamed. Instead of being tempted to sexual indulgence, "the soul of the lover follows the beloved in reverence and awe" and is more and more oriented toward a life of philosophy. Besides harmony in this life, such a philosophical soul is on its way to regaining the heavenly sight of beauty, and thus immortality. People who are occupied with such things are usually dismissed as "mad," but this madness is god-given, and is the wellspring from which love flows.

To sum up Socrates's argument, then, it's *preferable* for a man to have a relationship with one who's in love with him. If he doesn't grapple with the "madness" that springs from love, he won't have the opportunity to train the "horses" leading his "chariot," thus gaining the pleasures of philosophy and the eventual vision of true beauty. In contrast, if one embraces the seeming "good sense" of a relationship with someone who's not in love with him, he'll only gain "miserly benefits of a mortal kind," causing him to "wallow mindlessly around the earth" instead of contemplating eternal truth and beauty.

RHETORIC AND PHILOSOPHY

After Socrates has refuted the speechwriter Lysias's argument about love, Socrates and Phaedrus begin talking about the speechwriting (rhetorical) profession in general. In the ancient world, rhetoric—which Socrates defines as "a kind of leading of the soul by means of speech"—was sometimes dismissed as a manipulative art that held loosely to the truth. Through Socrates and Phaedrus's discussion, Plato argues that, while rhetoric in itself isn't a shameful pursuit, it isn't enough for a speaker to master rhetorical tools; to truly speak and write well, he must understand souls—that is, a good rhetorician must be a philosopher.

Socrates rejects the idea that the goal of rhetoric is persuasion alone. Socrates asks Phaedrus whether, in order to speak or write well, it's necessary for one to possess knowledge of the subject he intends to tackle. Phaedrus responds that he's heard it isn't necessary for an orator to know, for instance, what is truly just, but only what *appears* to be just, since the object of speaking is to persuade, and knowledge of the truth isn't necessary for that.

Socrates counters Phaedrus by giving an example of someone making a persuasive speech claiming that a worthless donkey is actually a valuable horse. If an expert in rhetoric is ignorant of good and bad and tries to persuade an ignorant populace "to do

something bad instead of good, what sort of harvest do you think rhetoric reaps after that from the seed it sowed?" Phaedrus acknowledges that the harvest would be poor. Thus, it's necessary that a good orator "should acquire the truth first and then get hold of [rhetoric]." Socrates further points out that a skilled rhetorician has the ability to make the same thing appear at one time just and at another time unjust—simply "playing" with his audience. He rejects the idea that rhetoric should be primarily concerned with persuasion alone.

Nevertheless, Socrates argues that rhetorical tools are indispensable for speaking and writing well. Socrates suggests that they examine the speech Lysias gave, and the speeches Socrates gave in response, to understand the proper use of rhetoric. When Phaedrus reads Lysias's speech again, Socrates points out that Lysias doesn't define "love" from the beginning. This is a problem because, while audiences have the same meanings in mind when they hear concrete terms like "iron" or "silver," an abstract term like "love" sends everyone in different mental directions.

Also, Lysias starts his argument about love not from the beginning, but "from the end, trying to swim through his speech in reverse, [and] … begins from the things the lover would say to his beloved when he'd already finished loving." As a result of this convoluted approach, the rest of the speech is randomly organized and therefore garbled, insufficiently informed by the science of rhetoric.

Socrates explains that "every speech should be put together like a living creature, as it were with a body of its own, so as not to lack either a head or feet but to have both middle parts and extremities"; that is, each part should fit with each other part and with the whole. This organic structure serves truth by ensuring that the orator's argument can be clearly understood throughout.

According to Socrates, the art of rhetoric also includes the ability to collect and divide things properly. Socrates goes through his second speech and shows Phaedrus how he organized his argument—for example, collecting in one place the various types of madness, so that it was clear what Socrates did and didn't mean about the "madness" of love, allowing the speech as a whole to be internally consistent.

Secondly, Socrates explains that a speech needs to be divided at its "natural joints," not sliced up like the work of an "inexpert butcher." Because Lysias failed to divide his subject properly, he discussed madness as though it were a single thing, while Socrates divided "madness" up into various kinds and was thus able to show how love is a praiseworthy form of it.

Socrates goes on to explain that this ability to collect and divide so as to speak and write properly is actually not rhetoric *per se*, but dialectic—the systematic inquiry into the truth which Socrates held to be the heart of philosophy. When dialectic, with its concern for truth, is joined to other rhetorical tools, rhetoric is on its way to being truly philosophical. One more thing is needed, however.

To use the tools of rhetoric and dialectic well, Socrates argues, it's necessary to have a thorough knowledge of the soul. Socrates explains that if somebody claimed to be an expert doctor, but in reality only knew how to cause a patient to vomit or help their bowels move, people would say that that "doctor" may have stumbled upon a remedy or two, but didn't know anything of the science of medicine. Likewise, a novice musician can't claim to be an expert on harmony just because he knows how to produce high and low notes on his strings. Such things are necessary rudiments and prerequisites, but in no way does grasping them suggest mastery over the sciences of which they're part.

From this Socrates argues that, if rhetoric is indeed the leading of the soul by means of speech, then "the man who means to be an expert in rhetoric must know how many forms soul has," "why some people are like this, and others like that," why different people are responsive to different methods of persuasion, and so on. Only when someone has learned these things and observed them in real life is he then prepared to speak in different ways suitable to different occasions (that is, be a true rhetorician). Whenever someone lacks the fullness of this knowledge of souls and how to address them, he isn't truly speaking according to the science of rhetoric, regardless of what he claims.

By having Socrates examine the three speeches that occur earlier in the dialogue, Plato is able to build a nuanced argument for the necessity of rhetoric as well as its insufficiency by itself for speaking well. He neither dismisses the value of rhetoric as a persuasive tool nor disregards its potential risks; instead, he raises the broader contemporary debate about rhetoric to another level by showing that the orator must also be vitally concerned with *whom* he is persuading—that is, he must be a philosopher.

THE LIMITS OF WRITING

Near the end of *Phaedrus*, Socrates and Phaedrus have a short but fascinating exchange on the subject of the "propriety and impropriety [of] … writing." Writing things down wasn't common even among learned circles in classical Greece; in this discussion, in fact, it's regarded as an ambivalent new technology. While Plato doesn't mean to dismiss writing as a worthless practice, he uses Socrates's arguments to show that, in the pursuit of wisdom, writing has inherent limitations and can't replace the interactive, personalized nurturing of individual souls through philosophical discourse.

According to Socrates, writing doesn't improve memory, as some have claimed; it actually encourages forgetfulness and prevents real learning from taking place. Socrates tells a story

about an Egyptian god named Theuth who was the first to discover letters. Theuth came to King Thamus of Egypt to show him this new technology, claiming it "will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory; what I have discovered is an elixir of memory and wisdom."

King Thamus, however, tells Theuth he's been misled. Letters will actually have the *opposite* effect than the god has claimed: "they produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practice at using their memory, as through reliance on writing they are reminded from outside by alien marks, not from within themselves by themselves." Writing is therefore "not an elixir of memory," as Theuth had said, "but of reminding."

Socrates posits that the problem with writing being a mere "reminder" is that, when teachers rely on it, "to your students you give an appearance of wisdom, not the reality of it; thanks to you, they will hear many things without being taught them, and will appear to know much when for the most part they know nothing, and they will be difficult to get along with because they have acquired the appearance of wisdom instead of wisdom itself." In other words, teachers will repeatedly read about knowledge but won't actually internalize it, and they'll pass on this "knowledge" to their students in a similarly tenuous manner. Students will then arrogantly assume they've acquired knowledge they don't actually have. Thus, in the long run, writing will actually have a less than favorable effect on people's character.

Socrates also points out that writing is a "dead letter"—unlike philosophical dialectic, conveyed through conversation, one can't directly engage with the written word or target writing to the needs of specific souls. Socrates remarks, "I think writing has this strange feature, which makes it truly like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them something, they preserve a quite solemn silence. Similarly with written words: you might think that they spoke as if they had some thought in their heads, but if you ever ask them about any of the things they say out of a desire to learn, they point to just one thing, the same each time." Writing is as inert as painting; it never changes and isn't responsive to questioning or critique.

The other issue with writing is that it can't be tailored to every audience who might read it. Socrates explains that "every composition trundles about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject and of those who have nothing at all to do with it, and it does not know how to address those it should address and not those it should not." While a written composition addresses all audiences the exact same way, dialectic is the "kind of speech that is written together with knowledge in the soul of the learner, capable of defending itself, and knowing how to speak and keep silent in relation to the people it should." When engaging in dialectic, a philosopher can always engage directly with his listeners and tailor his arguments specifically to the "souls" with which he is dealing. Thus, dialectic is superior to the written word because speech is more flexible and customizable. Phaedrus calls dialectic "living, animate speech … of which written speech would rightly be called a kind of phantom." Only the former can take root in a human soul and be nourished, through face-to-face encounter, such that it can grow and ripen into wisdom and happiness for that soul. The written word can't replicate this kind of animated exchange between souls; it's at best an echo of it.

The irony of Socrates's and Phaedrus's discussion about writing is that, of course, it takes place in a dialogue that's been *written down*. Plato obviously saw value in preserving and passing down his ideas, or he would not have authored dialogues in the first place. As such, one should probably read this section of *Phaedrus* as containing at least a dash of tongue-in-cheek humor. Nevertheless, Plato makes a serious point about the pedagogical limitations of writing and the importance of attending to the needs of actual, flesh-and-blood learners through personal, spoken discourse.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SOUL-CHARIOT'S HORSES

In *Phaedrus*, Socrates famously introduces the metaphor of the soul as a winged chariot that's guided by two horses representing, in turn, the noblest and basest human impulses: one of the horses is good, while the other is wicked, devoted to its own base (generally sexual) desires. Socrates explains that the job of a person's soul is to learn to control the bad horse so as to drive his soul-chariot to the summit of heaven and witness eternal beauty in the company of the gods. Most souls don't succeed and are dragged earthward by the conflict between their two horses. Socrates's central point here concerns the relationship between a lover and his beloved. In such cases, one's bad horse desires sexual indulgence and constantly strives to overpower the good horse's restraint. The key to leading a philosophical life, he argues, is to repeatedly subdue the bad horse, specifically through the remembrance of heavenly beauty and the practice of restraint. Doing so will eventually make the bad horse placid—i.e., will quell one's base desires—enabling a relationship with one's beloved to endure on the basis of philosophy rather than sexuality. This metaphor enables Socrates to argue that love, a divine form of "madness," is not opposed to living a philosophical life, and in fact promotes the beautification of the soul.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Phaedrus* published in 2005.

227a-230e Quotes

Phaedrus — if I don't know Phaedrus, I've forgotten even who I am. But I do, and I haven't; I know perfectly well that when he heard Lysias' speech he did not hear it just once, but repeatedly asked him to go through it for him, and Lysias responded readily. But for Phaedrus not even that was enough, and in the end he borrowed the book and examined the things in it which he was most eager to look at, and doing this he sat from sun-up until he was tired and went for a walk [...] knowing the speech quite off by heart, unless it was a rather long one. He was going outside the wall to practice it, when he met the very person who is sick with passion for hearing people speak — and [...] he was glad, because he would have a companion in his manic frenzy, and he told him to lead on.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Lysias, Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *Phaedrus*, Socrates (probably in his 50s at this time) comes upon young rhetoric student Phaedrus (probably in his 20s), who has just come from hearing famed speechwriter Lysias giving a speech about love. Socrates asks to hear Phaedrus's rendition of the speech, but Phaedrus somewhat coyly pretends he couldn't possibly deliver such a great speech well. But Socrates sees through the enthusiastic novice's "modesty" and knows he's not only carrying a copy of the speech on his person, but that he's likely been studying it ceaselessly in an attempt to memorize it. The "person ... sick with passion" is Socrates himself, but as will become clear later in *Phaedrus*, what Socrates means by "hearing people speak" involves face-to-face philosophical discourse, as distinct from written speeches. Thus, this quote represents Socrates's attempt, throughout the dialogue as a whole, to guide Phaedrus toward a more mature understanding of what constitutes good speaking—something of greater substance than memorizing the words of a flashy celebrity.

But, Phaedrus, while I think such explanations attractive in other respects, they belong in my view to an over-clever and laborious person who is not altogether fortunate; just because after that he must set the shape of the Centaurs to rights, and again that of the Chimaera, and a mob of such things [...] if someone is skeptical about these, and tries with his boorish kind of wisdom to reduce each to what is likely, he'll need a good deal of leisure. As for me, there's no way I have leisure for it all, and the reason for it, my friend, is this. I am not yet capable of 'knowing myself', in accordance with the Delphic inscription; so it seems absurd to me that while I am still ignorant of this subject I should inquire into things which do not belong to me.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Lysias, Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

As Phaedrus and Socrates walk along the banks of the Ilissus River in search of a place to sit and go over Lysias's speech, Phaedrus asks whether they are near the spot where the Greek wind-god Boreas kidnapped the legendary princess Oreithuia. He then asks Socrates if, "for goodness' sake," he really believes this "fairy-tale" to be true. In response, Socrates shares some explanations he's heard "wise people" give for this story, such as that Oreithuia was pushed off the rocks by the wind and drowned. But his bigger point is that a "clever" person who takes the time to offer a "reasonable" explanation for such a story might be missing its value altogether. And, if he starts here, pretty soon such a person will proceed through all the mythological figures, reducing them to something that can be rationally grasped—and to what end, except to make himself look "wise?" For his own part, Socrates says that he's still too far from understanding *himself*—an imperative of philosophy—to arrogantly presume to correctly "explain" ancient tales.

231a-234c Quotes

❝ Yet how is it reasonable to give away such a thing to someone in so unfortunate a condition — one that no person with experience of it would even try to prevent? For the ones who suffer it agree themselves that they are sick rather than in their right mind, and that they know they are out of their mind but cannot control themselves; so how, when they come to their senses, could they approve of the decisions they make when in this condition? Moreover, if you were to choose the best one out of those in love with you, your choice would be only from a few, while if you chose the most suitable to yourself out of everybody else, you would be choosing from many; so that you would have a much greater expectation of chancing on the man worthy of your affection among the many.

Related Characters: Lysias, Phaedrus (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from Lysias's speech, read aloud by his admirer Phaedrus, at the beginning of the dialogue. Lysias's argument is that it's better to respond to the sexual advances of someone who's *not* in love with you than to the advances of someone who is. Lysias's speech doesn't follow a logical progression, but at the heart of his argument is the claim that people in love aren't in their right mind, so it's foolish to enter a relationship with someone in that state. He also assumes that anyone who experiences this unfortunate condition of "madness" will inevitably return to his senses and regret the things he did under its influence. His subsequent point, that choosing from the subset of men who *aren't* in love with you rather than limiting yourself to those who are, is representative of both the shoddy reasoning and emphasis on self-interest that are pervasive throughout Lysias's speech.

234d-241d Quotes

❝ In everything, my boy, there is one starting-point for those who are going to deliberate successfully: they must know what they are deliberating about, or they will inevitably miss their target altogether. Most people are unaware that they do not know what each thing really is. So then, assuming that they know what it is, they fail to reach agreement about it at the beginning of their enquiry, and, having gone forward on this basis, they pay the penalty one would expect: they agree neither with themselves nor with each other. So let us, you and I, avoid having happen to us what we find fault with in others: since the discussion before you and me is whether one should rather enter into friendship with lover or with non-lover, let us establish an agreed definition of love, about what sort of thing it is and what power it possesses, and look to this as our point of reference while we make our enquiry as to whether it brings help or harm.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Lysias, Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the beginning of Socrates's first speech in *Phaedrus*, which he gives on the spot in response to hearing Lysias's speech from Phaedrus. From the beginning, it's important to observe that Socrates's speech is meant to be a parody of Lysias's speech. In the lines above, he indirectly critiques what he heard Lysias failing to do at the beginning of his own speech: giving a clear definition of "love" that would have allowed his speech to stay internally consistent, and also ensure that his hearers were on the same page with him and with each other. Socrates brings up this same critique later, when he and Phaedrus examine the speeches and discuss the art of rhetoric together in the latter half of the dialogue.

In this speech, Socrates claims that love is an undesirable form of madness—an argument he then goes on to demolish in his second speech. Socrates knowingly sets up an elaborate comparison whereby Phaedrus will be forced to acknowledge the weaknesses of Lysias's line of argument and also begin to understand the rudiments of good rhetoric.

241e-243e Quotes

❝ When I was about to cross the river, my good man, I had that supernatural experience, the sign that I am accustomed to having — on each occasion, you understand, it holds me back from whatever I am about to do — and I seemed to hear a kind of voice from the very spot, forbidding me to leave until I make expiation, because I have committed an offence against what belongs to the gods. Well, I am a seer; not a very good one, but like people who are poor at reading and writing, just good enough for my own purposes; so I already clearly understand what my offence is. For the fact is, my friend, that the soul too is something which has divinatory powers; for something certainly troubled me some while ago as I was making the speech, and I had a certain feeling of unease, as Ibycus says (if I remember rightly), 'that for offences against the gods, I win renown from all my fellow men'. But now I realize my offence.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Lysias, Phaedrus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

After Socrates gives his speech in response to Lysias, he prepares to depart from the riverbank where he's been sitting with Phaedrus. However, he senses some sort of supernatural nudge—he doesn't make its nature exactly clear—warning him that he's displeased the gods in some way. He later goes on to explain that, by casting "love" as a form of undesirable madness and thus a bad thing, his speech has been impious. Love is a god, so his speech (and Lysias's, for that matter) has been slanderous. It's especially wrong to try to win applause from people by disrespecting the gods, so he must make amends by giving a better speech.

Socrates's divinely-prompted "repentance" is at least partly intentional, however, part of the path by which he's guiding Phaedrus to a better understanding of both love and good speaking. His comment about the soul's "divinatory powers" is in keeping with his view (elaborated in his second speech) that the soul is the part of a human being that's closest to the gods—and the soul of a philosopher is even closer than the average person's.

244a-257b Quotes

❝ [It is not true that] when a lover is there for the having, one should rather grant favors to the one not in love, on the grounds that the first is mad, while the second is sane. That would be rightly said if it were a simple truth that madness is a bad thing; but as it is, the greatest of goods come to us through madness, provided that it is bestowed by divine gift. The prophetess at Delphi, no less, and the priestesses at Dodona do many fine things for Greece when mad, both on a private and on a public level, whereas when sane they achieve little or nothing; and if we speak of the Sibyl and of others who by means of inspired prophecy foretell many things to many people and set them on the right track with respect to the future, we would spin the story out by saying things that are obvious to everyone.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Lysias, Phaedrus

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates begins his second speech, having received supernatural prompting to better honor the god Love. He starts by straightforwardly refuting what Lysias argued in his speech (that it's better to gratify someone who's not in love with you). Lysias built his argument on the assumption that "madness" is a universally bad thing; Socrates dismantles this assumption by distinguishing between different types of madness and asserting that madness caused by the gods is actually a *good* thing.

As examples, he mentions Delphi, where Greeks would go to hear the prophecies of one of the most popular oracles, or sibyls; Dodona was a similar oracle site, just a little below Delphi in prestige. Socrates uses these examples that most Greeks would have taken for granted—that oracles underwent a form of temporary madness in order to receive and communicate messages from the gods—to establish his case that madness isn't always and everywhere a bad thing, especially when it's divinely bestowed.

> About its form we must say the following: that what kind of thing it is belongs to a completely and utterly superhuman exposition, and a long one; to say what it resembles requires a lesser one, one within human capacities. So let us speak in the latter way. Let it then resemble the combined power of a winged team of horses and their charioteer. Now in the case of gods, horses and charioteers are all both good themselves and of good stock; whereas in the case of the rest, there is a mixture. In the first place, our driver has charge of a pair; secondly, one of them he finds noble and good, and of similar stock, while the other is of the opposite stock, and opposite in its nature; so that the driving in our case is necessarily difficult and troublesome.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Here, in his second speech, Socrates is discussing the soul. He says that it's beyond human capacities to truly describe the soul as it is, but that it's possible to say something about what the soul resembles. He therefore introduces a myth for this purpose, using the metaphor of a winged chariot that circles the heavens, led by two horses. He explains that gods have "horses" which are unvaryingly excellent, so they enjoy a smooth and pleasant flight; the souls of all other creatures, however, are variable, and the "charioteer" has a much more difficult time keeping them under control.

These variable horses represent different aspects of human nature—the noble, restrained side and the side that's chiefly concerned with satisfying the lower appetites, like sexual indulgence and other worldly delights. From here, Socrates will go on to explain the charioteer's continual struggle to tame its "bad horse" in order to draw nearer to the gods.

> This is the life of gods; of the other souls, the one that follows god best and has come to resemble him most raises the head of its charioteer into the region outside and is carried round with the revolution, meanwhile being disturbed by its horses and scarcely seeing the things that are; while another now rises, now sinks, and because of the force exerted by its horses sees some things but not others. The remaining souls follow after them, all straining to reach the place above but unable to do so, and are carried round together under the surface, trampling and jostling one another, each trying to get ahead of the next. So there ensues the greatest confusion among the sweating competitors, and in all of it, through their charioteers' incompetence, many souls are maimed, and many have their wings all broken; all of them with great labor depart without achieving a sight of what is, and afterwards feed on what only appears to nourish them.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Developing his myth of the charioteer with its horses as a metaphor for the soul, Socrates explains why most people's souls fall back to earth and don't gain a sight of the heavenly realities beyond the rim of heaven. Those souls who follow the most "godly" course in life (among them philosophers, as Socrates later explains) do manage to peek beyond the heavens, but even they must pilot their straining horses, so they aren't able to take in very much. Those whose bad horse is even more unruly are repeatedly yanked back toward the earth, meaning that their view of heaven keeps being interrupted. And most souls don't even make it that far—they're injured by the crush of chariots struggling for ascent and lose sight of their heavenly goal altogether. The latter souls tend to satisfy themselves with earthly beauties, but these don't nourish their wings, so they become more mired in worldly distractions than ever.

> When the agreed time comes, and they pretend not to remember, it reminds them; struggling, neighing, pulling, it forces them to approach the beloved again to make the same proposition, and as soon as they are close to him, head down and tail outstretched, teeth clamped on its bit, it pulls shamelessly; but the same thing happens to the charioteer as before, only even more violently, as he falls back as if from a starting barrier; still more violently, he wrenches the bit back and forces it from the teeth of the horse of excess, spattering its evil-speaking tongue and its jaws with blood and, thrusting its legs and haunches to the ground [...] When the bad horse has had the same thing happen to it repeatedly and it ceases from its excess, now humbled it allows the charioteer with his foresight to lead, and when it sees the boy in his beauty, it nearly dies of fright; and the result is that then the soul of the lover follows the beloved in reverence and awe.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, still in the midst of Socrates's second speech, Socrates explains the process of "taming" one's unruly "horse" in the context of a relationship with a lover. He says that even if one makes an "agreement" with one's bad horse (representative of one's sexual appetites) that they'll submit to the good horse (restraint), this goes out the window when the beloved shows up. He offers a vivid picture of the bloody, strenuous efforts involved; the charioteer must yank the horse relentlessly to keep it in check. Once this has happened enough times, the horse is gradually subdued; it reaches the point where the mere sight of the beloved scares it, in anticipation of another fierce pull on the reins. Now the soul is able to meekly follow the beloved without fear of being derailed by sexual desire, and their relationship is free to focus on the contemplation of wisdom. This kind of relationship is what's colloquially known as a "Platonic friendship."

> And then, well, if the better elements of their minds get the upper hand by drawing them to a well-ordered life, and to philosophy, they pass their life here in blessedness and harmony, masters of themselves and orderly in their behavior, having enslaved that part through which badness attempted to enter the soul and having freed that part through which goodness enters; and when they die they become winged and light, and have won one of their three submissions in these, the true Olympic games - and neither human sanity nor divine madness has any greater good to offer a man than this. But if they live a coarser way of life, devoted not to wisdom but to honor, then perhaps, I suppose, when they are drinking or in some other moment of carelessness, the licentious horses in the two of them catch them off their guard, bring them together and make that choice which is called blessed by the many, and carry it through...

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Here Socrates is beginning to wrap up his second speech on love. He continues to expound on the blessings enjoyed by those who, helped by sexual restraint, achieve a philosophical life. Not only do they enjoy a more harmonious life on earth, but their souls also become winged, able to fly to heaven once again. The term "three submissions" is a wrestling reference, comparing the soul-struggle with Olympic competition—once a soul has succeeded in mastering itself for three lifetimes in a row, according to Plato's thought, it's liberated forever and need never be weighted down by a body again. When one fails to actively pursue wisdom, however, he's susceptible to the bad horse getting the better of him in a careless moment. Even if he makes choices that look sensible and honorable to the masses, he might be sabotaging his soul in the process. This is in keeping with Plato's emphasis that the philosophical life will often defy social conventions.

These are the blessings, my boy, so great as to be counted divine, that will come to you from the friendship of a lover, in the way I have described; whereas the acquaintance of the one not in love, which is diluted with a merely mortal good sense, dispensing miserly benefits of a mortal kind, engenders in the soul that is the object of its attachment a meanness that, though praised by the many as a virtue, will cause it to wallow mindlessly around the earth and under the earth for nine thousand years.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Lysias, Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Here Socrates brings his speech praising love to a close by comparing the friendship of a lover with the acquaintance of one who isn't in love. He's just finished explaining some of the glorious benefits that come from a relationship with a lover—especially the chance to train one's soul philosophically in the hope of regaining fellowship with the gods. Notably, such a relationship does *not* include sex, no matter how much the two partners may have had to struggle with deep desire for one another. Such a friendship inevitably looks strange in the eyes of the world. In contrast, a sexual relationship with a non-lover might be praised for its "good sense," for all the reasons Lysias's speech praised earlier—it's free from emotional turmoil, it's more discreet, and it might yield long-term social benefits for both partners. Yet Socrates disdains these as "miserly benefits" that, while praiseworthy in the eyes of most, actually do harm to the beloved's soul, holding him back from making spiritual progress—even trapping his soul in miserable wanderings through many cycles of life.

257c-274a Quotes

Socrates: Well then, for things that are going to be said well, and beautifully, mustn't there be knowledge in the mind of the speaker of the truth about whatever he means to speak of?

Phaedrus: What I have heard about this, my dear Socrates, is that there is no necessity for the man who means to be an orator to understand what is really just but only what would appear so to the majority of those who will give judgement; and not what is really good or beautiful but whatever will appear so; because persuasion comes from that and not from the truth.

Related Characters: Phaedrus, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in *Phaedrus*, the action shifts from speeches on love to what has been Socrates's overriding concern—what makes for good speaking versus bad. He engages in a dialogue with Phaedrus on the subject, hoping to guide the enthusiastic young man beyond his superficial fondness for flashy oratory toward a more profound understanding of how rhetoric *works*. Socrates suggests that in order to speak well, one must know the truth of his subject; however, Phaedrus contends that truth is secondary—it's more important that the speaker be persuasive, making his points *appear* beautiful, regardless of whether they're good and beautiful or not.

Phaedrus's perspective accords with the practice of the sophists around this time—itinerant teachers of rhetoric who emphasized the external tricks of persuasive speaking (Lysias would be classed among these). Through Socrates and Phaedrus's discussion, Plato attacks the popularity of such teachers and advocates a sounder method.

Socrates: ...[I]t would be [ridiculous] when I tried in earnest to persuade you by putting together a speech in praise of the donkey, labelling it a horse and saying that the beast would be an invaluable acquisition both at home and on active service, useful to fight from and capable too of carrying baggage, and good for many other purposes.

Phaedrus: Then it would be thoroughly ridiculous.

Socrates: Well then, isn't it better to be ridiculous and a friend than to be clever and an enemy? [...] So when an expert in rhetoric who is ignorant of good and bad finds a city in the same condition and tries to persuade it, by making his eulogy not about a miserable donkey as if it were a horse but about what is bad as if it were good, and — having applied himself to what the masses think — actually persuades the city to do something bad instead of good, what sort of harvest do you think rhetoric reaps after that from the seed it sowed?

Related Characters: Phaedrus, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

As Socrates and Phaedrus continue their conversation about what constitutes good rhetoric, Socrates puts forward a silly scenario as an example. If, out of ignorance, he made a persuasive speech recommending a donkey as an excellent animal of war, the outcome would be merely ridiculous. However, if a rhetorically savvy speaker who's ignorant of the truth tries to persuade a likewise ignorant populace to do something bad, then the outcome could be far worse. Through this exchange, Socrates argues that speaking that isn't firmly grounded in the truth isn't simply harmless. Speech is always meant to achieve some sort of *end*, shaping people's views and actions in one direction or another; as such, speakers must not flatter their audiences with what merely *looks* appealing or reasonable to their hearers, but be careful to speak with the good of their audiences' souls in view. Socrates will continue to build his argument by exploring the nature of the soul.

Socrates: Isn't this sort of thing, at least, clear to anyone: that we're of one mind about some things like this, and at odds about others? [...] When someone utters the name of iron, or of silver, don't we all have the same thing in mind?

Phaedrus: Absolutely.

Socrates: What about the names of just, or good? Doesn't one of us go off in one direction, another in another, so that we disagree both with each other and with ourselves? [...] So in which of the two cases are we easier to deceive, and in which does rhetoric have the greater power?

Phaedrus: Clearly in those cases where we go off in different directions.

Socrates: So the one who means to pursue a science of rhetoric must first have divided these up methodically and grasped some mark which distinguishes each of the two kinds, those in which most people are bound to tread uncertainly, and those in which they are not.

Related Characters: Phaedrus, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates and Phaedrus continue their discussion of rhetoric. Socrates is trying to help Phaedrus understand the importance of clearly defining one's terms at the beginning of a speech. There are certain terms that nearly anyone will understand—concrete things like iron or silver that evoke a particular image in people's minds. However, when one takes up more abstract subjects such as justice, goodness, or love, much greater care must be taken. That's because such subjects don't bring up concrete images in most people's imaginations, and the speaker can't assume that his listeners' understanding is the same as his own (or as each other's). This fact also makes it easier for a speaker to deliberately manipulate his audience—by failing to define something, he can lead people in all sorts of directions instead of pursuing a straight line or argument. In fact, as Socrates will later demonstrate, this is exactly what Lysias did by neglecting to define "love" at the beginning of his speech. A good speaker, by contrast, will be mindful of those subjects that are more difficult to grasp and divide his subject accordingly.

Now I am myself, Phaedrus, a lover of these divisions and collections, so that I may be able both to speak and to think; and if I find anyone else who I think has the natural capacity to look to one and to many, I pursue him 'in his footsteps, behind him, as if he were a god'. And the name I give those who can do this - whether it's the right one or not, god knows, but at any rate up till now I have called them 'experts in dialectic'.

Related Characters: Phaedrus, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates has been explaining to Phaedrus the importance of properly gathering and dividing different concepts in order to establish a clear beginning in one's speech. For example, in his second speech, he took care to divide up the topic of madness appropriately (into human and divine categories) so that his audience would clearly understand what he meant by the term, and be able to follow his argument that divine madness is good. Now Socrates explains that this practice of collecting and dividing is nothing other than dialectic—the process, through step by step questioning of an interlocutor, of seeking the truth.

Dialectic is Socrates's favored method of exploring any subject, as *Phaedrus* itself illustrates—his very discussion with Phaedrus, leading him through question after question about rhetoric, is an example of the same. This means that

there's something inherently philosophical about the practice of rhetoric—a bold assertion that most orators of the time wouldn't have taken for granted. It's part of Socrates's larger argument that the practice of speaking must be concerned with the health of souls if it's to be done well.

❝ The method of the science of medicine is, I suppose, the same as that of the science of rhetoric. […] In both sciences it is necessary to determine the nature of something, in the one science the nature of body, in the other the nature of soul, if you are to proceed scientifically, and not merely by knack and experience, to produce health and strength in the one by applying medicines and diet to it, and to pass on to the other whatever conviction you wish, along with excellence, by applying words and practices in conformance with law and custom.

Related Characters: Phaedrus, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates and Phaedrus have been discussing the topic of rhetoric. They've just finished listing some of the great Greek orators, like Gorgias and Tisias, and the components of crafting a speech as presented in conventional rhetorical handbooks—pieces like the preamble, exposition, proofs, and recapitulation. They've also discussed how important it is for the orator to have a thorough understanding of the soul before proceeding to speak in public; without this, he's no better than a medical quack who passes himself off as a doctor while knowing only a handful of remedies. Wrapping up their discussion, Socrates draws a parallel between medicine and rhetoric. Both are sciences that require a complete understanding of one's subject, not a piecemeal acquaintance with it; and both need a scientific view of diagnosis in treatment—medicine and diet in the once case, and words and practices in the other. Through this discussion, Plato elevates rhetoric as a science among other sciences and rejects approaches that go merely by "knack and experience" rather than by comprehensive study.

274b-279c Quotes

❝ You, as the father of letters, have been led by your affection for them to describe them as having the opposite of their real effect. For your invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practice at using their memory, as through reliance on writing they are reminded from outside by alien marks, not from within themselves by themselves. So you have discovered an elixir not of memory but of reminding. To your students you give an appearance of wisdom, not the reality of it; thanks to you, they will hear many things without being taught them, and will appear to know much when for the most part they know nothing, and they will be difficult to get along with because they have acquired the appearance of wisdom instead of wisdom itself.

Related Characters: Thamus, Socrates (speaker), Phaedrus, Theuth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the final section of *Phaedrus*, when Socrates and Phaedrus discuss the appropriateness of writing, particularly writing speeches. By way of illustration, Socrates offers the tale of an Egyptian god, Theuth (Thoth) who is said to have discovered letters. When he presents this exciting new technology to King Thamus, he claims that writing will be the perfect memory aid for people. But Thamus, as quoted above, tells him he's overestimated the potential of letters. When people come to rely on writing, he claims, they won't truly remember things, rooting them in their minds; instead, they'll just refer to "alien marks" to remind them of what they think they know. This will have a disastrous chain effect, convincing people that they're wise when the actually know nothing, and handing on this attitude to their students as well.

By putting this story on Socrates's lips, Plato isn't actually rejecting writing altogether, but arguing that it should be used mindfully—if people don't take care to internalize knowledge through dialectic, then writing can too easily become a crutch, enabling arrogance.

Yes, Phaedrus, because I think writing has this strange feature, which makes it truly like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them something, they preserve a quite solemn silence. Similarly with written words: you might think that they spoke as if they had some thought in their heads, but if you ever ask them about any of the things they say out of a desire to learn, they point to just one thing, the same each time. And then once it is written, every composition trundles about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject and of those who have nothing at all to do with it, and it does not know how to address those it should address and not those it should not. When it is ill-treated and unjustly abused, it always needs its father to help it; for it is incapable of either defending or helping itself.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

As Phaedrus and Socrates continue their discussion of writing, Socrates turns from the fable of Theuth and Thamus and shares his own reflections on the limitations of this practice. He compares it to painting, which conveys the appearance of living beings. If one tries to speak to a painting in the hope of learning something, however, he's quickly disappointed; the figures maintain an eternal silence. Similarly, written words convey an impression of wisdom, but they can't be questioned or directly interacted with in any way—they just "trundle about."

The problem with this, from a Socratic perspective, is that learning takes place through lively interchange—an ability that dead writing doesn't possess. A book could be read by someone with expertise on a subject, or it could fall into the hands of someone who is quite ignorant. The book has no way of speaking to the particular situation of either party and thus could actually be harmful to the one with less ability to evaluate its claims. Dialectic, on the other hand, is tailored to the specific soul of the hearer by its very nature.

But I think it is far finer if one is in earnest about those subjects: when one makes use of the science of dialectic and, taking a fitting soul, plants and sows in it words accompanied by knowledge, which are sufficient to help themselves and the one who planted them, and are not without fruit but contain a seed from which others grow in other soils, capable of rendering that seed forever immortal, and making the one who has it as happy as it is possible for a man to be.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

As their discussion of writing comes to a close, Socrates has just told Phaedrus that he thinks of writing as more of an amusing indulgence than a serious pursuit—something that people might use to store up reminders for themselves in old age, but not something that's really beneficial to anyone outside of the self. On the other hand, he asserts that dialectic is the appropriate method by which to deal with serious subjects. That's because it can be "planted" and "sown" within the soul of the person who's best fitted to receive the knowledge of the farmer, or teacher. Unlike writing, it's not just "words," but words accompanied by knowledge. And this knowledge isn't just arbitrarily handed out; the "ground" of the recipient's soul is carefully prepared and the crop tended with care to ensure a good harvest. In other words, dialectic occurs within the context of human relationship; writing, in Socrates's view, is a shortcut through the hard work. But it's worth it, because well-tended wisdom sprouts into a philosophical life, which is the only thing that can bring a human being eternal happiness.

Until a person knows the truth about each of the things about which he speaks or writes, and becomes capable of defining the whole by itself, and, having defined it, knows how to cut it up again according to its forms until it can no longer be cut; and until he has reached an understanding of the nature of soul along the same lines, discovering the form of speech that fits each nature, and so arranges and orders what he says, offering a complex soul complex speeches containing all the modes, and simple speeches to a simple soul: not until then will he be capable of pursuing the making of speeches as a whole in a scientific way, to the degree that its nature allows, whether for the purposes of teaching or for those of persuading either, as the whole of our previous argument has indicated.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

At the conclusion of the dialogue, Phaedrus asks Socrates to remind him of what they've discussed together that day, and Socrates offers the above summary in response. In short, to be able to speak or write well, one must be able to define one's subject and divide it appropriately; understand human souls in general and the types of speeches best suited to each type of soul; and gather all of this together in a scientific theory and practice. In other words, Plato shows, through Socrates, that the art of rhetoric is really a subspecies of philosophy.

Through its unusual structure, *Phaedrus* is an illustration of this argument—it opens with competing speeches by a celebrity rhetorician and a seasoned philosopher, but neither speech is successful because it seeks primarily to persuade, without adequate accounting for the truth. When Socrates reconsiders the truth of the topic and the needs of his audience, he delivers a much more effective speech that's infused with wisdom. This is followed by a commentary not just on the technicalities of speaking, but how speaking *works* and bears good fruit among human souls.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

227A-230E

Socrates comes upon Phaedrus outside the city walls of Athens. He asks his young friend, "Where is it you're going, and where have you come from?" Phaedrus says he's just come from hearing Lysias speak and is taking a refreshing walk.

Socrates's query isn't just small talk; he's concerned about where his protégée is headed in a larger sense and how he's being influenced along the way—especially when he hears that Phaedrus has been learning from famed orator Lysias. Socrates' words also gesture ahead to his upcoming discussion about the journey of the soul.

Socrates asks if Lysias had been "feasting you all with his speeches." Phaedrus says that it will be appropriate for Socrates to hear about Lysias's speech because it was "in a certain sort of way about love." He goes on to explain that in his speech, Lysias argued that one should grant sexual favors to a man who's *not* in love with him rather than one who is.

The subject of rhetoric and its purported delights will recur throughout this dialogue. Phaedrus's term for "love"—"eros" in Greek—has definite sexual connotations. While sexual relationships between older mentors and younger men weren't uncommon in elite Athenian circles, Lysias's speech sounds as if it is particularly suggestive, assuming that a young man will have many opportunities to "grant his favors."

With a heavy dose of sarcasm, Socrates remarks that Lysias's speech sounds admirable, and that if only he were arguing in favor of a poor man over a rich one, or an older man instead of a young one, "*then* his speeches would be … for the general good." He tells Phaedrus he wants to hear the speech. Phaedrus acts astonished that Socrates would expect him, a novice, to be able to repeat from memory the speech of such a clever writer.

Socrates's sarcasm suggests that he doesn't think much of Lysias or his chosen subject. His comments also suggest that he thinks the value of speeches lies in their usefulness to the general public. He wants to hear what's gotten young Phaedrus so fired up, but Phaedrus, rather coyly, replies that he could never imitate a speaker of Lysias's stature.

Socrates retorts that if he knows Phaedrus at all, Phaedrus asked to hear Lysias's speech not once, but repeatedly, and even borrowed a copy to memorize. He's sure that Phaedrus wants a companion in his "manic frenzy," and Phaedrus has come upon "the one who is sick with passion for hearing people speak," so he might as well go ahead and speak, since he wants to anyway.

Phaedrus is known for being an enthusiastic fan of speeches, to the point that he likes to learn them by heart. Socrates describes this passion in both Phaedrus and in himself as a kind of "madness," a theme he'll develop later. And Socrates's love of "hearing people speak" is different from simply listening to speeches, a point that will also be brought out as he talks more about rhetoric.

Phaedrus agrees to run through the speech, but Socrates asks to see what's hidden under Phaedrus's cloak. It's a copy of the speech, as he'd suspected. Socrates tells Phaedrus he'd rather not have Phaedrus practice declaiming a speech he's memorized, if he can hear Lysias's exact words instead. Phaedrus admits he's been foiled.

Phaedrus had been hoping to give a dramatic delivery of Lysias' speech, but Socrates would rather hear it straight. The fact that Phaedrus is carrying around and practicing Lysias' speech suggests he's interested in modeling himself on Lysias. Socrates doesn't seem too impressed by that fact.

Socrates and Phaedrus find a shady spot on the riverbank where they can sit and read Lysias's speech. Phaedrus asks if this is the spot where the wind god Boreas was said to have seized the daughter of the King of Athens, and whether Socrates believes this "fairy-tale" to be true. Socrates admits that "wise people" disbelieve the story and offer some plausibly logical re-readings of the tale. However, he adds, "while I think such explanations attractive in other respects, they belong in my view to an over-clever and laborious person who is not altogether fortunate."

Phaedrus appears to scoff at this traditional Greek tale as unsophisticated—in contrast to the sophisticated rhetorical style he favors. However, Socrates, as Plato portrays him, is never eager to identify himself with the self-proclaimed "wise." He sees value in traditional stories and myths that more clever folks too readily dismiss—to their detriment, Socrates suggests.

When Socrates speaks poetically of the beauties of the spot, Phaedrus remarks that Socrates is an extraordinary person—even though he's a local, he acts as though the place is new to him. Socrates explains that as a lover of learning, he doesn't learn anything from the country, but from the people of the city. He teases Phaedrus that "speeches in books" will be just the thing to get him out in nature more.

Socrates isn't truly unappreciative of what the country has to offer, but his comment about people in cities is in keeping with his view that conversation with others is the key to learning. His ambivalence toward written books will come up again later.

231A-234C

Phaedrus reads Lysias's speech to Socrates. Lysias begins by claiming that he will not "fail to achieve the things I ask for because I happen not to be in love with you." He explains that, while those who are in love often later repent of "services" rendered, those who aren't in love do not, because they act according to their own choosing, not under the "compulsion" of love. Furthermore, Lysias argues, someone who promises great things to a lover, elevating him above all others, will eventually fall in love with somebody else and neglect him in turn.

Lysias speaks as one who desires sex with his hearer (presumably a younger man), but isn't actually in love with him. With little preamble, he immediately begins giving reasons why agreeing to his proposition is better than agreeing to such an advance from someone who is in love. A major theme is "compulsion" versus free choice.

Lysias continues that it's unreasonable to agree to sex with someone who's in the "unfortunate" condition of being in love—"for the ones who suffer it agree themselves that they are sick rather than in their right mind," and when they come to their senses, they disapprove of how they themselves have acted. Further, it's better not to limit oneself to those who are in love; outside that limited subset, one has a better chance of finding a man "worthy of your affection."

If a lover himself admits he isn't in his right mind, Lysias argues, then how is it reasonable to agree to sex with someone in this state, who will likely repent of his actions later? Also, only sleeping with men who are in love with you narrows your options unnecessarily. (It's worth noting here that a young boyfriend was likely not expecting a long-term commitment from his wooer; in the ancient Greek context, he was more likely to gain mentorship and social connections through such a relationship.)

Lysias points out that men in love will likely boast about their conquests, while those not in love are more likely to be discreet. Lovers, too, are more likely to take needless offense at things and become quarrelsome, and they tend to be jealous. Lovers sometimes come to dislike their boyfriends after their passion is spent; when a sexual encounter is based on friendship, however, friendship is more likely to outlast sex.

Lysias's arguments are based on (what appears to be) good sense and are guided by long-term self-interest, as well as concern for how a relationship will appear within society. Socrates will undermine many of these assumptions later.

It seems to make sense, Lysias says, to grant favors to those who need them the most, because they'll be most grateful. But he argues that it's actually more fitting to grant favors to those who'll be in a position to pay you back someday, and to those who aren't simply interested in your youthful beauty, but in sharing their advantages with you. His speech trails off soon after.

Lysias's arguments, while baldly self-interested, do make sense in the context of mentoring relationships that are oriented toward a youth's long-term societal advantage. At the same time, it's easy to hear a potentially seductive and manipulative note as well.

234D-241D

Phaedrus finishes reading Lysias's speech and asks Socrates what he thought of it. Socrates replies that he was "beside himself" listening to the speech, particularly because Phaedrus was "beaming with delight" as he read it; he couldn't help joining in the supernatural "ecstasy" of his "inspired" friend. Phaedrus senses that Socrates is joking with him. Socrates admits that he was only paying attention to "the rhetorical aspect of the speech." It seemed to him that Lysias said "the same things two or three times over" and with a "youthful swagger."

Socrates teases Phaedrus good-naturedly about his enthusiasm for this speech; his observation that Phaedrus appears divinely inspired in his delivery of the speech perhaps suggests that Lysias wasn't *so inspired in the writing of it. Socrates further acknowledges that the content didn't interest him so much as the construction of the speech itself—and that didn't impress him very much.*

Phaedrus says that Socrates is "talking nonsense," and that Lysias's speech lacked nothing worth saying on the subject. Though Socrates pleads "ignorance" and his layman status, Phaedrus eventually prevails upon him to say something more and different about love. But Socrates says he'll speak with his head covered, so he can proceed quickly and not be embarrassed by seeing Phaedrus's reactions.

Phaedrus doesn't see anything lacking in Lysias's speech and playfully strong-arms his older friend into attempting something better. Socrates's claims of "ignorance" reflect his belief that philosophy is about pursuing wisdom and not about possessing knowledge. He doesn't feel suited to making a speech of this kind, perhaps because he's not interested in trying to beat a popular rhetorician at his own game.

Socrates calls upon the Muses for help with his speech. He opens by telling the story of a handsome young lad with many lovers. One cunning lover convinced the lad that he (the lover) was *not* in love with the boy. This lover began to persuade the boy that he should grant favors to *him* rather than to someone who's in love with the boy.

Socrates is clearly setting up his speech so as to undercut Lysias's claims. The forthcoming speech will parody Lysias.

Socrates quotes the imaginary lover as saying that most people fail to establish the subject of their deliberations at the outset, so they end up agreeing neither with themselves nor each other. He therefore proposes that he and the lad agree on a definition of love to serve as the basis for subsequent discussion.

From the beginning of his speech, Socrates is making a point about rhetoric and what makes a good speech—namely that it's important to clearly define a topic from the start, so that speaker and audience are on the same page throughout.

Socrates explains that, in order to distinguish between a man who's in love and one who isn't, the first step is to observe that every person is ruled by two things: "the one an inborn desire for pleasures, the other an acquired judgment that aims at the best." These things are sometimes in accord; at other times they're not, with one or the other gaining the upper hand. When judgment is in control, it's called "restraint"; when desire is in charge, it's called "excess." Socrates explains that when the irrational drive toward pleasure overpowers restraint, this is called "love."

Socrates continues to establish what he means by "love" within the context of this parodic speech. Now he begins to explore a person's internal motivations, hinting at his later development of the topic of the soul. The Greek term for "restraint," sophrosune, means something like "being in one's right mind," suggesting that its opposite is a kind of madness. In this speech, Socrates views love as a kind of madness that overpowers restraint.

In a brief aside, Socrates asks Phaedrus if he thinks that Socrates, too, is under divine inspiration. Phaedrus agrees that he's speaking especially fluently. Socrates resumes the speech, arguing that one who's ruled by desire will want to make his beloved as appealing to himself as possible, and will be jealous of any strengths in his beloved which he himself lacks. Therefore, he'll keep his beloved away from many beneficial things, and will even "be the cause of the greatest harm by keeping him from that association from which he would become *wisest*."

Socrates argues that the "madness" of love is to the beloved's detriment—and the worst outcome is that, out of jealousy, a lover might prevent his beloved from pursuing philosophy, that love of wisdom which Socrates sees as the path of greatest happiness for a person. A lover will want his partner to look to himself (the lover) for all things, so philosophy would be viewed as unwelcome competition—a rival lover.

An excessive lover, Socrates goes on, will even keep his beloved in a weak physical condition and try to keep him away from family, possessions, and marriage for as long as possible, caring only for his own enjoyment. Moreover, there will be an aspect of unhealthy compulsion in the relationship that will make the young boyfriend feel trapped by his older lover, and will eventually make that lover repugnant to him.

Someone who's madly in love, Socrates explains, will overstep the culturally understood boundaries of such relationships by preventing his boyfriend from maturing and moving on to take his expected place within society. He paints a picture of a relationship driven by love as an inherently abusive setup.

When the lover falls out of love and returns to his senses, leaving his "previous mindless regime," says Socrates, the indignant boyfriend will realize that his lover doesn't intend to make good on his former promises. Socrates concludes that "the friendship of a lover does not come with goodwill; it's like an appetite for food, for the purpose of filling up—as wolves love lambs, so is lovers' affection for a boy." Phaedrus wants to know if Socrates will go on to praise the virtues of the non-lover.

In this speech, Socrates portrays love as inevitably fizzling out and resulting in enmity between the former lovers. To him love is an animalistic appetite that's not sustainable or grounded in genuine affection for its object.

241E-243E

Socrates explains that there's no need for a lengthy speech lauding the opposite characteristics from those he's already criticized. Anyway, the riverbank is the home of nymphs, and they might possess Socrates if he doesn't leave now. Phaedrus begs him to stay and further discuss these subjects. Socrates remarks that Phaedrus has a divine capacity for speeches.

Socrates says that enough has already been said on this topic, and given that they're sitting in the midst of a supernatural habitat, who knows what he might say next? This could be a sarcastic jab at the notion that good rhetoric owes more to divine inspiration than to wisdom. At this point, Phaedrus seems to have more of an appetite for speechmaking than for wisdom.

Socrates then tells Phaedrus he will have to make another speech. He explains that as he was about to cross the Ilissus (the river by which they are talking), he had a "supernatural experience"—a sign urging him to atone for having offended the gods. He says that something troubled him as he was making the previous speech, and now he realizes that both Lysias's speech and his own were "dreadful," "foolish," and "impious."

Occasionally throughout Plato's works, as here, Socrates mentions receiving divine nudges of this sort. However, recall that when he started his speech, Socrates covered his head in shame—he had misgivings from the start.

Phaedrus asks in surprise what offense Socrates could have committed, and Socrates reminds him that Love is a god, the son of Aphrodite. That being the case, both Lysias's speech and his own slandered Love by attributing bad things to him. Furthermore, both speeches were guilty of a refined sort of foolishness—"parading themselves as if they were worth something while actually saying nothing healthy or true, in case they might deceive some poor specimens of humanity and win praise from them." Unlike the previous speech, Socrates's next speech will be made with his head uncovered.

Socrates explains that their speeches have spoken ill of the god Love, and the offense is compounded by the fact that in doing so, they've deceptively tried to win the applause of naïve humans. Socrates is guiding his discussion with Phaedrus toward a more intentional focus on the purpose of rhetoric.

244A-257B

Socrates begins his second speech. He opens by saying that it isn't true that "one should rather grant favors to the one not in love, on the grounds that the first is mad, while the second is sane." That might be true, if madness were simply a bad thing; however, "the greatest of goods come to us through madness, provided that it is bestowed by divine gift."

Socrates completely changes course in this speech. He overturns the basis of Lysias's argument and that of his own earlier speech, arguing that madness of a certain kind is actually desirable, even divine.

Socrates explains that the prophetess at Delphi, for instance, can only serve Greece when she's mad, not when she's sane. In fact, the ancients referred to the prophetic arts as "manic," "thinking madness a fine thing when it comes by divine dispensation." The Muses represent another type of divine madness, inspiring poetry that educates many generations, whereas if someone thinks that mere expertise will make him a good poet, his poetry will be "eclipsed by that of the mad."

Socrates begins building a case for how madness can be a good thing when it's divinely given; among other things, it gives birth to prophecy and art. His comments about expertise also gesture toward his later argument that mastery of skills alone isn't sufficient to make someone a good speaker or writer.

In addition to the aforementioned types of madness, love is "sent from the gods to help lover and beloved." This kind of madness brings about the greatest good fortune, and, Socrates adds, "the proof will be disbelieved by the clever, believed by the wise." In order to understand this, he goes on, it's first necessary to understand the nature of the soul.

Love, too, is a good kind of god-sent madness. Socrates's words echo earlier remarks to the effect that the self-identified "clever" and "wise" don't always understand what's best for them. His explanation of the goodness of love will proceed from an understanding of the human soul.

Socrates asserts that "all soul is immortal." He explains that souls never stop moving, are not moved by anything else, and cause other things to move. This makes a soul a "first principle," something that never comes into being or perishes, but causes other things to come into being.

Socrates's philosophical idea of the "first principle" boils down to something that is self-propelled and isn't created or caused by anything else. Something that meets these characteristics, in his view, is necessarily immortal.

Socrates says that explaining what kind of thing the soul is would be far too difficult for human capacities, but it *is* possible to talk about what the soul resembles. He describes the soul as the "power of a winged team of **horses** and their charioteer." The gods' horses and charioteer are of good stock; in humans' case, however, there is one good horse and one bad one, making it difficult to drive one's chariot.

Socrates introduces his famous metaphor for the soul, explaining that this is a more accessible way for humans to comprehend the soul's nature.

Socrates goes on to explain why some creatures are mortal and some immortal. He says that perfectly winged souls fly above the heavens and govern the cosmos, but imperfectly winged souls sink to the earth and inhabit mortal bodies. He then explains how some souls come to lose their wings. The wings, whose job is to lift the soul up to the heavens where the gods reside, are nourished by everything beautiful, wise, and good, while the opposite kinds of things cause wings to wither and perish.

Socrates continues his explanation of the nature of the soul in support of his argument in favor of love. While souls properly belong among the gods, their "wings" aren't always in fit shape to carry them there.

Socrates explains that when the gods travel to the summit of heaven, they have an easy journey because their "chariots" are well balanced. Souls, however, have a difficult time, because their "bad **horse**" constantly drags them back toward earth, if it is not well trained. Immortal souls are able to attain the summit and gaze upon the region above the heavens, which is "observable … by intellect" alone.

Souls' lowlier desires constantly incline them back toward earthly things, making it difficult for them to glimpse the reality beyond, which can't be perceived by the senses.

Mortal souls that best follow the gods, continues Socrates, manage to control their **horses** just well enough to catch a glimpse of heavenly reality. Others have a turbulent flight and see some heavenly things, but not others. The rest, jostling together beneath the heavens, end up becoming maimed, even breaking their wings. The latter, despite great effort, catch no vision and "afterwards feed on what only appears to nourish them."

All mortal souls have a difficult journey toward the heavens' summit, and many won't make it. Even those who attain the heights only see a little bit of what the gods and immortal souls see. Most souls have such a violent struggle during their course of life that they satisfy themselves with things that don't nourish their "wings," and their struggle is made that much harder.

Socrates explains that the soul that is able to glimpse the most during its journey gets to be planted in the seed of a man who will become a philosopher during the soul's next journey around the heavens. Souls that see less are planted in the seed of people who will occupy various other stations in life, from kings to doctors to poets, descending all the way down to demagogues and tyrants. For most souls, it takes 10,000 years to return to the summit of heaven, with the exception of the philosopher; if he chooses the philosophical life three times in a row, it will only take him 3,000 years to return.

Socrates is not necessarily offering what he understands to be a literal account of reincarnation, though his account has been understood in that way. More than anything, he's trying to convey the sheer difficulty of attaining true wisdom through philosophy, and how rare it is for people to follow a course of life that leads them there.

Socrates explains that the reason a philosopher's thought more easily becomes "winged" is because, through memory, he is closer to those things that make the gods divine. His condition is thus one of "possession," and the masses don't understand this, thinking him disturbed.

Because a philosopher would have had a more prolonged flight above the heavens than the average person and remembers that journey more clearly, he is more attuned to heavenly things and less attuned to everyday concerns, making people think he is crazy.

Socrates sums up this final and best kind of madness as "the madness of the man who, on seeing beauty here on earth, and being reminded of true beauty, becomes winged and, fluttering with eagerness to fly upwards but unable to leave the ground, looking upwards like a bird, [takes] no heed of the things below." These souls are called lovers of beauty, and there are few such souls in the world.

Socrates begins to connect his discussion of madness more directly to love once again. Because of the way he's described madness, and the eccentricity of those who care about divine things, one gets the sense that his view of love will subvert expectations, too.

Socrates elaborates that when souls received their "final initiation" in the heavens, they saw simple, unchanging truth in the company of the gods. Now, souls are "imprisoned" in bodies, and those who were "initiated" a long time ago or have been corrupted tend to gaze on earthly beauties, forgetting the heavenly "namesake" that lies beyond. Recently initiated souls, however, experience a "shudder" of recognition when they get glimpses of godlike beauty on earth, and their dormant wings are nourished. The painful, exhilarating experience of alternately pining for and finding relief in the presence of beauty is what is called "love."

The difference between those who remember heavenly beauty and those who don't, Socrates explains, is that those who've forgotten think that earthly beauty is all there is, while those who remember it—at least in part—go through an alternately tormenting and joyful experience of longing and striving toward that heavenly beauty. The human body, although it's an important tool in this process, is felt to be a trap and an impediment compared to the glory of the heavens.

Depending on which god a lover followed in his travels among the heavens, Socrates explains, he will tend to seek out and encourage similar characteristics in a beloved—for instance, followers of Zeus will prefer the philosophically-inclined, followers of Ares gravitate toward belligerence, and followers of Hera look for someone who's regal.

Those who followed a particular god in the heavens will tend to both imitate that god in earthly life and be drawn to others who exhibit similar characteristics; they will try to bring out those traits even more strongly in the beloved, drawing him, too, closer to the divine. Zeus refers to the king of the Gods, Hera to his wife, and Ares to the Greek god of war.

Socrates next returns to the image of the good and bad **horse** and describes their respective behavior in connection to love. When the "charioteer" catches sight of a beloved, the good horse shows restraint, but the bad horse immediately desires sex. The lover, when reminded of the beauty and self-control he witnessed in heaven, pulls back on the reins of both horses, but this only inflames the desires of the bad horse. The charioteer must exert great energy to repeatedly subdue the bad horse until, finally, the horse is tamed and cowers at the sight of the beloved. At this point, the soul of the lover is able to follow the beloved "in reverence and awe."

Socrates makes clear that the kind of lover-beloved relationship he has been describing doesn't (or shouldn't) include sexual indulgence. However, the lover must harshly restrain his desires, and this requires repeated practice and the recollection of heavenly beauty in order to be successful.

Even if the beloved was initially prejudiced against the idea of accepting a lover, he will be overawed by the goodwill of his "divinely possessed" new friend. Gradually, Socrates says, the wings of both lover and beloved are nourished by the beauty each sees in the other through their interactions. If both succeed in continuing to restrain their licentious horse, "drawing them to a well-ordered life, and to philosophy, they pass their life here in blessedness and harmony," and after they die, their souls become "winged and light"—they're on their way to reaching the summit of heaven and observing ultimate beauty again. By contrast, if someone pursues a "coarser" way of life that's driven by honor instead of wisdom, he will give in to his bad horse at some point out of carelessness, and his friendship with his lover will never be as soul-nourishing as that of the philosopher; he won't gain his wings.

Socrates explains how a friendship marked by restraint and mutual cherishing of beauty nourishes the "wings" of both lover and beloved, leading to philosophically-inclined lives and the hope of seeing the summit of heaven once again. Thus, wrestling one's sexual desires into submission is an essential part of the journey back to heaven. This can't occur if someone enters a relationship with someone who isn't *in love with him.*

Socrates concludes his speech by again contrasting the divine blessings that accompany friendship with a lover and the "good sense" and "miserly benefits" that come with acquaintance with one who's not in love. He ends with a prayer to the gods, commending this speech to them and again asking forgiveness for what came before, and also asking that Lysias, too, will be turned toward philosophy.

Again, the seeming "good sense" of entering a relationship with a non-lover is shown to have limited benefit to one's soul, especially compared to the divine potential that friendship with a lover brings. Socrates prays that Lysias will attain this wisdom as well.

257C-274A

Phaedrus praises Socrates's speech and admits that Lysias now appears "wretched" to him by comparison. He muses that he heard someone disparaging Lysias as a "speech-writer," and that writers of speeches fear being dismissed as "sophists" by posterity. However, Socrates points out that some people crave recognition as speech-writers even in their own lifetimes.

Phaedrus's attitude toward Lysias shifts dramatically after he hears Socrates's lengthy speech. However, he isn't yet able to explain why *Socrates's speech was better—something Socrates will explore in the coming section. The stigma attached to "sophists" is that they essentially sell knowledge and rhetorical tricks rather than imparting enduring skill and knowledge.*

Socrates asserts that writing speeches itself isn't to be considered shameful, but speaking and writing poorly *is* shameful. He suggests that they discuss what it means to write well or badly, and Phaedrus agrees that this will be a pleasure. Socrates also says that perhaps the cicadas singing overhead—according to legend, they used to be humans who sang ceaselessly until they died—will bestow the Muses' divine gifts on them.

Socrates has successfully guided Phaedrus toward a deeper exploration of what constitutes good or bad speaking. Socrates continues to be attentive to supernatural elements in their surroundings and the impact these have on human speech.

Socrates asks whether, if something is going to be said well and beautifully, it's necessary that the speaker have knowledge of his intended subject. Phaedrus replies that he's heard that it's not necessary for an orator to know what is really just, but only what appears to be so to the majority, because "persuasion comes from [appearance] and not from the truth."

Phaedrus's response reflects a common outlook among popular orators at the time—that persuasion is the ultimate goal of speaking, regardless of the underlying truth of the matter at hand.

Socrates gives an example, imagining a scenario where Socrates wanted to persuade Phaedrus to defend himself against his enemies by getting a **horse**, but Phaedrus thought that a donkey was a horse and Socrates knew no better. If Socrates gave a speech persuading Phaedrus to get a donkey, thinking it was a horse, it would be quite ridiculous, but at least it would be foolishness committed in the context of friendship.

Socrates offers this silly scenario in order to set up a much more harmful scenario by way of contrast.

Wanting to establish the point that a ridiculous friend is better than a clever enemy, Socrates gives another scenario—that of a rhetorical expert, knowing nothing of good and bad, who finds a city as ignorant as he is and gives a speech commending something bad as if it were good and persuading the city to act accordingly. Socrates asks what sort of harvest this would yield. Phaedrus admits that it wouldn't be a very good one.

Socrates' point is that it's one thing if someone tries to persuade a friend of something foolish out of ignorance; but someone whose skills garner authority and respect has the power to influence an ignorant populace in any way he likes. This suggests that knowing the truth before speaking is, in fact, quite important.

Socrates then moves to the argument that "unless [Phaedrus] engages in philosophy sufficiently well, neither will he ever be a sufficiently good speaker about anything." He begins by saying that rhetoric is "a kind of leading of the soul by means of speech." Socrates also suggests that it's important for a speaker to understand the truth of things in order to identify fine distinctions between them, in order to lead souls in one direction or another.

Having established the point that truth matters in rhetoric, Socrates reaches the next step in his argument about what constitutes good vs. bad speaking—that one must be a good philosopher in order to speak well. This is because rhetoric is aimed at the soul.

Socrates and Phaedrus decide to examine Lysias's speech and Socrates's own, in order to see whether they accord with the science of rhetoric, and to see if they can find an example of how "someone who knows the truth can mislead his audience by playing with them." Phaedrus accordingly reads aloud the beginning of Lysias's speech.

Socrates doesn't discuss rhetoric in the abstract, but scrutinizes the earlier speeches in order to identify where they go wrong and how they function. The function of those two speeches—so clearly aimed at influencing the hearer's soul in a specific direction—within the dialogue as a whole become clearer.

Socrates stops Phaedrus after he's read a few lines. He points out that, when people use certain concrete terms, such as "iron" or "silver," everyone who hears them has the same thing in mind. But in the case of more abstract things, like justice or goodness, "one of us [goes] off in one direction, another in another, so that we disagree both with each other and with ourselves." In these latter cases, rhetoric is more powerful, because it has greater power to deceive. So, a foundational rhetorical skill is to be able to distinguish between clearer and more uncertain kinds of things.

Socrates points out that it's critical for speakers to clearly define things—especially more abstract ideas—from the outset, so as to be consistent with themselves and not lead their audiences astray. This is a point at which an unscrupulous speaker can easily manipulate an audience.

Phaedrus and Socrates agree that "love" is a more abstract, uncertain type of thing, and Phaedrus aptly points out that Socrates indeed toyed with his audience by describing love as harmful in one speech and as the greatest of gifts in the other. They look again at Lysias's speech to see if he clearly defined "love" at the beginning and ordered the rest of the speech accordingly.

Socrates, no doubt aware of what he was doing, achieved the very rhetorical trick they've just been criticizing in his pair of speeches on love—presenting love one way in the first speech and the opposite way in the sequel.

After Phaedrus reads the beginning of Lysias's speech again, Socrates points out that Lysias didn't even "begin from the beginning," but tried "to swim through his speech in reverse, on his back," with the result that the rest of the speech is thrown together in a "random heap," as though he was simply saying things as they occurred to him. Socrates suggests that, instead, "every speech should be put together like a living creature, as it were with a body of its own, so as not to lack either a head or feet but to have both middle parts and extremities, so written as to fit both each other and the whole."

Socrates points out that Lysias began his speech with the words of a disenchanted lover, rather than starting with a clear definition of love, and that this had a muddled effect on the speech as a whole. It seems that Lysias not only isn't clear about the truth of his subject, but he isn't as skilled in the science of rhetoric as he's reputed to be.

In contrast to Lysias's speech, Socrates points out how he began his second speech by first distinguishing between human and divinely caused forms of madness, and from there identified four types of divine madness, culminating in the best one, love. He explains to Phaedrus how this worked scientifically: first, he gathered together scattered things under one heading (madness), then divided the one heading up again, according to the subject's "natural joints." The first two speeches failed to gather and divide properly, assuming that "madness" has only a single form and then slicing up that form until it settled on an abusive form of "love" that proved the speaker's argument. Socrates explains that he calls this ability to collect and divide properly "dialectic."

Socrates explains how and why he arranged his second speech on love. None of his choices were accidental, but worked together toward a specific persuasive aim. From there he's able to show how Lysias's speech and his own initial speech were poorly—and manipulatively—constructed, assuming from the beginning that love is an undesirable form of madness. Socrates associates the term "dialectic"—the same method he follows in philosophical discussion—with the ability to think and speak in an organized fashion about a topic.

Socrates and Phaedrus talk for a while about the various components of a proper speech, according to the consensus of famous Greek rhetoricians. But Socrates maintains that there's a gap in their approach. By way of example, Socrates describes an "expert" doctor who only knows remedies relating to one's body temperature or bowels, or a playwright who only knows how to write specific types of passages, or a musician who claims expertise in harmony, but only knows how to produce certain notes.

Socrates goes on a slight side trail from the subject of dialectic, admitting the value of expert views on the science of rhetoric, but arguing that these men are missing something vital. They're like naïve aspirants in other fields, who imagine they've grasped the whole of their profession, but have only actually mastered certain rudiments.

Socrates explains that, just as it's important in the science of medicine to understand the nature of the body, so in rhetoric one must understand the nature of the soul. Instead of "[producing] health and strength" in the body "by applying medicines and diet to it," in rhetoric one "[passes] on to the [soul] whatever conviction you wish, along with excellence, by applying words and practices."

Socrates returns to the centrality of the soul in the practice of rhetoric, drawing a parallel between medicine and rhetoric as healing arts for body and soul respectively.

Socrates says that a rhetorician must understand the various types of souls and how various types of speech can be successfully applied to each. Therefore, anyone who claims to teach rhetoric accurately, yet doesn't delineate the various forms of soul, can't claim to be approaching his subject scientifically. A student of rhetoric must both grasp the theory and observe these things being put into practice. Once he has done these things and knows how to speak to the specific person in front of him on a given occasion, only then will "his grasp of the science … be well and completely finished."

Socrates sums up what he thinks the curriculum for rhetoric should be, as opposed to the abridged version that most manuals of the subject actually present. One can only claim to teach or practice rhetoric when technical skills are matched by a thorough grasp of souls and how to guide them under specific circumstances.

274B-279C

Socrates says that they must finally turn to the subject of "propriety and impropriety in writing." He tells Phaedrus an Egyptian myth he's heard. A certain god named Theuth discovered various things, such as numbers, geometry, astronomy, and ultimately letters. Theuth presented his findings to King Thamus of Egypt, explaining the various benefits each would bring to the people. When he introduced letters, Theuth claimed that these would serve as "an elixir of memory and wisdom."

Having covered the topic of how to speak well, now they turn to a discussion of writing. As he's done before, Socrates uses an illustrative myth to make a point about the utility of letters. In this case, letters are presented as an exciting technological innovation.

Socrates continues the story: King Thamus told Theuth that Theuth's affection for letters had led him astray; letters actually have the *opposite* effect, "[producing] forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it." This is because people begin to rely on letters instead of really internalizing what they've learned. Writing is thus not actually an elixir of memory, but merely of reminding.

Socrates makes a distinction between memory and reminding. A memory is of something one already knows; if someone continually relies on writing, they never actually know *something, but must be continually* reminded *of what is written down.*

Thamus goes on to explain that one who relies on writing will appear to have wisdom in the eyes of his students, but will lack the reality of it. His students will hear many things from him without actually having been taught them. They'll appear to know much themselves, but will actually know nothing. This will make them "difficult to get along with because they have acquired the appearance of wisdom instead of wisdom itself."

Because one hasn't actually learned the things he has read, he's able to look wise, while actually lacking knowledge all the while. He passes this same deficit, and the corresponding moral weakness, along to his students.


Socrates and Phaedrus talk about this story and its implications. Socrates remarks that writing has a strange resemblance to painting—that is, the figures in paintings look as if they are alive, but they stand silently if questioned. Similarly, one cannot question letters; they signify the same thing at all times. Furthermore, a written text has no ability to differently address those who are experts and those who are ignorant. It also can't defend itself if unjustly abused.

Socrates points out some weaknesses of writing—there is no ability to interact with a written text as there would be with a living person. It can't adapt to its audience or respond to others' critiques.

Socrates says there's a better kind of speech—that which is "written together with knowledge in the soul of the learner." Such speech knows how to defend itself, when to speak, and when to keep silent. Phaedrus recognizes that Socrates is talking about "the living, animate speech of the man who knows, of which written speech would rightly be called a kind of phantom."

Socrates is speaking of dialectic—the interactive process by which a philosopher and his interlocutor arrive at truth. This type of speech has none of the liabilities of the written word, which is little better than an echo of it.

Socrates compares the science of dialectic to farming—it takes "a fitting soul, plants and sows in it words accompanied by knowledge, which are sufficient to help themselves and the one who planted them." The seed so planted can even flourish unto immortality and bring a person the greatest possible happiness.

Socrates emphasizes the living, organic character of dialectic, which is carefully planted and nurtured in a specific soul known to the teacher—something writing can't achieve. Dialectic has endless potential, because it helps someone along the path toward a philosophical life and the freedom of the soul.


As Socrates and Phaedrus wrap up their conversation, Socrates remarks that he thinks Isocrates will turn out better than Lysias, since Isocrates demonstrates "an innate philosophical instinct" which Lysias lacks. The two pray to the gods of the place, that they will be made beautiful within, and they depart from the riverbank.

Isocrates was a contemporary of Plato's, known as a brilliant rhetorician and writer of speeches. Readers of Plato would likely have been familiar with his renown, and Socrates's remarks are perhaps meant to show that Plato isn't criticizing Isocrates wholesale. The two close their discussion of good and bad speech with prayer and then leave together.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*Phaedrus*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 10 Apr 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*Phaedrus*." LitCharts LLC, April 10, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/phaedrus.

To cite any of the quotes from *Phaedrus* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Plato. Phaedrus. Penguin Classics. 2005.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Plato. Phaedrus. London: Penguin Classics. 2005.