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Never the Same Twice

What do Aristotle and Nicholas Sparks have in common? They both wrote on love. Thousands of years later, love is still being used as the muse for poets, playwrights, and more. However, as the iconic song says, “what is love?” Is it what Sparks’ portrays in his cliché novels, or is love more complex than that? The Greeks believed that there are different kinds of love in this world. Although many don’t realize it, the modern concepts of romantic, familial, and platonic love from come from the Greek types: eros, agape, and philia. These three types of love are exemplified through “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” by William Shakespeare, “Nani” by Alberto Rios, and “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien. Through these poems and one story, each type of love is equally as important and essential as the next in relation to the Greek concepts of love.

To begin with, eros is the type of love that one feels for a significant other. Named after the goddess of fertility, this type of love is characterized by passion and intimacy. According to Sara Protesi, “Eros is what we think of, when we think of “love.” It is what we all want and need… let’s think of it in terms of the passionate attachment we feel for one special individual, who is seen as beautiful, desirable and valuable” (Protesi 4). In modern terms, eros would refer to romantic love. It’s that love that Nicholas Sparks is so famous for. Shakespeare often used this concept of eros as a muse in his work. In William Shakespeare’s “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”, he talks about his partner’s beauty and how a beautiful day cannot compare.
Shakespeare goes on to say, “By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimmed/ But thy eternal summer shall not fade” (Shakespeare lines 8-9). This means that summer is not forever, seasons change; however, the subject’s beauty is constant and everlasting. Shakespeare ends the poem with “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (lines 13-14). This means that as long as people are alive and able to read, his lover will be immortalized by the sonnet. Throughout Shakespeare’s sonnets, there is a theme of immortality.

In “Shakespeare and the Denial of Death,” Calderwood writes,

For of course the very act of writing implies a reader and a bridging of the time/space between writer and reader, and hence a momentary or in Shakespeare's case a not so momentary conquest of death. Surely it's no accident that so many of Shakespeare's sonnets about the impermanence of time are themselves couched in the present tense, as in Sonnet 18... Such a sonnet- and this one is not atypical- is less a narrative remembrance of things past than a recording of the present process of writing a sonnet. (Calderwood 170)

Calderwood is saying that by a person reading a writer’s work, the time and space between the two become hazy. Even though centuries later, Shakespeare is able to connect the reader and writer. He does this by writing his sonnets in present tense, as if conquering death in the process. Rather than reflecting and writing on his lover in the past tense, he uses the present tense, so that the reader is forced to think that the sonnet is happening in current time. This is a common tool that Shakespeare uses throughout his sonnets to immortalize his romantic partners. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” focuses on romantic love, the eros aspect of love. It’s the kind that is mostly conveyed in popular media these days because everyone is supposed to dream of
finding that perfect person. Although the exposure of it is higher in media and literature, romantic love is as equally important as the others.

Secondly, agape is the type of love that is unconditional. From The Agapic Dimension of Societal Life,

Agape is defined starting from itself and for itself without interest, without a return, accountability or justification… it is not a utilitarian action, or a market exchange… nor is it founded on a principle of justice in giving or rendering according to a distribution criterion. It does not even appertain to the logic of solidarity which implies participation to a condition that does not belong to one, or of having the following or respect of others for our social status. (Iorio 24)

Agape is love that has no underlying motive other than to serve another. It’s self-sacrificing. Agape is loving without restraints and expecting nothing in return. It’s often portrayed as God’s love for his children. Bennett Helm of Stanford writes in his essay “Love” that agape “has come, primarily through the Christian tradition, to mean the sort of love God has for us persons, as well as our love for God and, by extension, of our love for each other” (Helm para. 5). In that respect, it’s very representative of familial love in that it’s not self-seeking and doesn’t care for the value of its object.

“Nani” by Alberto Rios is great example of familial love and agape. In this poem, the narrator’s grandmother is serving him food. The food is symbolic for the love and necessities that one needs to thrive. Rios says that “even before I speak, she serves” (Rios line 39). His Nani gives him what he needs without him even having to ask. She sees that he needs more, and she simply gives. Rios writes, “I watch her fingers in the flame for me” (lines 20-21). Although this is a simple line, it symbolizes the lengths that Nani will go to for those who she loves. This is
what agape is and how family should be. With a family that supports one another no matter the
consequences, in addition to the other two types of love, one is able to thrive.

Moreover, philia is the type of love between close friends. It’s characterized as a deep
friendship or platonic love. According to The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,
Aristotle elaborates on the kinds of things we seek in proper friendship,
suggesting that the proper basis for philia is objective: those who share our
dispositions, who bear no grudges, who seek what we do, who are temperate, and
just, who admire us appropriately as we admire them, and so on. Philia could not
emanate from those who are quarrelsome, gossips, aggressive in manner and
personality, who are unjust, and so on. The best characters, it follows, may
produce the best kind of friendship and hence love… (Moseley para. 9)

Moseley expands on what Aristotle said on philia. He says that friendship cannot flourish if both
individuals don’t admire one another. Philia can only develop between those with no ill feelings
or no mean behavior towards the other. Mosely says that people generally develop friendships
with those who have similar interests or are in similar situations. This friendship leads to love. In
“The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien, the philia, or platonic love, between the men is
what keeps them going. O’Brien writes, “Often, they carried each other, wounded or weak”
(O’Brien 376). Whether sick or tired, the soldiers would carry one another. They felt a sense of
duty and compassion to help those that they love. Philia is often common between comrades in
war because of the shared experiences and understanding that comes with those experiences.
O’Brien writes, “They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the
terrible power of the things they carried” (371). With O’Brien’s word choice of “they,” the
reader can infer that there’s a sense of community among the men. This community, despite
becoming one for a morbid reason, is built on platonic love. People say that one can’t choose who one loves, but philia is an exception to this. Moseley goes on to say, “Reciprocity, although not necessarily equal, is a condition of Aristotelian love and friendship, although parental love can involve a one-sided fondness” (Moseley para. 11). This quote shows the main difference between philia and agape. People can choose their friends. Humans desire to have others who admire, trust, and understand them, which is what philia provides, especially in “The Things They Carried.” Friends help guide us and ease the burden of living. Having a friend is just as important as having a family or relationship.

Furthermore, romantic, familial, and platonic love are all significant to have in one’s life. In each chapter of one’s life, there comes a time when he is going to need these different loves. One’s love for his wife isn’t the same love he may have for his brother; nevertheless, one is no more important than the other. A person isn’t going to need all at the same time perhaps; however, throughout life, it’s important to have each when the time comes. With each different type of love comes a new lesson. Each helps us grow and to eventually pass on that love and lesson to next person. Eros shows us that life can be passionate. Agape is there to love, provide, and support without hesitation or reservation. Lastly, philia shows us the power and beauty of true friendship. In “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Shakespeare says, “Nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade” (line 11). This quote can be applied to all those who one loves. Whether they be friends, family, or a significant other, no one can truly die if they are loved because their memory and love live on within others. Each type of love is different and equally important as the next since one needs each at some point in life. With each type of love, one is able to grow into the person that they have the potential of being.
As one can see, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?,” “Nani,” and “The Things They Carried” exemplify three different kinds of love: romantic, familial, and platonic in relation to the Ancient Greek terms for love. Despite being over two-thousand years old, the Greeks have managed to live on through their concepts and philosophy of love. With these poems and one story, each love is portrayed as essential to have in life. When the time comes, one will need these different types. Whether one is a poet, son, or soldier, every person needs love. Not every love is Nicholas Sparks’ material, nor should one expect it to be, but each is special. Fitzgerald had it right when he wrote that “there are all kinds of love in the world, but never the same love twice” (Fitzgerald).
Works Cited


