

Episode Sixty-One - The Perils of Romantic Love (Part 1)

Post by “Cassius” of March 2, 2021 at 6:09 AM

Welcome to Episode Sixty-One of Lucretius Today.

I am your host Cassius, and together with my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book, "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

For anyone who is not familiar with our podcast, please check back to [Episode One](#) for a discussion of our goals and our ground rules. If you have any question about that, please be sure to contact us at EpicureanFriends.com for more information.

In this episode 61 we will begin discussion of the well-known ending of Book 4, addressing the perils of romantic love.

Out text today is Latin Lines 1037-1140 of Book Four.

Munro Notes

1037-1057 All fall toward their wound, whether in the fields of Mars or Venus or elsewhere.

1058-1072: when tormented by love seek distraction ; else your passion will only be increased by the absence of the object loved.

1073-1120 : moderation in this as in other passions affords the truest pleasure: indulgence only increases the force of the passion which food instead of appeasing only makes more ravenous.

1121-1140: lovers ruin their health and fortune ; and even then their happiness is often poisoned by jealousy.

Browne 1743

And then, what mighty deeds are men hurrying themselves about in their dreams? Then they show their valor, and do wonderful exploits; they engage with kings, and are taken captive, are in the confusion of battle; they cry out as if they were expiring on the spot. Some are the hottest in the fight, and groan with the anguish of their wounds, and fill the air with complaints, as if they were torn by the teeth of a panther or fierce lion. Some in their sleep talk of the mysteries of State, and frequently discover the treason of their own contriving. Some think they

are dying away, and others, falling from the dreadful precipices with all their weight upon the earth, are terrified, and awake almost out of their senses, and can scarce recover themselves from the hurry and distraction of their spirits. Another, parched up with thirst, sits on the river's bank, or by the side of a pleasant fountain, and almost drinks down his throat the whole stream. And children in their sleep often fancy that they are near some sink or public pissing place; they think they are taking up their clothes that they may make water freely, and so the Babylonian coverlid with its purple dye and the rich bedding are wet through. And further, those who are in the heat of youth, whose ripening age has well digested the semen through all the limbs, on such the images of every beauteous object strike deeply, and show the lovely face and blushing cheek which so provoke and stimulate the parts, swelling with seed in abundance, that they discharge, as if the deed were done, large floods of moisture and pollute the robe.

For (as I said before) the seed begins to boil as soon as mature age has well-braced the limbs. Other things are moved and provoked by other impressions, but nothing but the power of beauty can put the human semen into motion, which, as soon as it is ejected from its little cells, flows through the limbs and through every part of the body, and being received into the receptacle of the nerves proper for it, in an instant stimulates the genitals. These parts grow turgid with the semen, and thence proceeds the will to project it where the heat of lust strives to reach; for the mind drives furiously toward the lovely body from when it received the wound of love. Men generally fall upon their wound, and the blood gushes with violence toward the part from which we received the blow. If the murderer be near, the red liquor will spout all over him. So he that is struck with the darts of Venus (whether some beauteous boy, with female charms, the arrow casts, or some more beauteous maid, that shoots out love from every pore) tends to the part that gave the stroke; he is in raptures to enjoy, to inject and to consummate, for the hot desire to the act foreshows the mighty pleasure that attends it.

This is properly Venus to us, this is the Deity of Love. Hence the drops of sweet delight first strike upon the heart, and the burning fever of succeeding care follows it close, for if the object of your love be absent, her charming image is always before you, and her sweet name is ever thrilling in your ears. But take care that you fly those images, and avoid those incentives to love, and divert your mind some other way; choose to bestow your favors in common, don't reserve your whole stock for one only, lest by that means you entail anxiety and certain sorrow upon yourself, for the ulcer spreads and grows stubborn by feeding it, the madness increases every day, and trouble becomes the heavier unless you cure old wounds by new, or like a Rover, remove your first smart by wandering over all the sex, or turn the passion of your mind into some other channel.

Nor is he without the pleasures of Venus who disdains the fetters of love, but rather takes the sweet without the pain that follows it; for such a sober lover takes more certain and more unmixed delight, than those wretches, those furious votaries, whose mind in the very instant of enjoyment is tossed with a thousand doubts and fears. These know not what sweets they shall first rifle with their hands and eyes, what they fasten upon, they strain hard and give pain to

the body; they often fix their teeth in the fair-one's lips, and pin her down with kisses. And for this reason, because the joy is imperfect, and some stings remain which provoke them to hurt the thing, whatever it is, that first put them into a rage. But Venus in the encounter of love gently soothes the pain, and the sweet pleasure intermixed restrains the lover's teeth from biting too hard. The lover hopes, perhaps, that his flame may be extinguished by the same object that first blew the fire, but experience shows the contrary of this, for this is the only thing which, the more we enjoy of it, our soul still burns with the eager desire of more. Meat and drink are taken down into the body, and because they fill up certain empty spaces, therefore the appetite of eating and drinking is easily satisfied; but from a lovely face and a fine complexion, the body can enjoy nothing but empty images, and a fleeting hope scattered by every wind.

As a thirsty man desires to drink in his sleep, and has no moisture to allay the heat within, but vainly catches at the images of rivers, and labors to no purpose, and is parched up while he fancies himself quaffing a full stream, so in the business of love Venus deludes the lover with empty images, nor can he quench his desire by gazing upon the charming object, nor bring away anything from the tender limbs with his hands, as he wanders with wild excess over all the body of his mistress. Besides, when they sport in the flower of their age with their limbs mingled in the embrace, when their bodies feel the coming joy, and Venus is fully employed to sow the female soil, though they eagerly twine with amorous folds, and dart their humid tongues, and bite, and ardently receive each other's breath, 'tis all to no purpose, for they can carry nothing away from the parts they strain, nor can bodies pierce or be in bodies lost. For this they sometimes wish, for this they contend when they engage, so eagerly are they entangled in the nets of love, that their very limbs are dissolved in the excess of pleasure. Then, when the collected lust has burst from the nerves, a cessation of the violent ardor ensues for a while, but the same rage soon returns, the same fury is renewed, and again they strive to touch the point, the end of their desires: They can find no device to subdue the pain they feel, and so they pine and languish by a secret wound.

And then, they waste their strength, and perish by the labor they go through. And more, they lie under the power of another's will, while their fortune decays and their debts increase, their duty is neglected and their tottering reputation sickens. Rich pearls and fine shoes of Sicyon shine upon the feet of their mistress; the large emeralds, with their green luster, are set in gold; and the blue vest is daily stained, and continually in use drinks up the sweat of lust. The family estate, acquired with honor, is changed into coronets of ribbons, and headdresses sparkling with jewels, and is sometimes turned into costly gowns, or garments of Melita, or Cean robes. Besides, they add to these the luxury of feasts and stately couches, plays, frequent carousals, crowns and garlands. But in vain! For some bitter bubbles up from the very fountain of his delight, and poisons all his sweets; either his own guilty mind stings him for leading such a life of sloth, and murdering so large a part of his time, or his mistress has dropped some doubtful word, which kindles in his fond heart like fire; or he thinks she has thrown her eyes too freely abroad, and glanced upon another, and he discovers the remains of a smiling pleasure upon

her face.

Munro 1886

Again the minds of men which pursue great aims under great emotions, often during sleep pursue and carry on the same in like manner; kings take by storm, are taken, join battle, raise aloud cry as if stabbed on the spot. Many struggle hard and utter groans in pain, and as if gnawed by the bite of panther or cruel lion fill all the place with loud cries. Many during sleep speak of important affairs and have often and often disclosed their own guilt. Many meet death; many as if tumbling down from high precipices to the ground with their whole body, are scared with terror and after sleep as if out of their judgment scarce come to themselves again, quite disordered by their body's turmoil. Again a thirsty man sits down beside a river or a pleasant spring and gulps down well-nigh all the stream. Cleanly people often, when sound asleep, believing that they are lifting their dress beside a urinal or the public vessels, pour forth the filtered liquid of their whole body, and the Babylonian coverlets of surpassing brilliancy are drenched. Then too those into the boiling currents of whose age seed is for the first time passing, when the ripe fullness of days has produced it in their limbs, idols encounter from without from what body soever harbingers of a glorious face and a beautiful bloom, which stir and excite the frame.

That seed we have spoken of before is stirred up in us, as soon as ripe age fortifies the frame. For as different causes set in motion and excite different things, so from man the sole influence of man draws forth human seed. As soon then as it has been forced out from and quits its proper seats throughout the limbs and frame, it withdraws itself from the whole body and meets together in appropriate places and rouses forthwith the appropriate parts of the body. The places are excited and swell with seed, and the inclination arises to emit the seed towards that to which the fell desire all tends, and the body seeks that object from which the mind is wounded by love; for all as a rule fall towards their wound and the blood spurts out in that direction whence comes the stroke by which we are struck; and if he is at close quarters, the red stream covers the foe. Thus then he who gets a hurt from the weapons of Venus, whatever be the object that hits him, inclines to the quarter whence he is wounded, and yearns to unite with it and join body with body; for a mute desire gives a presage of the pleasure.

This pleasure is for us Venus; from that desire is the Latin name of love, from that desire has first trickled into the heart yon drop of Venus' honeyed joy, succeeded soon by chilly care; for though that which you love is away, yet idols of it are at hand and its sweet name is present to the ears. But it is meet to fly idols and scare away all that feeds love and turn your mind on another object, distract your passion elsewhere and not keep it, with your thoughts once set on one object by love of it, and so lay up for yourself care and unfailling pain. For the sore gathers strength and becomes inveterate by feeding, and every day the madness grows in violence and the misery becomes aggravated, unless you erase the first wounds by new blows and first heal them when yet fresh, roaming abroad after Venus the pandemian, or transfer to something else the emotions of your mind.

Nor is he who shuns love without the fruits of Venus, but rather enjoys those blessings which are without any pain: doubtless the pleasure from such things is more unalloyed for the healthy-minded than for the love-sick; for in the very moment of enjoying the burning desire of lovers wavers and wanders undecided, and they cannot tell what first to enjoy with eyes and hands. What they have sought, they tightly squeeze and cause pain of body and often imprint their teeth on the lips and clash mouth to mouth in kissing, because the pleasure is not pure and there are hidden stings which stimulate to hurt, even that whatever it is from which spring those germs of frenzy. But Venus with light hand breaks the force of these pains during love, and the fond pleasure mingled therein reins in the bites. For in this there is hope, that from the same body whence springs their burning desire, their flame may likewise be quenched; though nature protests that the very opposite is the truth; and this is the one thing of all in which, when we have most of it, then all the more the breast burns with fell desire. Meat and drink are taken into the body; and as they can fill up certain fixed parts, in this way the craving for drink and bread is easily satisfied; but from the face and beautiful bloom of man nothing is given into the body to enjoy save flimsy idols; a sorry hope which is often snatched off by the wind.

As when in sleep a thirsty man seeks to drink and water is not given to quench the burning in his frame, but he seeks the idols of waters and toils in vain and thirsts as he drinks in the midst of the torrent stream, thus in love Venus mocks lovers with idols, nor can bodies satisfy them by all their gazing upon them nor can they with their hands rub aught off the soft limbs, wandering undecided over the whole body. At last when they have united and enjoy the flower of age, when the body now has a presage of delights and Venus is in the mood to sow the fields of woman, they greedily clasp each other's body and suck each other's lips and breathe in, pressing meanwhile teeth on each other's mouth; all in vain, since they can rub nothing off nor enter and pass each with his whole body into the other's body; for so sometimes they seem to will and strive to do: so greedily are they held in the chains of Venus, while their limbs melt overpowered by the might of the pleasure. At length when the gathered desire has gone forth, there ensues for a brief while a short pause in the burning passion; and then returns the same frenzy, then comes back the old madness, when they are at a loss to know what they really desire to get, and cannot find what device is to conquer that mischief; in such utter uncertainty they pine away by a hidden wound.

Then too they waste their strength and ruin themselves by the labor, then too their life is passed at the beck of another. Meanwhile their estate runs away and is turned into Babylonian coverlets; duties are neglected and their good name staggers and sickens. On her feet laugh elastic and beautiful Sicyonian shoes, yes, and large emeralds with green light are set in gold and the sea-colored dress is worn constantly and much used drinks in the sweat. The noble earnings of their fathers are turned into hair-bands, head-dresses; sometimes are changed into a sweeping robe and Alidensian and Cean dresses. Feasts set out with rich coverlets and viands, games, numerous cups, perfumes crowns and garlands are prepared; all in vain, since out of the very well-spring of delights rises up something of bitter, to pain amid the very flowers; either when the conscience-stricken mind haply gnaws itself with remorse to think that

it is passing a life of sloth and ruining itself in brothels, or because she has launched forth some word and left its meaning in doubt and it cleaves to the love-sick heart and bums like living fire, or because it fancies she casts her eyes too freely about or looks on another, and it sees in her face traces of a smile.

Bailey 1921

Moreover, the minds of men, which with mighty movement perform mighty tasks, often in sleep do and dare just the same; kings storm towns, are captured, join battle, raise a loud cry, as though being murdered—all without moving. Many men fight hard, and utter groans through their pain, and, as though they were bitten by the teeth of a panther or savage lion, fill all around them with their loud cries. Many in their sleep discourse of high affairs, and very often have been witness to their own guilt. Many meet death; many, as though they were falling headlong with all their body from high mountains to the earth, are beside themselves with fear, and, as though bereft of reason, scarcely recover themselves from sleep, quivering with the turmoil of their body. Likewise a man sits down thirsty beside a stream or a pleasant spring, and gulps almost the whole river down his throat. Innocent children often, if bound fast in slumber they think they are lifting their dress at a latrine or a roadside vessel, pour forth the filtered liquid from their whole body, and the Babylonian coverlets of rich beauty are soaked. Later on to those, into the seething waters of whose life the vital seed is passing for the first time, when the ripeness of time has created it in their limbs, there come from without idols from every body, heralding a glorious face or beautiful coloring, which stir and rouse their passion to bursting.

There is stirred in us that seed, whereof we spoke before, when first the age of manhood strengthens our limbs. For one cause moves and rouses one thing, a different cause another; from man only the influence of man stirs human seed. And as soon as it has been aroused, bursting forth it makes its way from out the whole body through the limbs and frame, coming together into fixed places, and straightway rouses at last the natural parts of the body; and there arises the desire to seek that body, by which the mind is smitten with love. For as a rule all men fall towards the wound, and the blood spurts out in that direction, whence we are struck by the blow, and, if it is near at hand, the red stream reaches our foe. Thus, then, he who receives a blow from the darts of Venus, whosoever it be who wounds him, inclines to that whereby he is smitten; for an unspoken desire foretells the pleasure to come.

This pleasure is Venus for us; from it comes Cupid, our name for love, from it first of all that drop of Venus's sweetness has trickled into our heart and chilly care has followed after. For if the object of your love is away, yet images of her are at hand, her loved name is present to your ears. But it is best to flee those images, and scare away from you what feeds your love, and to turn your mind some other way, and vent your passion on other objects, and not to keep it, set once for all on the love of one, and thereby store up for yourself care and certain pain. For the sore gains strength and festers by feeding, and day by day the madness grows, and the misery becomes heavier, unless you dissipate the first wounds by new blows, and heal them

while still fresh, wandering after some wanton, or else can turn the movements of the mind elsewhere.

Nor is he who shuns love bereft of the fruits of Venus, but rather he chooses those joys which bring no pain. For surely the pleasure from these things is more untainted for the heart-whole than for the love-sick; for in the very moment of possession the passion of lovers ebbs and flows with undetermined current, nor are they sure what first to enjoy with eyes or hands. What they have grasped, they closely press and cause pain to the body, and often fasten their teeth in the lips, and dash mouth against mouth in kissing, because their pleasure is not unalloyed, and there are secret stings which spur them to hurt even the very thing, be it what it may, whence arise those germs of madness. But Venus lightly breaks the force of these pains in love, and fond pleasure mingled with them sets a curb upon their teeth. For therein there is hope that from the same body, whence comes the source of their flame, the fire may in turn be quenched. Yet nature protests that all this happens just the other way; and this is the one thing, whereof the more and more we have, the more does our heart burn with the cursed desire. For meat and drink are taken within the limbs; and since they are able to take up their abode in certain parts, thereby the desire for water and bread is easily sated. But from the face and beauteous bloom of man nothing passes into the body to be enjoyed save delicate images; and often this love-sick hope is scattered to the winds.

Just as when in a dream a thirsty man seeks to drink and no liquid is granted him, which could allay the fire in his limbs, but he seeks after images of water, and struggles in vain, and is still thirsty, though he drinks amid the torrent stream, even so in love Venus mocks the lovers with images, nor can the body sate them, though they gaze on it with all their eyes, nor can they with their hands tear off aught from the tender limbs, as they wander aimless over all the body. Even at last when the lovers embrace and taste the flower of their years, eagerly they clasp and kiss, and pressing lip on lip breathe deeply; yet all for naught, since they cannot tear off aught thence, nor enter in and pass away, merging the whole body in the other's frame; for at times they seem to strive and struggle to do it. And at length when the gathering desire is sated, then for a while comes a little respite in their furious passion. Then the same madness returns, the old frenzy is back upon them, when they yearn to find out what in truth they desire to attain, nor can they discover what device may conquer their disease; in such deep doubt they waste beneath their secret wound.

Remember too that they waste their strength and are worn away with effort, remember that their life is passed beneath another's sway. Meanwhile their substance slips away, and is turned to Babylonian coverlets, their duties grow slack, and their fair name totters and sickens: while on the mistress's feet laugh and lovely Sicyonian slippers; yes, and huge emeralds with their green flash are set in gold, and the sea-dark dress is for ever being frayed, and roughly used it drinks in sweat. The well-gotten wealth of their fathers becomes hair-ribbons and diadems; sometimes it is turned to Greek robes and stuffs of Elis and Ceos. With gorgeous napery and viands feasts are set out, and games and countless cups, perfumes, and wreaths and garlands; all in vain, since from the heart of this fountain of delights wells up some bitter

taste to choke them even amid the flowers—either when the conscience-stricken mind feels the bite of remorse that life is being spent in sloth, and is passing to ruin in wantonness, or because she has thrown out some idle word and left its sense in doubt, and it is planted deep in the passionate heart, and becomes alive like a flame, or because he thinks she casts her eyes around too freely, and looks upon some other, or sees in her face some trace of laughter.

Post by “Cassius” of March 11, 2021 at 9:23 PM

Episode 61 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we begin the famous ending of Book 4, which addresses in great detail the perils of romantic love. We will be covering this section for the next several weeks, so please be sure to let us know if you have any comments or questions, and we will try to address them over the next several episodes.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/43850665>

Post by “Cassius” of March 13, 2021 at 7:44 PM

Great point Godfrey. "Platonic love" must have its origin somewhere, so we need to look that up. Hard to believe we didn't comment on that aspect and I'll try to remember for the next episode as it is always good to contrast Epicurus with Plato.

Post by “Joshua” of March 15, 2021 at 8:14 PM

Listening to this now, and very much enjoying the conversation!

Here are a few points that come to mind;

Regarding the image of seminal fluid "spreading through the limbs", I think Lucretius may be making an inference by analogy. He seems to think of this fluid as being associated with adolescent growth and sexual maturity, which of course it is—the "springtime" of life, when the streams run high with the freshets of meltwater, and the sap in the trees runs up into the limbs and oozes out the trunk. This is actually offered as one of the definitions for the word 'sap';

vigor or energy: e.g. "*the hot, heady days of youth when the sap was rising*".

Regarding the image of "falling toward the wound", he seems to be drawing on the ancient association between Mars and Venus, war and love—the arrows of Cupid. The way that intense love, particularly when unrequited, can feel like a kind of trauma. When Romeo overhears his friends mocking him because of his obsession with Rosaline, he says (to himself and the audience) "They jest at scars who never felt a wound." But he felt the wound, deeply—and yet rather than recoil from this trauma, he found himself drawn ever closer. The connection between the young man's "spurt of fluid" and the dying soldier's gush of blood is then too easy to pass up—and certainly any ancient reader of Homer would have been accustomed to imagining such violent scenes.

Quote

Now the son of Tydeus was in pursuit of the Cyprian goddess [Aphrodite], spear in hand, for he knew her to be feeble and not one of those goddesses that can lord it among men in battle like Athena or Enyo the waster of cities, and when at last after a long chase he caught her up, he flew at her and thrust his spear into the flesh of her delicate hand. The point tore through the ambrosial robe which the Graces had woven for her, and pierced the skin between her wrist and the palm of her hand, so that the immortal blood, or ichor, that flows in the veins of the blessed gods, came pouring from the wound...Diomedes shouted out as he left her, "Daughter of Zeus, leave war and battle alone, can you not be contented with beguiling silly women? If you meddle with fighting you will get what will make you shudder at the very name of war."

Iliad, translated by Samuel Butler

The poet W. B. Yeats was a great lover of Lucretius, and his commentary on this passage about love is often found separated from its Lucretian context; "The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul." Our bodies touch, but we can never be close enough to satisfy the desire that love instills.

I haven't finished listening, but I am certainly enjoying it

Post by "Don" of March 15, 2021 at 8:23 PM

Just needed to say, [Joshua](#) , I always enjoy reading your insightful comments. Thanks!!

Post by “Don” of March 15, 2021 at 8:27 PM

I thought I'd add a link to my section on the characteristics of the sage, specifically about sexual desire:

<https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...l-relationships>

The section of the podcast talking about not succumbing to lust brought my translation to mind.