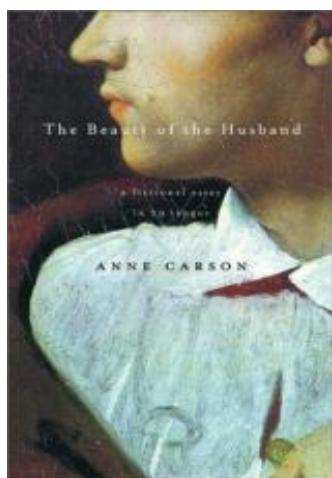


## The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos

by Anne Carson



### About the Book

The Beauty Of The Husband is an essay on Keats's idea that beauty is truth, and is also the story of a marriage. It is told in 29 tangos. A tango (like a marriage) is something you have to dance to the end. This clear-eyed, brutal, moving, darkly funny book tells a single story in an immediate, accessible voice?29 ?tangos? of narrative verse that take us vividly through erotic, painful, and heartbreaking scenes from a long-time marriage that falls apart. Only award-winning poet Anne Carson could create a work that takes on the oldest of lyrical subjects?love?and make it this powerful, this fresh, this devastating.

### Discussion Guide

1. The poem is dedicated to Keats, "for his general surrender to beauty." In his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats concludes that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,--that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Clearly the speaker of **The Beauty of the Husband** knows a lot more than that, but she is not saved by her knowledge from the fatal beauty of her first love. The irony is that the beautiful husband is a liar, and his lies destroy the marriage. The speaker states, "Poets (be generous) prefer to conceal the truth beneath strata of irony/ because this is the look of the truth: layered and elusive" [p. 37]. How is Carson using irony in this poem?
2. Carson has appended a subtitle to this work; she calls it "a fictional essay in 29 tangos." What effect does the word "fictional" have? Is it a warning that readers are not to take this as an autobiographical story? Does it make a difference, in terms of emotional impact and reading pleasure, whether **The Beauty of the Husband** is true or not? Daphne Merkin has suggested that "a story line in any conventional sense is not what fuels Carson's writing--or what she cares about, except as it may enable her to ask the questions that interest her: to what avail are Parmenides and 'the true lies of poetry'<sup>4</sup> when set against the 'welter of disorder and pain' that 'is our life'?" How does **The Beauty of the Husband** read as a

story? Does it share certain elements with fiction?

**3.** The wife in the poem says, "How do people/ get power over one another?" [p. 38], and later, "Why did nature give me over to this creature--don't call it my choice, / *I was ventured*: / by some pure gravity of existence itself,/ conspiracy of being!" [p. 49]. She also asks a related question: "What does *not wanting to desire* mean?" [p. 75]. These are crucial philosophic questions for the poem, and for the whole ideal of human self-determination. Does Carson suggest that people are helpless when in the grip of desire? Carson has written a book about the Greek concept of Eros; does she suggest that in fact a power like the god Eros still exists and can conspire to give one person over to another?

**4.** The wife states that her husband was "loyal to nothing," and yet she is "not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty. / As I would again / if he came near" [p. 9]. This is essentially a romantic and aesthetic approach to life. What role, then, does the rational mind play in this drama?

## Author Bio

Anne Carson was born in Canada in 1950. In addition to the works addressed in this guide, she has written **Economy of the Unlost**, **Eros the Bittersweet** and **Glass, Irony and God**. She has also produced translations of Sappho (**If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho**, forthcoming in 2002) and **Electra** of Sophocles. A 2000 MacArthur fellow, she is a professor of classics at McGill University.

## Critical Praise

"[An] eerie, elliptical, very beautiful elegy for a failed marriage.... Her verse pierces the mind with a laserlike light."

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