

Passionate ROMANTIC LOVE

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L'amour romantique n'a pas toujours été populaire. Dans la Grèce ancienne les gens priaient Aphrodite de les protéger contre cette "maladie". D'ailleurs, le mot "passion", qui vient du latin, signifie "souffrance". Si un homme qui vit dans une société patriarcale veut obtenir l'amour d'une femme, il doit la mettre sur un piédestal.

L'amour romantique peut approcher l'extase, mais il peut aussi devenir désespoir, car étant peu réaliste, il a de grandes chances de mourir. L'auteure pense que l'amour vrai devrait se baser sur l'amitié et l'égalité.

Passionate romantic love is one of the most attractive, compelling, and dangerous emotions in our literature and, indeed, in our lives. We grow up reading fairy tales in which prince and princess fall deeply in love, marry, and live happily ever after. *Harlequin* romances and other popular fiction present love as a universal panacea. Many movies and TV programs present the time-worn, traditional, and ever-entrancing story of the power of love and each generation revels in its renewed and updated appeal. *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story*, *Love Story*, *Endless Love* — all carry the same message, an age-old, powerful, patriarchal myth.

Passionate romantic love goes back to the beginnings of our culture but has not always been accepted, approved, or desired. For example, in ancient Greek and Roman times, people prayed to Aphrodite or Venus to be spared from this dread "disease."

With the rise of "Courtly Love" in twelfth-century Europe, people for the first time saw romantic love as one of the highest forms of

human experience, one which led to ecstasy. However, even in this period this kind of love did not lead to marriage. Indeed, marriage was, quite rightly, seen as opposed to it. One of the biggest mistakes our Western culture ever made was to insist that passionate romantic love should always lead to marriage.

The story of *Tristan and Iseult*, first written down during the period of "Courtly Love," became the pattern for all such stories. Perhaps for the first time, a writer expects a reader to sympathize with his lovers (despite their adultery and guile) and, as a result, maybe to want to fall in love also. Although *Tristan and Iseult* contravene all the codes of their society (feudal, Christian, chivalric, and family), they relentlessly pursue their passionate love, surmount all obstacles, and die in each other's arms. So it is with all the other great love stories. The lovers love despite everything and die in the end.

What, then, is passionate romantic love? Let us look at the original meaning of the words. *Romance* came into English through French and originally referred to tales of chivalry and knightly heroes. Later, it came to mean far-fetched, often fanciful stories, quite removed from reality. Much, much later, it began to mean "a love affair." *Passion* comes from the Latin word for suffering. The word, often used for Jesus's suffering on the cross, comes from the same Latin root as *patient*, one who "suffers" an illness. Passionate romantic love has, then, something to do with both suffering and unreality.

Our own language also gives us a clue to the nature of this kind of love. We speak of "falling in love." We do not *decide* to love or

choose the best match. No, we "fall in love" suddenly, inexplicably, often against our rational selves, and our friends say, "I don't know what you see in him." Again, the language is deadly accurate. This kind of love is not something we plan! Something that *happens* to us, it makes us, as Aristotle said, like someone asleep, drunk, or insane, not using or capable of using our reason.

When we examine passionate, romantic love stories, we discover how truly they speak to the meaning of such words. Almost all of these stories are antisocial. The lovers are, or see themselves as, doing something family and/or society disapproves of or the situation prevents. Either one or both lovers is married to someone else (*Tristan and Iseult*), or their families are feuding (*Romeo and Juliet*), or there is a war (*Farewell to Arms*), or one lover is of a lower class than the other (*Wuthering Heights*), and so on.

Thus, the lovers must meet irregularly and often secretly, only with great difficulty; when they do meet, they are in ecstasy and, when apart, in despair. The only way out for them is (usually) to part forever or to die. Also, throughout the affair, the male lover usually places his adored lady on a pedestal by seeing her as special, out of the ordinary, and she often feels this way about him.

What does all this mean? What we are dealing with in passionate romantic love is something that militates against the ordinary, the everyday. The "lady" a man falls in love with is, to his mind, a kind of goddess, on a pedestal. Why? Shulamith Firestone (in *The Dialectic of Sex*) argues that, in order to love a woman at all, a man has to lift her out of her inferior status as woman and see her as special, deserving of his love. She cannot be his equal for he knows his own faults; he can "love" only a superior. Hence, he describes her as "not like other women." She, in turn, *when sure of his love*, can afford to adore him and is prepared to devote her life to him.

The trouble is, of course, that it is hard for anyone to maintain the

semblance of goddess or knight in shining armour. Everyday reality is a certain destroyer of romantic illusions. So, in order to maintain a passionate and romantic love, lovers must avoid being together too much. When we fall "madly in love" with someone our parents or our religion disapproves of, we are making sure the love will last, at least for a time. We do the same when we fall in love with someone five hundred miles away.

The nature of passionate romantic love is that it dies quickly. Partings and obstacles prolong its life, and that is why romantic lovers have to surmount so many difficulties to be together. And that is why marriage, that great leveller, is the most potent enemy of romantic love.

Suffering and death are, as Denis de Rougemont points out in *Love in the Western World*, also integral elements in passionate romantic love. The ecstasy and the misery are not only inevitable but also desired. But ecstasy is *by nature* short-lived. Partings keep it going but cause anguish. Since this kind of love is doomed, lovers in stories do what most of us ordinary people cannot; they die (one or both) before the sad and unavoidable end to their *grand amour*.

So passionate romantic love is, by definition, unrealistic, irrational, and short-lived. It promises ecstasy, to be sure, but also brings suffering. And, above all, it is doomed to die.

The majority of the powerful love stories that we grow up on and enjoy during our lives are also male oriented. In most of these stories, the focal point is the male lover and his emotions, even in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Perhaps passionate, romantic love stories are a dangerous myth, developed by patriarchal culture primarily to entertain and direct young men and control women. This kind of love happens; so patriarchy had to find a way to control and use it. That way was to have it end in marriage.

In order to win the princess, the prince has to endure dangers and surmount them. His prize is a woman *par excellence*, a woman on

a pedestal. The princess, on the other hand, remains waiting, asleep (virginal), until the great moment when he kisses her (or their eyes meet or they drink the love potion or he declares his undying devotion). Then she becomes his adoring wife/mistress/slave, content to devote her life to her prince, secluded from the public realm.

So far the patriarchal myth has achieved its purpose. By directing passionate and romantic love to marriage, it has forced it into a situation where the love can be channelled by society, where it will change — or die. However, concerned as the myth is with the societal good, it does not reckon the individual cost.

As "the sensuous woman," the wife must remain the man's princess (or lose him and her "life"). If her love continues to be based on romantic unreality, it must for her be one of "quiet desperation." She needs his devotion to maintain the illusion and any sense of her own worth, yet she has an impossible task. She has been trained from childhood to see her whole life as fulfilled by love. He is of another "culture," one in which, though for a time love is an exciting, all-consuming game, what really matters is the public world. Passionate romantic love can, then, be a trap

for both lovers, but particularly for the woman. Suffering and ecstasy may be fun for a short time but, if we try to make them last, we are surely entering the realm of sado-masochism.

Divorce is one solution, one we are using increasingly. Another solution is, of course, for us to stop seeing this kind of love as leading to marriage. An even better one is for us to try to develop another basis for relationships (such as "friendship" between equals). One thing for sure — passionate romantic love has little to do with equality.

Further Reading:

Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Jonathan Cape hardback. Available in paperback.

Tristan and Iseult (Bedier-Belloc), Vintage paperback.

Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (or *Passion and Society*). Faber & Faber. Available in paperback.

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Cartoon: from "Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire", Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely, (Indiana University Press, 1981).



"Thank goodness! I was scared to death he'd slay that dragon and I'd have to marry him."