

**THE MYTH OF ROMANTIC LOVE IN WESTERN CULTURE,
ITS RECENT PORTRAYAL IN AMERICAN POPULAR CINEMA,
AND ITS RELATION TO FINITUDE**

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INTRODUCTION

Within the academy there appears to be a dearth of literature on the myth of heterosexual romantic love. One possible reason for this is that the subject not worthy of analysis. However, another possible reason for this is that we have become so enveloped by the myth that we cannot step outside of it in order to look at it objectively. Written in 1940, Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* hypothesizes that romantic love as we know it is particular to Western Culture, is a relatively recent development, usually entails an illicit rapport such as adultery, and is inextricably psychologically linked with death. Robert A. Johnson in *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love* extrapolates on de Rougemont's theories and uses Jungian interpretative tools to state that even before death, romantic love as we commonly know it is not conducive to long-lasting productive, psychologically balanced relationships. Both de Rougemont and Johnson's theories originate with the medieval myth of Tristan and Isolde, work through Renaissance pieces such as *Romeo and Juliet*, and culminates with Wagner's adaptation of *Tristan und Isolde*.

In the twentieth century there has been a dramatic rise in the popularity of romance stories in the popular literature as well as in popular music and films. For example, the highest grossing film

of all time is “Titanic,” the story of a passionate illicit affair between an engaged upper class young woman and a working class young artist. The film is a tragedy that ends with Jack’s death and the elderly Rose reminiscing about the passionate twenty-four hours that she “held onto forever”; in the film we can observe the stark juxtaposition of mundane passionless existence with the ephemeral heightened feeling of romance or passion, which becomes sealed forever by the death of one or both of the lovers. However, even in comedies, Johnson would argue each filmic lover drives into the sunset with his or her idealized notion of the other lover: they are in love with being in love and do not yet see the other as a complete human being with all of his or her foibles; eventually this idealization wanes and the other lover can no longer be objectified to be seen as the “missing part” of his or her lover.

The effect on the audience of romantic comedies is similar to that of tragedies: to perpetuate the myth of romance and the illusion that it can last forever. Tristan and Isolde and Romeo and Juliet believe that their romances can only last forever in death whereas film audiences are led to believe that this passion can also endure in life. However, we shall see that this may not be the case, that the myth of romantic love as perpetuated in popular films may be equally detrimental to our mundane relationships. Also, we will note basic patterns that exist in contemporary films. For example, if the lovers begin a film madly in love then one or both of them will die, such as in “Ghost” and “Titanic”; if the lovers begin by hating each other or by having apparently nothing in common, then at the end of the film they will drive off together into the romantic sunset, such as in “When Harry Met Sally,” “Pretty Woman,” and “Notting Hill.”

In contemporary popular cinema, in both tragedies and comedies, the audience is left with the myth that the passion is eternal. Romantic American films subtly censor us from watching lovers take out the trash, wash the dishes, or conduct most mundane activities. When we see lovers together they are usually consumed with unbounded passion or overcoming internal and external obstacles to being together - such as in the model case of Tristan and Isolde.

Interestingly, these obstacles tend to rear their ugly heads immediately after the couples have consummated their love on screen for the first and possibly last time, such as in "Titanic," "Ghost," and "The Bodyguard." Tangentially we will see how contemporary issues such as the AIDS fear and single parenthood modified the myth in films such as "Sleepless in Seattle," in which the passion is not consummated on screen.

In this paper I will first recount the myth of Tristan and Isolde, then discuss de Rougemont's and Johnson's theories of romantic love regarding the myth. Thereafter I will apply de Rougemont and Johnson's theories to the ten highest grossing romance films reported during the last twenty years.^{1*} In these films I will observe similarities and differences as well as variations on the basic myth of Tristan and Isolde. Finally, after having analyzed the myth of romantic love as portrayed in contemporary American cinema, I will juxtapose this myth with Ricouer's notion of finitude to suggest that what we look for in romance is the same thing that previous cultures sought in religion.

^{1*}I could not find a list of the most widely viewed or highest grossing romantic films so I had to distill such a list from a list of the top 250 highest grossing films. The criteria I used to determine if a film should be classified in the genre of romance - rather than mystery or action/adventure with a strong romantic subplot, for instance - pertained both to the plot and the marketing: firstly I watched the films to see if both lovers were fully developed characters and essentially equal in terms of screen time and depth of emotions. Then I regarded the credits and marketing of the film to be certain that the romantic leads received equal billing.

TRISTAN AND ISOLDE

The myth of the Tristan and Isolde can be summarized as follows: during childbirth Tristan's mother dies, which is especially unfortunate because his father recently also died. Born an orphan, Tristan moves into his uncle King Mark's castle in Cornwall where he becomes a charming prodigy, the quintessential knight in shining armor. As a rite of passage into chivalrous knighthood, Tristan defends his uncle King Mark's kingdom Cornwall against Morold who has come to exact tribute for Gurnun the King of Ireland; Tristan slays Morold but is wounded by a poisoned barb. Morold's sister Isolde, the beautiful blonde princess, has the only antidote; disguised, the Tristan travels to Ireland, lures her into curing him, then returns home.

A few years later a bird drops a blonde hair near King Mark and he arbitrarily decides that he will marry the woman from whom this hair came. Tristan goes off in search of this woman and after more knightly and chivalrous acts finds Isolde, who now knows that Tristan killed her brother Morold. She threatens to kill him but when he tells her that she is to become King Mark's wife, she spares his life. Meanwhile the Irish queen has produced a love potion that will create great passion between Isolde and Mark. Isolde's attendant Brigane insists that Tristan and Isolde become friends and during the boatripe from Ireland to Cornwall forces them together. Finally they toast to their friendship; however, they toast with the queen's love potion instead of wine and are overcome with unbounded passion for each other which they immediately consummate. Although it plays little importance to the narrative, it should be noted that in

Beroul's version, the love potion will last exactly three years, which is very interesting psychologically considering the fact that the average American marriage lasts four years.

Back in Cornwall Isolde marries Mark but continues her adulterous affair with Tristan; suspicions arise and several times they narrowly escape being caught. Finally, with the help of a dwarf, King Mark lays a trap and establishes proof of the affair. Mark sentences Tristan to die at the stake while he gives Isolde to be ravished by hundreds of lepers. On the way to the execution Tristan escapes and rescues Isolde from the lepers. Thereafter they spend years in the Forest of Morois hiding from King Mark. When the love potion wears off, Tristan repents for breaking the knightly code of honor; Isolde would like to be queen again. Mark forgives them, Isolde is reinstated and queen, and Tristan continues his chivalrous adventures. Tristan eventually marries another woman, Isolde of the White Hands, a brunette, but he cannot consummate this relationship because he only thinks of the blond Isolde. Once again Tristan becomes wounded by a poison lance and the only person who can save him is Isolde for whom he sends. Jealous Isolde of the White Hands informs Tristan that Isolde is not coming and he dies. Isolde arrives and she falls dead - so that Tristan and she can be together forever. Mark forgives them and buries them next to each other whereupon two rose bushes bloom and grow intertwined into one.

LOVE IN THE WESTERN WORLD: DENIS DE ROUGEMONT

Influenced by Freud's notion of the Death Instinct, Denis De Rougemont has an extremely negative view of passion. He believes that we subconsciously seek suffering and death in passion and that passion is not conducive to healthy marital relationship. In the preface to his

second edition, de Rougemont states that his “central purpose was to describe the inescapable conflict in the West between passion and marriage.”¹ As we will see in our analysis of contemporary films, de Rougemont’s theory comes to light when applied to our conception of marriage and how it is portrayed in films in relation to both passion and what we consider to be “true love.” In terms of conventional narratives, De Rougemont states that “Happy love has no history. Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon and doomed by life itself.”² Relationships are most often doomed when one or both of the lovers is already betrothed to someone else.

To assert that passionate love is actually tantamount to adultery is to insist upon a fact which our cult of love both conceals and distorts; it exposes what by the cult is dissimulated, repressed, and left unnamed, so as to leave us free to give ourselves up ardently to something we should never dare claim as our due.³

De Rougemont also notes that we can clearly trace the theme of adultery as passion in popular literature as in such texts as *Madame Bovary*. If we reflect upon Western literature during the past five hundred years it is difficult to find a renowned romance novel that portrays a passionate love affair between a happily married couple.

De Rougemont traces romantic love back to feudal chivalry where knights were supposed to adhere to a strict code of honor. Such brave knights engendered an ideal of courtly love for the wives of the lords whom they protected. This courtly love was never consummated; it remained an ideal and could never manifest itself sexually because of the code of honor. The knights worshiped the fair lady as a symbol of beauty. In effect, this type of courtly love actually *condemned* passion. It had to remain an ideal because, to the knights and princesses, “Whatever turns into a reality is no longer love.”⁴ Here we can see a parallel between this situation and the Garden of Eden: the one thing that God specifically tells Adam and Eve not to do, they are

tricked into doing. However, psychologically, one can argue - as Freud does - that taboos or prohibitions could actually cause objects or phenomena to be increasingly desired. De Rougemont goes so far as to say that Tristan and Isolde, after they have transgressed the boundary of courtly love, create obstructions that prohibit or hinder themselves from being together. "When there is no obstruction, they invent one, as in the case of the drawn sword and of Tristan's marriage. They invent obstructions as if on purpose, notwithstanding that such barriers are their bane."⁵ Here we begin to glimpse the psychological underpinnings of the transformation from the boundary of courtly love between the doting knight and lord's wife, to committing the transgression of adultery. It is almost as if the knight becomes the serpent who tempts the lord's wife with the apple of carnal knowledge - a knowledge that is obviously unfamiliar to her in her marriage. Again, based on Freud's work, it appears as if there is sometimes increased desire for that which is forbidden specifically because it is forbidden.

Another interesting point regarding American cinema is the trend for "character driven" films which usually show a severely deficient or damaged man, such as Jerry Macguire, or Melvin in "As Good as it Gets," or Zack in "An Officer and a Gentleman" and then shows how the unconditional love of woman helps that man overcome the internal obstacles to him having a healthy relationship. However, I will argue that we should not view these films as romances because they do not portray balanced relationships of equal male and female partners such as in "Romeo and Juliet." In addition, on the videocassette box cover of "Jerry Macguire" is Tom Cruise, not Tom Cruise and Renee Zellweger; on the videocassette box cover of "As Good as it Gets" is Jack Nicholson lovingly holding the dog that he tortures during the film, not Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt. Thus, I will argue that the women in these films are more the muses

of these impoverished men than their partners - they heal and sooth these men just as Isolde provides the only antidote for Tristan's otherwise fatal wound.

We can now turn our attention to how passion is inextricably linked with both suffering and ultimately with death for de Rougemont:

Passion means suffering, something undergone, the mastery of fate over a free and responsible person. To love more than the object of love, to love passion for its own sake has been to love to suffer and to court suffering all the way from Augustine's *amabam amare* down to modern romanticism. Passionate love, the longing for what sears us and annihilates us in triumph - there is the secret which Europe has never allowed to be given away; a secret it has always repressed - and preserved!⁶

The suffering comes from the obstacles that must coexist with the passion. And while in the throngs of passion consciousness is unable to discern the inextricable link between overcoming obstacles and passion. This is how de Rougemont is able to relate passion to suffering and death. It is interesting to attempt to imagine the great love affairs of history without internal and external forces conspiring against the lovers. What if Capulet had condoned or actually desired Juliet's marriage to Romeo, what would the lovers' story have been then? The heightened feeling of passion itself is so enticing and alluring that it does not allow the lovers to be conscious of the fact that they are more in love with the feeling of love - which is mostly due to the situation of ever-present internal and external obstacles - than with the other person. De Rougemont claims that this passion offers an escape from the "mechanical boredom" of mundane existence. "In 'passion' we are no longer aware of that 'which suffer', only of what is 'thrilling'."⁷

One of de Rougemont's most interesting claims is that "What they (the lovers) need is not one another's presence, but one another's absence."⁸ Again, obstacles such as physical distance or the threat of being discovered by a jealous husband, wife, or fiancé, actually fuel lovers' passions. And when lovers are finally reunited, does the passion live up to the expectations they had while they were apart? In American romances we almost never see that part of the relationship. As we will see in "My Best Friend's Wedding," absence, as we have been told repeatedly, does make the heart grow fonder. "Passion is that form of love which refuses the immediate, avoids dealing with what is near, and if necessary invents distance in order to realize and exalt itself more completely,"⁹ says de Rougemont. Regarding romantic love in general, de Rougemont concludes that "The myth operates wherever passion is dreamed of as an ideal instead of being feared like a malignant fever; wherever its fatal character is welcomed, invoked, or imagined as a magnificent and desirable disaster instead of simply as a disaster."¹⁰

WE: ROBERT A. JOHNSON

If it is possible, Johnson is even less optimistic than de Rougemont. He begins his text by stating that, "Romantic love is the single greatest energy system in the Western psyche. In our culture it has supplanted religion as the arena in which men and women seek meaning, transcendence, wholeness, and ecstasy."¹¹ Johnson believes that modern lovers have fooled themselves into believing that the ultimate meaning in life can be found in another human being, the "missing part" of themselves. This is often seen by lovers as a "reunification" with their "soulmates." However, there is no ontological support for this belief; it appears to be merely a rationalization or justification for the intense heightened feeling of passion. Worse, we are so enveloped by the myth of romantic love that we cannot understand that there are other types of

love; in particular, there are other types of love that may be more conducive to marriage than that of romantic love or passion. One of the major problems for Western Culture is that we have come to believe that marriage should and must be based on romantic love: “We are all so caught up in the belief that romantic love is “true love” that we use the term for many things that are not romantic at all. We assume that if it is love, it must be “romance,” and if it is romance it must be ‘love’.”¹² What Johnson wants us to recognize is the confusion between the terms “romance” and “love.” He is particularly concerned with the importance put on sex and sexuality in the nineteen-sixties in America; often people mistake passion or intense recreational sex for love when the relation between passion and love could be either more complex or even non-existent. In addition, because of the mystical hole left by the rise in faith in science that is often accompanied by the denial of the existence of the human soul or spirit, we have come to mistake the heightened feelings of passion that accompany recreational sex with something mystical or spiritual. “We seek the “spiritual” intensity, the ecstasy and the despair, the joyous meetings and the tearful partings, of the romances,”¹³ says Johnson. But we have come to desire passion and intensity irrespective of the other human being with whom we are involved. In fact, Johnson believes that the other lover becomes immaterial seeing as the lover is not seen as a whole person unto him or herself, but rather as the objectified “missing part” of the lover. He says that the man “feels that all the joy and intensity of life is contained in the hope that one day a woman will come along who will make him whole and make life perfect.”¹⁴ Johnson’s theory revolves around Jungian definitions of anima and animus, or male and female characteristics. He believes that men are no longer able to express and exhibit certain “female” traits and characteristics and that women are no longer able to express and exhibit certain “male” traits and characteristics; thus, psychologically, every man and woman inherently feels that there is

something missing from him or her. It is this “missing part” that we sometimes seek in a lover. Johnson goes to great lengths to show that such passion is actually detrimental to healthy, well-balanced, meaningful relationships for myriad reasons.

Despite our ecstasy when we are “in love,” we spend much of our time with a deep sense of loneliness, alienation, and frustration over our inability to make genuinely loving and committed relationships. Usually we blame other people for failing us; it doesn’t occur to us that perhaps it is we who need to change our own unconscious attitudes - the expectations and demands we impose on our relationships and on other people. This is the great wound in the Western psyche.¹⁵

Relationships based on this type of passionate “love” cannot endure for eventually one partner will see the other as a complete human being and not the missing part of him or her and will no longer be able to objectify that person into his or her ideal of “love.” “When a man’s projections on a woman unexpectedly evaporate, he will announce that he is “disenchanted” with her; he is disappointed that she is a human being rather than the embodiment of his fantasy,”¹⁶ observes Johnson.

1. Titanic

The current (1999) highest grossing film in the history of cinema - even greater than the heroic journeys of the Star War movies - is “Titanic.” It is the story of an upper class young woman who is engaged to a staid snob but who meets a working class artist, Jack, and suddenly realizes that she doesn’t know how to live, that her idyllic upper-crust life is actually a prison. Jack heroically saves her life and then the next day when she goes to thank him they get into a heated fight, not unlike Tristan and Isolde. Thereafter Jack impresses her with his abilities to both paint and spit, and they “fall in love.” Right after they make love for the first and last time and agree to supposedly spend the rest of their lives together, the ship hits an iceberg and Jack is arrested

for theft - two major obstacles to them having a viable relationship. Also at this point in the film Rose is confronted by her fiancé Cal about spending her life impoverished with a vagrant; her retort to him is “I’d rather be his *whore* than your wife.” In the end, Jack freezes to death and Rose is saved - having learned about passion but forced to spend the rest of her life juxtaposing her mundane existence with the twenty-four fantastic hours that she spent carousing with Jack. Her last words to her as he freezes to death are, “I’ll never let go, Jack, I’ll never let go...” If he had not died with the ship would they have had a life-long passionate marriage? It is impossible to tell, although I imagine that most viewers leave the theater believing that this idealized couple would rise up to the quotidian challenges of earning money, finding shelter and food, and being able to keep sacred their unbridled passion for each other.

2. *Ghost*

“Ghost” is more of a murder mystery than a romance although it still abides by the same formulaic conventions: the couple starts the film madly in love; shortly after they make passionate love for the first and last time onscreen, the husband is murdered and both the wife and the dead husband pine excessively until the murder is solved and the husband’s soul released. Although this film is about Iago-like treachery, I think that most viewers remember the “love story” as it is portrayed on the videocassette box cover of two embraced silhouetted lovers.

3. *Pretty Woman*

“Pretty Woman” is a Cinderella story of two supposed opposites who fall passionately in love, learn from each other what is missing from their lives, and drive off into the sunset without a

worry in the world. Richard Gere's character begins the film as a wealthy shark who profits from breaking up and destroying companies. Julia Roberts' character begins the film as the poor streetwalker who distances herself emotionally from her clients by refusing to kiss them - she is saving herself for her ideal Prince Charming who will ride up on a white horse and rescue her from her plight. But what would happen if the lovers really did settle down and got married as she dreamed of? Audiences are led to believe that they will drive off into the sunset and get married, have 2.3 children, and live happily after. What will Richard Gere's business partners say when he tells him that he is marrying a former streetwalker? Again, because of the myth of romantic love and our own puritanical American beliefs we make the assumption that the relationship will endure - *precisely because we do not see them*. But there are no plans at any Hollywood studio for "Pretty Woman II" starring Julia Roberts as the mother and housewife and Richard Gere as the doting husband. Without the external and internal obstacles it is probable that their "love" for each other would wane exponentially.

4. Jerry Maguire

Although most people would remember "Jerry Maguire" as a love story, a romance, I argue that it is more of a character study of an emotional crippled man who is inspired to find his own integrity through his muse, rather than a traditional love story. Firstly, if we look at the videocassette box cover it shows Tom Cruise alone, not a happily married couple in post-coital bliss. "Romeo and Juliet" provides the model for a modern romance precisely because it is a psychologically balanced relationship; Shakespeare's characters have an almost equal number of lines and they have similar concerns. "Jerry Maguire" is a film about a seriously flawed character at his wits end. However, the subplot in it fits Johnson's paradigm of romantic love

due to the elevator scene in which the deaf man signs to his lover “You complete me.” At the end of film, after Jerry has learned great emotional lessons through his trials and tribulations with Rod Tidwell, Jerry repeats this line to his wife. Also, “Jerry Macguire” does not follow the conventional Hollywood narrative formulas for two other reasons: 1. she is a single parent, which normally would hinder a passionate love story between two adults but in this case helps it, and 2. because the characters’ internal problem - namely Jerry’s profound loneliness as well documented by all of his ex-lovers during his bachelor party video - causes them to get married and separated very early in the film. However, at the end of the film all of their internal and external conflicts are resolved and the audience is led to believe that they will live happily ever after.

5. *As Good As It Gets*² Like “Jerry Macguire,” “As Good As It Gets” is more about Jack Nicholson overcoming his phobias and neuroses more than it is a love story. In addition to Jack Nicholson being the sole person on the videocassette box cover, Greg Kinnear’s character plays an equal if not greater part in Jack Nicholson’s character’s learning than Helen Hunt’s character does. However, similar to Tristan and Isolde, the lovers in “As Good As It Gets” begin the film with animosity and apparently little in common and end the film with love for each other.

6. *An Officer and a Gentleman*

Like “Jerry Macguire” and “As Good As it Gets,” “An Officer and a Gentleman” is more about a seriously flawed male in search of inspiration to change rather than an equal love story.

²“Runaway Bride” was the next romantic film on the list but I missed it in the theaters and it is not available on video yet.

Although she claims to have loved Zack since the moment she laid eyes on him, Debra Winger's character is not on the screen more than 30% of the time. At the end of the film after he has triumphed over all of his internal emotional obstacles stemming from his mother's suicide and father's alcoholism, Zack retrieves Debra Winger's character and carries her into the sunset as if she were a puppet or a piece of cake: as a human being she is immaterial to him.

7. My Best Friend's Wedding

"My Best Friend's Wedding" is about an *amour manqué*. It's more of a comedy or musical comedy than a romance film, but it still has the key ingredient for Hollywood "love" stories: only when Julianne learns that Michael is getting married does she "realize" that she has been in love with him for the last nine years. Why she didn't realize this before is unknown to everyone including Julianne, but after not speaking with Michael for three months and not seeing him for even longer, Julianne receives a phone call from him announcing his imminent marriage and she decides that she made a mistake when she spurned him nine years ago. Only when he tacitly threatens her with life-long absence due to his marriage does she feel passionate "love" for Michael.

8. Sleepless in Seattle

"Sleepless in Seattle" provides one of the most interesting variations of the myth of "Tristan and Isolde." It is a film about supposed "soulmates" whose romance begins when the movie ends; they do not consummate their passion on screen. In fact, they don't even kiss or speak much to each other on screen. Does this bode well for a marriage? Due to the profound fear of AIDS at the time when the film was made we can understand the audience's acceptance of this

incarnation of “love.” In the film Rob Reiner’s character tells Tom Hanks’ character about dating in the era of AIDS: unlike the free-love of the sixties, in the nineteen eighties people “go to dinner... then some necking - this could go on for years - then you takes tests (AIDS tests) and then you do it with a condom.” In describing his relationship with his deceased wife, Tom Hanks’ character says, “It just doesn’t happen twice... It was like coming home... it was like magic.” His description of his past relationship evokes sacred or spiritual images. Throughout the film he pines her loss and does not think he will ever reunite with a soulmate again. The film consciously plays with the audience’s definition of soulmates, for most people who believe in soulmates think that each person has one soulmate, his or her complement who completes him or her. However, in “Sleepless in Seattle” Tom Hanks’ character is obviously blessed with finding two soulmates in one lifetime. But if this is the case, then what would happen to the institution of marriage if his first wife were still living when he met Meg Ryan’s character? Seeing as polygamy is outlawed in most states, it is unlikely that American audiences would accept a man having two soulmates at the same time.

9. The Bodyguard

Again in “The Bodyguard” we follow the formula of the lovers having both profound internal and external threats to being together. Tacitly, there are racial and class boundaries broken in the relationship between Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston’s characters. Externally, they are both threatened by Rachel’s mad stalker(s); internally, they have to deal with Frank’s fear of getting close to his clients. Like “Titanic,” no sooner do the lovers consummate their passion for each other do they encounter both internal and external problems: Frank causes a rift by declaring the night a mistake, a mistake that he won’t make again - thus creating distance

between them; then in the next scene Rachel creates distance between them by fooling around with Frank's old partner, Portman, in front of Frank.

10. Notting Hill

Like "Pretty Woman" and "The Bodyguard," "Notting Hill" also utilizes the inherent conflicts in a relationship that involves a substantial class difference. Like Meg Ryan's character in "Sleepless in Seattle," Julia Roberts' character in "Notting Hill" is inexplicably involved in a relationship with a detestable character. In Hugh Grant's character she finds the thing that is missing from her high-profile, celebrated life: simplicity.

Ricoeur and finitude

Paul Ricoeur believes that finitude presents a major problem for human beings. 'Finitude' relates both to human beings' perception and to their life span. Our senses and our reasoning are limited and we are aware of that because consciousness allows us to perceive that there "appears" to be phenomena beyond phenomenal perception, beyond rational explanation, understanding - beyond consciousness. Thus, in distinction to our finite perceptual reality, we tacitly posit and/or accept the possibility of the infinite, such as that of death or God. "Primal finitude consists in perspective or point of view. It affects our primary relation to the world, which is to "receive" objects and not to create them,"¹⁷ says Ricoeur. It is this distance between the finite and the infinite that causes us to create myths in order to gain a better understanding of the infinite. However, this yearning to understand the infinite with our finite minds inevitably falls short. "Man's specific weakness and his essential fallibility are ultimately sought within

this structure of mediation between the pole of his finitude and the pole of his infinitude.”¹⁸

This intrinsically paradoxical situation cause us anxiety that we incessantly try to resolve.

We see, then, in what sense it is true to say that the finitude of man consists in receiving his objects: in the sense that it belongs to the *essence* of perception to be inadequate, to the essence of this inadequacy to refer back to the onesided character of perception, and to the essence of the onesidedness of the thing's profiles to refer back to the otherness of the body's initial positions from where the thing appears. The fact that the free mobility of my body discloses this law of essence to me does not make the law unnecessary. It is precisely necessary that motor spontaneity originate from a zero origin. To perceive *from here* is the finitude of perceiving something. The point of view is the ineluctable initial narrowness of my openness to the world.¹⁹

Here we can gain an insight into our desire to transcend our mundane perceptual reality, to search for a more meaningful, indeed sacred, experience. The heightened feeling of passion is so overwhelming that it collapses finite time. There is no time when one is passionate. This becomes evident if we think of the opposite extreme: pain. Pain is immediate and impossible to look past, around, or through. When a limb is broken seldom does one say to oneself, “In one year this wound will have healed and I will no longer be in pain.” The pain feels like it will never end, like it is infinite. The heightened feeling of pain itself focuses all consciousness on it. And consciousness does the same with lust or passion or “true love.” Thus, we can see how starkly this contrasts with finitude. Romantic love may be viewed then, like romantic music, as a search for God, a search for the infinite. And we have also placed it beyond academic analysis: “The Romance of Tristan is ‘sacred’ for us precisely to the extent that it seems ‘sacrilegious’ on my part to attempt to analyze it.”²⁰ In our search for transcendence we have become blind to our own psychological mechanisms. The narratives of popular and high culture lead us to believe in that certain ephemeral heightened feelings such as passion can endure a lifetime, as marriage should. But this is not a realistic understanding of human relationships, this an idealistic understanding of two disparate phenomena - passion and marriage - due to our external

puritanical values and our conflicting internal sexual desires. Thus, it is possible that we actually seek obstacles because of their effects on us psychologically. As de Rougemont says,

No passion is conceivable or in fact declared in a world where everything is permitted. For passion always presupposes subject and object, a third party constituting an obstacle to their embrace - a King Mark separating Tristan from Iseult - the obstacle being social (moral, conventional, even political) to such a degree that we even find it identified, at its limit, with society itself, though it is generally represented by a *dramatis persona*, in accord with the requirements of narrative, the rhetoric of romance.²¹

I think that it is easy to appreciate de Rougemont and Johnson's adversity to the positive portrayal of passion as the basis of myth of romantic love in popular music, literature, and particularly in contemporary American cinema. The relatively recent conflation of ephemeral passion and eternal love, which puritanical America has associated with its conception of marriage, is unrealistic and obviously not conducive to enduring healthy relationships. One only has to regard current divorce statistics to see that there is a problem with our understanding and expectations of what marriage is and should be.

NOTES

1. Denis de Rougemont. *Passion and Society*. Translated by Montgomery Belgion. (London: Faber and Faber, 1956) 8.
2. Denis de Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*. Translated by Montgomery Belgion. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963. De Rougemont) 15.
3. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*. 16.
4. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*. 34.
5. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*. 37.
6. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*. 50.
7. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*. 16.
8. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*. 42.
9. Denis de Rougemont. *Love Declared: Essays on the Myths of Love*. (New York: Pantheon, 1963) 41.
10. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*. 24.
11. Robert A. Johnson. *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) xi.
12. Johnson, 44.
13. Johnson, 47.
14. Johnson, 109.
15. Johnson, xii.
16. Johnson, 108.
17. Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*. Translated by Charles A. Kelbley. (New York: Fordham, 1986) 23.
18. Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*. Translated by Charles A. Kelbley. (New York: Fordham, 1986) xlv.
19. Ricoeur, 23.
20. De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*. 24.
21. De Rougemont, *Love Declared*, 42.