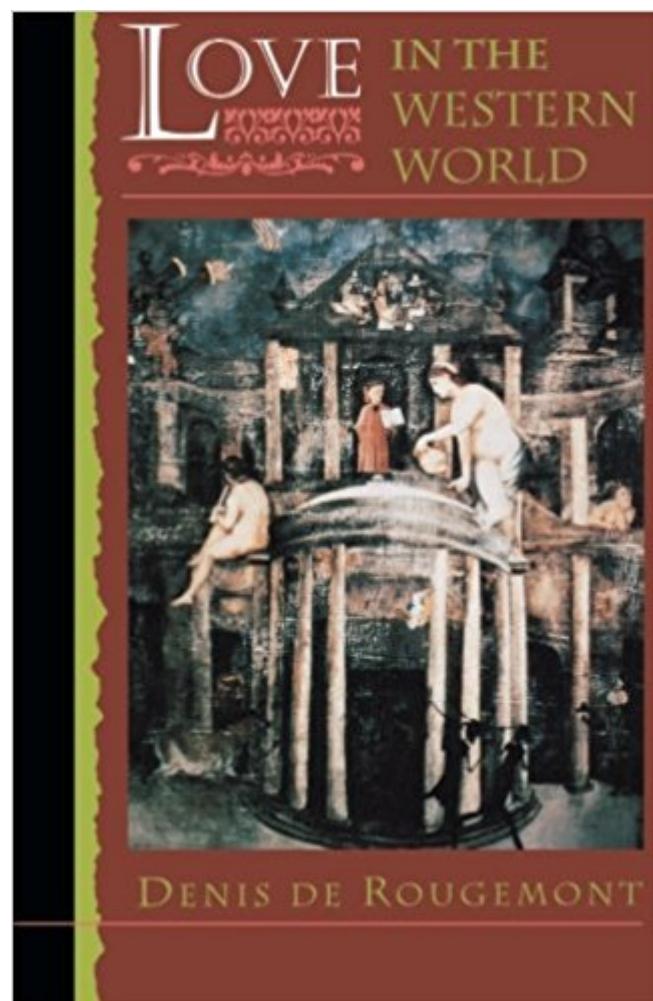


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Love In The Western World



Synopsis

In this classic work, often described as "The History of the Rise, Decline, and Fall of the Love Affair," Denis de Rougemont explores the psychology of love from the legend of Tristan and Isolde to Hollywood. At the heart of his ever-relevant inquiry is the inescapable conflict in the West between marriage and passion--the first associated with social and religious responsibility and the second with anarchic, unappeasable love as celebrated by the troubadours of medieval Provence. These early poets, according to de Rougemont, spoke the words of an Eros-centered theology, and it was through this "heresy" that a European vocabulary of mysticism flourished and that Western literature took on a new direction. Bringing together historical, religious, philosophical, and cultural dimensions, the author traces the evolution of Western romantic love from its literary beginnings as an awe-inspiring secret to its commercialization in the cinema. He seeks to restore the myth of love to its original integrity and concludes with a philosophical perspective on modern marriage.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a curious, compelling study that is likely to generate as much controversy for its style as for its amalgamation of historical, cultural, literary, operatic, biblical and theological traditions.

Rougement traces the "courtly love" tradition from its origins among 12th century troubadours in southern France through the high Romanticism of 19th century opera to the modern-day consequences of a love that is based on Eros, delusion, and selfishness--a passion that lives for passion, and whose only consummation can be death (for were it to endure, to be exposed to the glaring light of day, it would no longer be romantic passion). Rougement's scholarship is solid, his

interpretations provocative, and his proximity to his subject uncomfortably "close" for someone bearing the mantle of cultural critic and scholar. In fact, it's impossible not to feel the conflicted emotions of the author himself. On the one hand, he presents himself as the enemy of "Eros" and proponent of "Agape," as the critic of immature, romantic passion and the defender of mature relationships based on a realistic "dialogue" between two unique, complex individuals. On the other hand, he reveals the heart and soul of an incurable romantic, someone who has been love's thrall, who has been swept up in the dark rapture and sublimely lyrical death wish that is Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde." But far from being a liability, that underlying tension provides the book's argument with an energy, vitality and, yes, "passion" that is lacking in similar studies of this fascinating topic.

Rougemont's study of romantic love as a cultural phenomenon is an engaging and, at its best, compelling account of the origin and development of the western "cult" of romantic love between the sexes. He begins with a lucid reading of the myth of Tristan and Isolde, which exists in several medieval versions, showing how and why the mythic lovers seem to seek out barriers to their love rather than consummate it. Rougemont eventually links the Tristan myth to the early lyrics of the twelfth-century Troubador poets of southern France, whose lyrics are the foundation of the "courtly love" tradition in subsequent medieval and Renaissance poetry. Rougemont asks where the Troubadors got the idea that it was noble and poetic to pay erotic homage to an idealized lady who was beyond one's social reach. His answer is that the "courtly love" poems of the early Middle Ages arose from misappropriations of hymns developed by the heretical Cathars, a mystical sect that flourished in southern France in the twelfth century but was fiercely persecuted and eventually wiped out, leaving few authentic records of their beliefs. Nevertheless, Rougemont argues that the sect's predecessors included the Manichees of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, as well as earlier Gnostic cults of the Near East. The Cathars, he suggests, composed mystical hymns to a figurative "lady" who represented the essence of the cult itself. He argues that the Troubadors seized on these hymns and used their conventions to address real ladies in Provencal courts. As it developed out of neo-Manichean theology, courtly love poetry focused on the barriers to love such that the real topic of courtly lyrics is not the object of desire, but the desire itself, and especially its perpetual deferral.

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