- To Believe in Love -
The Religious Significance of the Romantic Love Myth in Western Modernity

A Thesis Submitted by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis responds to the claim that love has replaced Christianity in the secular sphere, and has become the ‘undeclared religion’ of the West. Building upon insights gained through the study of emotion in its cultural contingency, the romantic love myth will be analysed in its modern and contemporary forms, as it is romantic love that this thesis declares to be of religious significance. While the study of romantic love is often undertaken in reference to religious themes of a Christian or mystical character, it is asserted that the love myth only came to serve a religious function in response to modernity and secularisation. The first chapter of this thesis will explore the psychological climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in order to account for the rejection of Christianity as the dominant mythological system of the West. As the rejection of institutionalised Christianity involved the support of alternate ideals, the fact that the ethos of romantic love was linked to these same ideals meant that there was an ideational fit between secular and romantic values. Moreover, the love myth was perfectly suited to the favoured epistemological mode of feeling, intuition and taste that had become prominent in the West after the birth of the modern novel and the establishment of consumer culture. Tracing its metamorphosis from 1856 to 2011, the romantic love myth is shown to be intimately bound up with concepts of beauty and truth that have traditionally been associated with the ultimacy of God. Extrapolating the transformation of cultural understandings of beauty and truth, it becomes clear that the contemporary love myth has been able to develop and maintain an association with religious ultimacy through its relationship with these ‘fundamental’ categories.
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“Dream of total union:

everyone says this dream is impossible,

and yet it persists.”\(^1\)

“...The best and most delectable wine,

and also the most intoxicating...

by which, without drinking it,

the annihilated soul is intoxicated,

a soul at once free and intoxicated!

forgetting, forgotten,

intoxicated by what it does not drink

and will never drink!”\(^2\)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

The Study of Love
The Study of Religion

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Disenchantment, the Death of a Despot and Human Self-Determination
(Psychology, Secularism and the Experience of the Divine)

Introduction

The Disenchantment: Significance and Sacredness in the Modern Epistemological Mode

Psychologised Self, Psychologised World

Intellectual Gnosticism and Mystical Relation

The Death of God and the War against the Christian Symbolic

The Birth of Love and the Modern Symbolic of the Human

Chapter Two: Transitions (Sceptical Utopianism: Towards and Impossible Ideal)

Introduction

The Romantic Ethic

Writing Madame Bovary: Mystics, Beauty and Romantic Love in the Harsh Light of Modernism

Self-Illusory Hedonism and the Icon of Love

The Magic of Romantic Love

Beauty and Truth: An Aesthetic Epistemology

A Vision of Love: Madame Bovary and the Passion of Mystic Desire

Chapter Three: Consuming Passions (The Romantic Love Myth of Predestined Salvation)

Introduction

The Affect of Romantic Love: Emotive Epistemology in and out of the Cinema

Taste: An Epistemology of Pleasure

Romantic Potentialities in the City of Dreams

The Dialectic of the Romantic Love Myth in Contemporary Popular Culture

Those Three Magic Words

The Medium and ‘The Moment’


Conclusion: The Romantic Love Myth: Definitional Review (The Nature of a Contemporary Religious Worldview)

Introduction

Definitional Review: What is Love?

The Romantic Love Myth from Modernism to the Present Day

The Future of an Illusion?

Conclusion

References

From Popular Culture

Academic and Literary References
INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter will outline the history of love in its cultural contingency, featuring the most recent scholarship on the significance of love in Western culture. As love has been associated, in these studies, with both the Christian tradition and with ultimacy in general, the insights detailed below provide the foundation for further study. In particular, this thesis seeks to investigate the claim that love has usurped Christianity as the primary belief system of the West. 3 In order to ascertain how and why this would have occurred, ‘religion’ will be redefined as ‘social mythology’ in order to track changes in belief across the customary divide between religion and culture. Accordingly, it is posited that secularisation did not bring about the end of religion, but rather a reform of the mythological system of the West. The closing section of this introduction will provide an outline of chapters one, two, and three.

THE STUDY OF LOVE

In 2011, Simon May made the bold claim that “love has increasingly filled the vacuum left by the retreat of Christianity...so that it is now the West’s undeclared religion – and perhaps its only generally accepted religion.” 4 Although May’s research engages with philosophical debates rather than the more sociological concerns of the scholar of religion, his observations provide an excellent starting point for deeper analysis into this seemingly new religious phenomenon. What is the significance, for instance, of the fact that May refers to love as ‘the’ religion of the West, and the simultaneous claim that such a widespread belief system can remain unrecognised by its adherents? Moreover, what is meant by ‘love’? This thesis seeks to answer such questions and, in doing so, provide a comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural changes that have occurred between the mid-nineteenth century and the present day that have fundamentally altered both the significance of love, and the nature of religion itself. As the subject of study, love is defined as a particular social mythology that has achieved religious status due to important epistemological shifts associated with secularisation. 5 Through the consideration of a number of case studies, including Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856), the HBO series Sex and the City (1998–2004), and romantic comedy films, the religious function of love will be investigated. As a social mythology that effectively replaces the Christian symbolic, love will be appraised as a religious position, on the basis that it acts as an ultimate concern for Western individuals. 6

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5 Terms such as ‘myth,’ ‘mythology,’ ‘imaginative,’ and ‘imagination’ are not used in the pejorative sense in this thesis. While Christian polemicists have used these terms to imply a type of belief that is ‘untrue’ and based upon delusory thinking, here they are used to refer to their function. Mythology can be understood analogously to ‘social narrative,’ while imagination involves a type of active mental engagement requiring the suspension of reality.
importantly this will involve an analysis of the religious epistemological mode in order to demonstrate why the ‘love religion’ does not involve self-identification.

Typically understood as an emotional state, love has become an important topic of philosophical, religious and psychological investigation throughout Western history. While far from exhaustive, such a history might include examples from the Biblical Scriptures, Plato’s Symposium, Dante’s Commedia, the tradition of courtly love that emerged in eleventh century Europe, along with a host of examples from the Romantic poets, and humanist philosophers. As love has acquired a rich symbolic resonance through the influence of such discourse, it has variously been understood to be an aspect of the Christian symbolic system, a state of being associated with truth, sacredness and beauty, or as an ethical force that is human in origin. To consider the implications of each of these examples within their cultural context is an unwieldy task, yet one that has been tackled by numerous academics in the past thirty years, as well as in earlier studies such as C. S. Lewis’s Allegories of Love (1936) and Denis de Rougemont’s Passion and Society (1956). More recent studies of import include Stephen Kern’s The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns (1992) and Simon May’s Love: A History (2011), as well as a host of philosophical and socio-cultural studies. While these texts will inform this thesis, in general, their aim has been to extrapolate the culturally specific nature of the Western understanding of love, where ‘religion,’ in its Judeo-Christian form, is understood to be one of many influences upon the myth. In light of Wittgenstein’s assertion that “the meaning of a word is its use in language,” it becomes apparent that the survival of ‘religious themes’ does not necessarily prove the continuation of religious significance. Rather, in this thesis, the love myth is deemed to be a coherent symbolic system that functions as a type of secular religion, regardless of the origin of ideas that comprise its current form, which may or may not have been religious in their original cultural context.

Despite the depth and breadth of studies on love, and the frequent claim that love is of sacred or religious significance, the definition of love remains vague and the dynamics of this

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7 John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and others.
8 For instance, Petrarch and Auguste Comte.
11 Denis de Rougemont, Passion and Society (Faber and Faber, 1956).
13 May, Love: A History.
17 All love theorists mentioned in this thesis recognise the classic examples of sacred love enshrined in Biblical, Platonic, mystic, courtly, and Romantic sources. The centrality of love in Western culture is likewise recognised, yet each theorist articulates the ‘sacred’ or ‘religious’ role of love in a different way. Due to limitations of space, May’s claim is singled out for its directness and clarity.
supposed religious connection have yet to be fully explored. Those who have made the strongest claims regarding love’s spiritual significance have done so with disapproval, in the case of de Rougemont,\(^ {18}\) May\(^ {19}\) and others; or an air of tragedy, as can be found in the reflections of Flaubert,\(^ {20}\) Michel de Certeau and Roland Barthes.\(^ {21}\) The former find fault with the love myth, claiming that it puts unrealistic expectations upon human relationships,\(^ {22}\) that it is an inferior and adulterated version of a purer religious sentiment,\(^ {23}\) that it is a corrupting influence in society which involves the human attempt to become God,\(^ {24}\) or is otherwise responsible for human cruelty.\(^ {25}\) In each case, love and relationships are viewed to be separate from the culturally contingent love myth that is being subjected to critique. As a Religious Studies approach does not involve the evaluation of belief systems based on their putative merit, these arguments will not be explored; however, it is important to note the contested nature of the religiosity of love. As a ‘growing trend,’ the sacralisation of love is then identified as an undesirable development that must be studied in order to create a level of reflexivity necessary to stem the flow of its influence.

Although the majority of scholars mentioned thus far simply use the term ‘love,’ and may mention culturally specific sub-categories such as *agape*, *eros*, or parental love, the contemporary form of love that is increasingly idealised can be more accurately defined as ‘romantic love.’ As a cultural construct, romantic love has a history that can be most clearly traced to eleventh century Provence, when the love poetry of the troubadours began to depict a noble and divine love between man and woman that stood in contrast to the dry practicalities of arranged marriage.\(^ {26}\) Medieval scholars have problematised this reductive claim, and have revealed aspects of the courtly tradition that do not serve to convey the more modern notion of romance, yet, the concept of the birth of romance has remained a useful periodisation tool nonetheless.\(^ {27}\) As courtly love was an adulterous, albeit un consummated love that stood in contrast to the institution of marriage, romantic love is based upon passionate feelings towards an idealised other, involving a

\(^ {18}\) de Rougemont, *Passion and Society*.

\(^ {19}\) May, *Love: A History*.

\(^ {20}\) As will be discussed in further detail in the second chapter of this thesis, Flaubert’s views of love are tragic, idealistic, cynical and ironic. Evidence of this can be found in all of his written works, particularly *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *A Sentimental Education* (1869) yet also in his extensive collected correspondence. See John Charles Tarver, *Gustave Flaubert as seen in his Works and Correspondence* (Kessinger Publishing, 2005).

\(^ {21}\) Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*. As this thesis merely cites de Certeau and Barthes in order to engage with their personal representations of the love myth, their broader theoretical oeuvres will not be considered. Recognising that French theory has contributed much to the study of love, thinkers like Lacan, Kristeva, De Beauvoir and Foucault have been purposely omitted from this thesis in order to distinguish my methodological position from theirs, and avoid an unintended association with the strong political subtext of their writings.


\(^ {23}\) de Rougemont, *Passion and Society*.

\(^ {24}\) May, *Love: A History*.

\(^ {25}\) Ben-Ze’ev and Goussinsky view the “romantic ideology” of love to be responsible for “wife murders” and violence perpetrated against women in the name of love. Ben-Ze’ev and Goussinsky, *In the Name of Love*.


self-sacrificing attitude of devotional awe. Tristan and Isolde provides the most iconic example of courtly love, and due to the tragic culmination of this lovers’ tale, there has remained a strong link between romantic sentiment and the concept of being reunited with the beloved through death. While not always mentioned regarding the origins of romantic love, there is a very close relationship between courtly love poetry and the writings of medieval mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux and Hadewijch of Antwerp. Incorporating Biblical material such as the erotically charged “Song of Songs,” Christian mystics have developed strong associations between devotion for the beloved (as lover), and the Beloved (as Christ or the Deity himself). This form of romantic worship drew strongly on Platonic philosophy, wherein erotic desire for the beauty that resides within the beloved can lead the lover to purer states of love, and, ultimately, to the contemplation of the Divine. As influential strains of Christian mysticism appropriated this model of sacred relation, the concept of ascent via beauty intermingled with Christian concepts of the Divine, and this association has remained salient in Western cultural mythology.

The poetry of the courtly tradition and the writings of Christian mystics are historical antecedents of the idea of romantic love, however, in mid-eighteenth century England, romantic love came to be understood in terms of human relationships. Related to the rise of the middle-class, the birth of the modern novel, and other factors associated with modernisation, romantic love became a driving force of social change as it became increasingly acceptable to marry for love. Previously constrained by the class system and the social obligation to enter into practical marriages, in the mid-eighteenth century, the law of love became more deeply associated with virtue than the ability to conform to the dictates of the social institution. In this early period the ideal of true love was applied to the dissolution of class-based distinctions, and this deregulatory function has become characteristic of the love myth, so that in the contemporary context, romantic love is employed in the rejection of all forms of social barriers. In the realm of popular culture, the romantic comedy has offered a running commentary on the love myth since the establishment of the genre in Hollywood’s classical era. Depicting strong female leads in the 1930s and ambitious career women in the 1980s, the romantic comedy genre has a history of correlating the overthrow of patriarchal dominance with the negotiation of ‘true’ love. Films from the 1990s onward have extended the use of the romantic love myth to dismantle social barriers relating to race, gender, sexuality, age, and cultural extraction. As such, the love myth has been consistently identified as a force of justice that enables the individual to oppose social sanctions.

As the history of the love myth does not in itself define the specific types of beliefs involved in its contemporary form, examples will be provided of what romantic love is considered to be within the bounds of this thesis. First and foremost it is believed that true love can be found between two people, and that the connection that they share involves the total person; physical,

spiritual, mental. These two individuals are destined to be together and are led into contact with one another through divine aid or coincidence, so that all life events can be understood in relation to the formation of a relationship that was always ‘meant to be’. Romantic love requires one to surrender disbelief, and have faith in the power of love in order to experience this sacred relationship, and the individual expects to undergo trials of virtue in order to be worthy of such love. Super-empirical elements implicit in the romantic myth include a belief in destiny, and the ability to connect with the beloved by means of extra-sensory-perception, and a belief in post-mortem reunion in the afterlife, or in subsequent lives. The universe is believed to contain knowledge of the fated union between the individual and their ‘soul mate,’ and one can read ‘signs’ in daily life that may lead them to this person, or reveal their identity. The identity of one’s soul mate is as unique as the individual, so that uniqueness is prized over stereotypical conventions of beauty or personality.

34 Before Sunrise (1995) tells the story of Jesse and Celine who meet by chance on a train in Europe. They spend one night together, yet their entire lives are rewritten in relation to this event. Failing to reunite in Vienna the following year, in Before Sunset (2004) the couple eventually meet in Paris to find that the nine years that they had spent apart were filled with dissatisfaction and that their chance at happiness depends upon their being together.

35 In romantic comedies, the initial cynicism of the romantic couple is replaced by absolute faith in the reality of love by the film’s conclusion. For example, When Harry Met Sally (1989), The Proposal (2009), Friends with Benefits (2011).

36 In the romantic comedy Joe Versus the Volcano (1990) this test takes the form of a ‘leap of faith’ where the romantic couple express their commitment to each other and to love by jumping into a volcano. Rather than dying together, this act is rewarded by unseen forces as the volcano spits them out and they survive unscathed. In the ‘real life’ context of the reality television show The Bachelor (16:7) Ben takes Kacie, Nicki and Rachel shark-swimming on their group date. Rachel has a shark phobia, yet Ben convinces her that the shark dive is a suitable metaphor for their (potential) future relationship. Despite the danger that Rachel finds herself in, she is able to utilise the psychological skills learnt from romantic narratives in order to act against her natural instinct of fear. Knowing that when one demonstrates their faith in love, they will be rewarded, Rachel puts her life in danger as she wills herself to believe that Ben’s presence will magically protect her from harm.


38 Chris and Annie reunite in What Dreams May Come (1998), while in Ghost (1990) Sam communicates with his partner Molly after his untimely death. When his spirit is about to ascend to Heaven, the couple say goodbye in the temporary sense by saying “see ya,” implying that they will meet again.

39 The Fountain. Similarly, many romantic films involve lovers meeting while one partner is in a different body, yet the true spiritual bond that they share eventually enables the recognition of the disguised beloved. In Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003) this trope is played out in a range of body-swapping scenarios, and in the dual nature of Angel/Angelus. Similarly, in Doctor Who (2005-2009) the Doctor’s ‘true self’ is maintained through subsequent ‘regenerations.’

40 In its popular usage, this term refers to a person’s destined true love, yet is derived from Plato’s story of the original humans who were male and female; two joined together with four arms and four legs, until they were separated by Zeus. In popular culture, the term soul mate is employed to emphasise that love between two individuals is so great that no physical or metaphysical force could destroy it. In fictive form, soul mate partnerships are often depicted overcoming space, time, death, the body, or psychic barriers such as spells or Alzheimer’s disease. For example, in The Notebook (2004), The Fountain (2006), and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004).

41 "For me the other is neither he nor she; the other has only a name of his own, and her own name. The third-person pronoun is a wicked pronoun: it is the pronoun of the non-person, it absents, it annuls. When I realise that common discourse takes possession of my other and restores that other to me in the bloodless form of a universal substitute, applied to all the things which are not here, it is as
One may come up against innumerable practical obstacles; identifying subsequent mates as ‘the One,’ or failing to establish a connection with a person that one believes is their ‘soul mate,’ yet the romantic myth can be manipulated successfully to absorb even the most direct contradictions. This is possible due to a belief in layers of meaning, and an ultimate underlying ‘truth’ related to the concept of the ‘true self.’ This truth can only be verified by emotional cues and personal intuition, so that if these initial feelings of confirmation are seriously tested, the individual can concede that they were fooled by the appearance of truth, and so remain unshaken in their belief that their true love is still out there. Drawing upon the value of self-determination embedded in the ideal of freely choosing one’s partner, out of love rather than social obligation, love is heralded as a revolutionary force that can usurp institutionalised authority. Ultimately, true love removes the scales from one’s eyes, revealing the goodness inherent in all things, and enables one to experience Heaven on earth. As the mode of relation between the individual and God has been so often expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition in romantic terms, popular culture reveals that God and the beloved have now become almost interchangeable concepts.

THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Concerned with the trajectory of social myths at the macro-level, over an extensive historical period, the customary methodological divide between religion and culture distorts rather than clarifies the object of study. Sociologist Peter Berger has asserted that “every human society is an enterprise of world-building” and that “religion implies the farthest reach of man’s self-externalisation.” World-building involves “externalisation, objectification, and internalisation,” and to focus on merely one of these aspects is to distort the dialectic nature of this collective process. In the Study of Religion, if the researcher is to rely solely upon an individual’s self-identification and consciously held religious beliefs, the extent to which these beliefs determine one’s reality can be overlooked. The transformation of belief in pluralist societies has been well

if I saw my other dead, reduced, shelved in an urn upon the wall of the great mausoleum of language. For me, the other cannot be a referent: you are never anything but you, I do not want the Other to speak of you.” Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, p. 185.
43 In The Adjustment Bureau (2011) the authority to be overcome is that of God himself. In the film, it is revealed that angels monitor human behavior to ensure that all act according to their destiny. David and Elise state their case to the Deity and convince Him that they should be allowed to write their own destinies because they are most truly in love.
44 “In this world we’re just beginning to understand the miracle of living...Ooh, baby, do you know what that’s worth? Ooh, heaven is a place on earth. They say in heaven love comes first. We’ll make heaven a place on earth.” Belinda Carlisle, “Heaven is a Place on Earth.”
45 For example, songs that are generally understood to be about romantic love can also be read as songs about God, for instance, Florence and the Machine (“When food is gone you are my daily need. When friends are gone I know my Saviour’s love is real...You got the love I need to see me through.”) “You Got the Love,” Markita “Love, Thy Will be Done.” Similarly, in Sister Act (1992) a choir of nuns use the love songs “I Will Follow Him” and “My Guy” to refer to the Christian Deity.
47 Berger, The Sacred Canopy, p. 27.
48 Berger, The Sacred Canopy, p. 4.
49 Berger, The Sacred Canopy, pp. 10, 16.
documented by religious theorists, many of whom have observed the ‘psychologisation’ of religion,\(^{50}\) and the commodification of the religious ‘product’ through consumer channels.\(^{51}\) It seems, however, that little attention has been payed to the total belief system that subsumes individualised worldviews. This is often because it is assumed that secular culture contains only ‘little narratives,’ and that ‘meta-narratives’ no longer exist, as Francois Lyotard has famously argued.\(^{52}\) This pervasive view has distorted the fact that world-building is always social, relational, and collective and that all societies function with a culturally contingent cosmology. In the pre-secular West, Christianity operated as a meta-narrative informing all aspects of culture, and in the style of Bruce Lincoln’s ‘maximal’ mode of belief,\(^{53}\) “the religious world [would] then be simply taken for granted.”\(^{54}\) Collectively recognised among the social body, ‘reality’ consists of that which is assumed to be universally and obviously true.\(^{55}\)

Asserting that the individual’s understanding of ‘reality’ constitutes the fundamental ground of their worldview, those aspects of the individual’s total worldview that can be considered religiously ‘ultimate’ are revealed through the level of belief and emotional engagement. As the individual’s most strongly held beliefs can operate on an ‘unconscious’ level, direct questions posed by the researcher may offer distortive results.\(^{56}\) In The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism, Campbell overcomes this problem by employing a Weberian methodology in his analysis of cultural change, wherein:

\[\text{[T]he principal concern is to trace the manner in which changes in society’s conceptions of the true, the good and the beautiful influence patterns of conduct, not in any direct prescriptive fashion but through the way that ideals give direction to character-confirming conduct.}\]  

Adopting a similarly Weberian approach, this thesis will not make the claim that Western individuals profess to be members of a ‘Cult of Love,’\(^{58}\) or that they make a conscious and informed decision to adopt particular beliefs about romantic love and the sacred. Rather, evidence of peoples ‘unconscious mental habits’ is sought in the cultural products and intellectual discourse of Western society. Berger’s assertion that world-building involves “externalisation, 

^{52}\) Malpas, Jean-François Lyotard, pp. 25–29.  
^{53}\) Bruce Lincoln has addressed the issue of the extent to which one believes in his theory of minimal and maximal religious belief. In the maximal case, religion informs all aspects of reality and subsumes the total worldview, while in the minimalist case, typical of pluralist societies, religion becomes a discrete framework that coexists with many others in a person’s daily life. This thesis, however, contends that pluralist societies also operate within a broader maximal system that performs traditionally religious functions. Bruce Lincoln, Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11 (University of Chicago Press, 2006).  
^{54}\) Berger, The Sacred Canopy, p. 150.  
^{56}\) “[T]he ‘unconscious mental habits’ of people may be as significant for understanding their ethical conduct as their professed creeds.” Arthur Lovejoy quoted in Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 12.  
^{57}\) Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 12.  
^{58}\) de Rougemont, Passion and Society.
objectification, and internalisation,"\textsuperscript{59} infers that popular culture will encapsulate something of the internal beliefs of the populace. As the three ‘moments’ of world-building are non-separable, the careful analysis of macro-mythology reveals a great deal about the base-code each individual must possess in order to function and communicate in society.

Described by Max Weber as the “disenchantment of the world,”\textsuperscript{60} the notion of ‘becoming conscious’\textsuperscript{61} and cognitively distant from that which had once been believed to be real,\textsuperscript{62} was imagined as a process of progressive disbelief.\textsuperscript{63} Relating primarily a sense of incredulity regarding the existence of spiritual forces in nature, the ‘disenchanted’ position is more closely associated with a rationalistic and positivist worldview. While ‘re-enchantment,’\textsuperscript{64} discourse has become a means of accounting for spiritual beliefs in secular society, re-enchantment can be considered to be more than simply a revival of belief in the super-empirical. For Nicholas Paige, re-enchantment occurred simultaneously with the process of disenchantment as elements of culture were transferred from the religious to the secular domain.\textsuperscript{65} Similar to Hanegraaff’s ‘psychologisation of religion and sacralisation of psychology,’\textsuperscript{66} or Campbell’s “re-enchantment of experience,”\textsuperscript{67} this process caused the religious sign to become dislocated from its original meaning, while traces of its original meaning linger in the secular context. An often-cited example of this phenomenon can be found in the sensation of horror and pleasurable fear evoked through gothic fiction that derives from the true terror previously incited by the thought of the Devil.\textsuperscript{68} The new context is not overtly associated with the old, and due to the fictional mode of presentation, individuals can engage with ‘new’ myths as if they had no historical precedents. The story is experienced as it is, and if powerful feelings are triggered during this experience, then it is taken as a given that this is due to the art of the narrative. Like Paige, this thesis maintains that mythic forms remain structurally sound in the cultural consciousness long after it is assumed that

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\item \textsuperscript{59} Berger, The Sacred Canopy, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Courier Dover Publications, 2003).
\item \textsuperscript{61} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 73.
\item \textsuperscript{62} William James, ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ in The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy and Human Immortality (Courier Dover Publications, 1956) p. 45.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Although ‘disenchantment’ may appear to suggest a previous state of ‘enchantment,’ the distinction between the pre-secular and secular eras, is that in the latter, the individual cannot expect their worldview to be shared by others, and must employ cognitive measures when operating in society in order to be able to maintain a coherent sense of reality in the face of pluralism. Such cognitive measures include a propensity for metaphorical thinking that results in the ability to synthesise apparently disparate meanings, as these meanings only appear disparate if they are understood literally.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Christopher Partridge, The Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume One: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture (Continuum, 2004) p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Partridge, The Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume One; Christopher Partridge, Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume Two: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture (T&T Clark Int’l, 2005).
\item \textsuperscript{67} Wouter Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought (SUNY Press, 1998) pp. 224–229.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 138.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, A Sociology of Religious Emotion (Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 188; Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 75–76; Paige, ‘Permanent Re-Enchantments’.
\end{itemize}
they have been discredited or abandoned. Like ‘God’s shadow,’ these mythological structures linger, yet their meanings are indelibly altered through changes in epistemological relation.  

Just as re-enchantment theorists have looked for the ways in which religious phenomena have been relocated in the secular context, scholars of love have observed that romantic love rose to religious significance and grew in strength as belief in the Christian God declined. In light of Paige’s theory of re-enchantment, it is possible to see that this shift from the Christian to the secular does not imply an unproblematic survival of Christian concepts of love. Instead, the role of God, as the supreme source of love, has been isolated from his total role, and this holy function has been freed from its exclusive locus in the Christian symbolic. As de Certeau put it, “a gradual religious demythification” was “accompanied by a progressive mythification of love.” Through this process, “[t]he One...changed its site. It is no longer God but the other, and in a masculine literature, woman.” Expressing a similar sentiment, in his Royal Wedding speech to Prince William and Kate Middleton, Bishop Richard Chartres acknowledged this cultural shift, noting that “[a]s the reality of God has faded from so many lives in the West, there has been a corresponding inflation of expectations that personal relationships alone will supply meaning and happiness in life.” Such observations are apt, however, they only go half way to explaining the religious significance of romantic love. Firstly, Christianity is being reduced to a single concept, that God is the source of eternal love. Secondly, the fact that this specific religious myth has ‘changed its site’ involves a different mode of relation than was possible in the Christian context. ‘The One’ is no longer the source of love for everyone; in the romantic context, the One is the ultimate source of love for the individual and is a part of their personal narrative.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The first chapter of this thesis will deal with the provocative concepts like the Death of God, as pronounced by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1882, and explore the macro-mythological implications of this symbolic death and the affect that it had upon the link between God the Christian symbol and God the referent. While divergent schools of thought struggled to own the Christian symbolic and define it in light of their own values, the socio-political salience of certain depictions of Christianity meant that a particular version of Christianity was rejected in the name of human self-determination. It will be advanced that the war waged against Christianity in the modern period did not ‘kill’ the religion; rather, the total symbolic system of Christianity was fragmented

69 Kathleen J. Wininger defines Nietzsche’s concept of ‘God’s shadow’ as the remnants of the Christian religion that would remain even after God was ‘killed,’ or discredited in the cultural imagination. Kathleen J. Wininger, Nietzsche’s Reclamation of Philosophy (Rodopi, 1997) p. 22.

70 May, Love: A History, de Rougemont, Passion and Society; de Certeau, The Mystic Fable.

71 de Certeau, The Mystic Fable: Volume One, p. 4.

72 de Certeau, The Mystic Fable: Volume One, p. 4.

73 de Certeau, The Mystic Fable: Volume One, p. 4.

74 Bishop of London’s Amazing Speech to William and Kate (April 2011).

75 Within this thesis, the intense critiques mounted against the Christian religion, typifying the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, will be referred to as the ‘Death of God debates.’ Nietzsche played a central role in this discourse through his pronouncement of the ‘Death of God,’ yet there were many other voices in this long running debate.

and particular parts were rejected, whilst other aspects were reformed and reworked according to the social values of the period. This is not to say that Christianity continues today under the guise of secularisation, as Christianity itself can only be properly defined in its cultural specificity. That is, Christianity is a symbolic tool-kit, and its myths have been deployed and interpreted in an astounding variety of ways over the past two thousand years. It is for this reason that what the moderns rejected was labelled ‘Christianity’ and what they salvaged and revived through secular channels can also be read to be ‘Christian.’ The illusion of a break between religious and non-religious, Christian and secular comes from the fact that the moderns railed against what they called ‘God,’ ‘religion’ and ‘Christianity,’ yet these terms are not so narrowly defined in the contemporary period and the position from which this thesis is written. Considering the period through a Weberian lens, and identifying the psychological conditions that enabled the decline of Christianity, it becomes possible to account for the rise of a religious form of the romantic love myth.

Providing an early example of the transference of aspects of the religious into the love myth, Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856) will be analysed in chapter two. In keeping with the intellectual climate of the period, Flaubert’s novel parallels the thoughts of other writers leading up to the First World War who shared a deep sense of existential crisis and searched for ways in which humanity could move forward in a Godless world. As a ‘non-believer’ Flaubert appears to exemplify the ‘disenchanted’ worldview, however, he applies a uniquely modern understanding of mystic relation to his depiction of love so that references to transcendence are overt. Importantly, Madame Bovary combines Modernist cynicism with Romantic utopianism in the representation of truth, beauty and love, so that the essential nature of these qualities is subjected to doubt. In the third chapter of this thesis, the romantic love myth will be reconsidered in the contemporary context of popular culture. Focusing upon the filmic genre of romantic comedy, the narrative tropes that have become typical of romance will be analysed in terms of their symbolic significance. The dialectic between cynicism and utopianism that was evident in Madame Bovary is maintained, yet in the contemporary case, this narrative device is shown to be a means of realigning love with authenticity. Doubts about love that had characterised the Modernist period are notably absent in the contemporary love myth, and as a result, romantic love has taken on a more stable association with ultimate truth. Taking truth, and assumptions about the nature of reality to be crucial indicators of religious functionality, it is

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77 This thesis focuses upon the rise of the romantic love myth as one of the dominant narratives that emerged out of this secularising process. There are, however, a host of other religious forms that developed in response to these same conditions, with world religions, Theosophy, reformed Christianities and humanism being some of the more prominent examples. As the romantic love myth is posited to infuse Western culture in a broad sense, the importance and legitimacy of other changes in the religious landscape of the West is not challenged. It is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis to elaborate further on their impact.

78 Here, I employ a symbolic interactionist reading of Christianity wherein the meaning that is associated with certain myths and symbols is socially contingent as these concepts act as units of social interaction. This perspective recognises that in the Christian period, all points of view had to be expressed through the Christian symbolic. As many concepts attributed to ‘Christianity’ existed prior to the development of this religion, and survive in forms that are no longer considered Christian, it is dubious to claim that all of these ideas are definitively Christian. For instance, love, charity and self-sacrifice. John P. Hewitt, “Symbols, Objects and Meanings,” Larry T. Reynolds and Nancy J. Herman-Kinney, Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism (Rowman Altamira, 2003) p. 309.
concluded that people \textit{really believe} in love, and that the romantic love myth plays a vital role in the construction of the collective worldview of the West.
Chapter One

Disenchantment, the Death of a Despot and Human Self-Determination

Psychology, Secularism and the Experience of the Divine
INTRODUCTION

In 1882, Nietzsche declared that ‘God was dead.’ A little over twenty years later, Weber observed the widespread “disenchantment” of Western society. These two symbolic developments crystallize the thoughts of an era, and while the progression from Christianity to secularity constitutes a complex and ongoing process with origins stretching further back in history than is practical to consider within this study, it can be asserted that religious belief was an issue of crucial importance and was hotly debated in the Modernist period. Employing a Weberian approach, this chapter will account for the psychological conditions that prepared the ground for the instatement of the romantic love myth as a religiously significant worldview. As Weber asserted in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, it was not that certain beliefs like ‘predestination’ created the capitalist sense of a ‘calling.’ Rather, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the doctrine of predestination was a part of a socio-symbolic process of meaning-making that was only able to contribute to the capitalist ‘calling’ due to underlying psycho-social conditions. As ‘disenchantment’ infers epistemological change as well as the feeling of ‘existential crisis’ typical of Modernism, it is through an observation of these combined factors that a sense of ‘reality’ and ‘ultimate concern’ are considered. Rather than analysing the Death of God debates in terms of rational arguments for or against the Christian religion, this chapter considers the perspectives of prominent thinkers in terms of the particular symbols they favour in their discussion of Christianity and what their attitudes reveal about the way Christianity was conceived at the moment of its ‘death.’ What is most obvious is that Christianity is being depicted as a human institution rather than a transcendent religious one. It is this ‘evacuation of the spiritual’ from the Christian symbolic that enables an exceedingly negative interpretation of symbolic constructs as modernity progresses. As values of goodness, beauty, truth and love were increasingly aligned with humanity rather than the Deity, the individual was then able to access these ultimate values via alternative mythological systems.

THE DISENCHANTMENT: SIGNIFICANCE AND SACREDNESS IN THE MODERN EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODE

In the post-Enlightenment context of secular modernity, Christianity had become disassociated with both ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ so that Modernist thinkers sought to answer the big religious questions by alternate means. Given this widespread loss of faith in Christian authority, all external ‘authorship’ became suspect and individuals began to test the nature of reality from scratch. William James conducted experiments into ‘supernatural’ phenomena through the

79 The ‘Death of God,’ refers to a particular aphorism written by Friedrich Nietzsche, yet as the concept has been linked with the rejection of Christianity as the religion of Western society, this designation refers to a much broader discourse concerned with the illegitimacy and shortcomings of the Christian religion. Nietzsche, The Gay Science, pp. 181–182.
81 For instance, Campbell traces these origins “as far back as ancient Judaism.” Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 72.
Society of Physical Research,\textsuperscript{82} Carl Jung explored the collective unconscious using a variety of psychological techniques,\textsuperscript{83} Charles Baudelaire sought to capture the fleeting nature of modernity that, he claimed, existed in a state of flux,\textsuperscript{84} and Flaubert fashioned himself as a modern mystic in search of the perfect word.\textsuperscript{85} Like so many others of their age, these Modernist thinkers sought to disregard doctrinal structures that defined reality objectively in favour of experimenting with it in an unmediated fashion. This was the period of grand essentialising theories,\textsuperscript{86} the artistic manifesto and totalising political ideologies,\textsuperscript{87} yet no theory was considered sufficient to answer existential questions in an assured and absolute sense. As existence was being rewritten in terms of evolution, science, psychology and historiography, new discoveries continually challenged the old, so that truth remained provisional. Although ultimate truth was considered to be elusive and indefinable, this did not prevent these thinkers from believing that there were secret truths that could be discovered through a reappraisal of existence, once free from the corrupting influences of religious dogma.

**PSYCHOLOGISED SELF: PSYCHOLOGISED WORLD**

At once a science of the mind and an emergent therapeutic tool, psychology operates nonetheless according to certain epistemological and ontological premises. Seminal figures in the history of psychology, William James (1842-1910), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875 – 1961) have had a lasting impact on the way in which religion can be conceived, with James’s *The Will to Believe* (1896) being the most decisive. In this text, James effectively describes himself and those of his age as disenchanted, and confesses that he does not believe in the Christian God, yet feels an emotional need to believe. Putting aside debates about the truth or falsity of Christian doctrine, he refigures truth as “workability.”\textsuperscript{88} While the Christian claim to exclusive truth is considered despotic, the “scientific method”\textsuperscript{89} is no better, as it does not consider psychological and emotional factors. Alternatively, James proposes the “pragmatic method,”\textsuperscript{90} whereby individuals use their own powers of reflection to decide what is true based on the practical usefulness of beliefs. In his own reflections, he discovered that he felt the “religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply.”\textsuperscript{91} That is, the structure of Christianity and of the relationship imagined between the individual and God still functions unhindered in his mind, despite his inability to adopt a believing attitude towards the Deity, or to have any sense of affinity with the Christian institution. Rather than presenting a choice between belief in Christianity, and


\textsuperscript{91} James, ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ p. 39.
a rational atheism, James opens up a space for an alternative, where elements of religion are of value only insofar as they satisfy the psychological needs of the individual. Therefore, religion becomes a tool that one might employ in order to deal with unsettling psychological experiences associated with modernity and secular rationalism.

The psychological perspective offered by James highlights individual agency in maintaining the health of the mind, yet Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic method focused far more on the power that the unconscious wields over the individual, against their conscious will. As such, truth is revealed through slips of the tongue that interrupt the flow of rational responses. It was the task of the psychoanalyst to reveal that which the conscious mind repressed, as a failure to do so could only result in neurosis. For Freud, religion was the supreme example of widespread socially-sanctioned neurosis, wherein the religious view of the world was nothing more than a projection of the psyche, which modern psychology could remedy by reversing this process and transforming “metaphysics into metapsychology.” Whereas James had been primarily interested in religious experience and the social function of religion, Freud was concerned with accounting for the origin of religion as a means of rooting it out of the human mind, so that society could progress by the light of reason. This universalisation of the psychic life of humanity placed religion in a suspension of ‘consciousness,’ where religion was not reality, it was simply another narrative structure in the mind. Any religion that could have been safely equated with ‘reality’ in the Bergerian sense became merely one option among many others.

Following on from Freud with his interest in the unconscious and the origin of religion, Jung described this subliminal realm of the mind to be the source of deep wisdom that connected all of humanity with the Ultimate through the collective unconscious. According to Jung, all religious traditions sprung from this same source, so that the plethora of different deities apparent in world religions could be understood to be facets of core archetypes, serving particular functions for the individual in their psycho-spiritual journey into the depths of consciousness. Like Freud, Jung held an evolutionary view of human consciousness wherein ‘primitives,’ as yet unable to differentiate their consciousness from the world around them, believed most fully in their own mental projections, which took the form of gods. Holding a more positive view of religion than Freud, Jung presented the archetypes as being akin to the eternal Forms of Platonic philosophy, stressing that “the divinity of the gods can only be experienced spiritually, in the illumination of an idea, by direct revelation.” Jung qualifies his assertions regarding direct revelation when he says “[a]s psychologists we may stress the fact that this truth is always a psychic reality.” Prescribing to a layered understanding of truth, Jung’s notion of immediate revelation demonstrates a desire to divorce the individual’s psycho-spiritual quest from their cultural and historical context in order to connect with the purest Form of the archetypes.

93 For Freud, that which the conscious mind repressed was always sexual in nature. Michael F. Palmer, Freud and Jung on Religion (Routledge, 1997) pp. 90–92.
94 Freud, Psychopathology, p. 245.
Each of these three perspectives reveals important changes in the way that religion was understood. Firstly, authoritative dogmas were rejected and individuals were empowered to perceive reality themselves, and to choose to believe what they will. Secondly, the agency that was granted to supernatural beings under the rubric of the ‘enchanted’ worldview associated with pre-modern Christian credulity was relocated to the unconscious mind. Thirdly, religious figures were redefined as characters involved in the narrative of the self. Fourthly, spiritual experiences, such as those of prophets and mystics, were increasingly understood in terms of states of consciousness. In the modern context, where religious symbols were divested of their ‘automatic meaning,’ the profundity of experiences was not determined by the symbols themselves, but by the affective state produced and the corresponding level of consciousness that this implied that one had attained. Finally, the state of self-consciousness achieved through understanding the dynamics of the mind enabled one to observe these processes objectively, to understand the greater meaning of emotional events beyond the immediacy of experience, and to intervene in these processes to direct the course of one’s life. The nature of this journey was imagined as either a spiritual one, as a progression through increasingly enlightened states of consciousness, or simply as the gradual realisation of one’s true human potential.

As the rational and systematic study of emotional phenomena, psychology literally combined emotive life and all that was once spiritual (psyche) with logic. This process forever changed the nature of both rationalism and its opposite. The psychology of religion took this one step further by arguing that if something is functionally real to the mind, it is a psychological reality. For all that James, Freud and Jung have contributed to the analysis of religion, they were not interested in metaphysical truth. The binary of rational and irrational may have lingered in modern discourse, yet through the new science of psychology, the irrational could be mapped, categorised, known, and directed by the rational will. As the language of feeling was being celebrated by the Romantics, the psychologised epistemological mode reintroduced rationality, not as a return to Enlightenment premises, but as a means of reading the irrational realm. Emotion and religious experience formed the strange substance that psychology would elucidate once and for all. The irrational would not be repressed, it would be rationally understood. This was, however, a two way process. Once it was realised that the irrational world could be critically observed, known and mastered, it could be permitted to exist.

INTELLECTUAL GNOSTICISM AND MYSTICAL RELATION

According to the Modernist caricature of institutionalised Christianity, the Christian epistemological mode refused free thought and direct relation and issued dogmatic decrees that one was required to blindly accept. Christian intermediaries were suspected of exploiting modes of ‘faith,’ ‘belief’ and ‘worship’ in order to impose their will upon a pacified flock. Following the Reformation, the possibility of unmediated relation led to the belief that a personal interpretation

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100 Whether or not this ‘enchanted’ state of absolute religious credulity existed to the extent that Freud and Jung propose in their evolutionary schemas, it was against the notion of such credulity that modern rationality and psychology were defined. As this chapter is concerned with the Modernist period and its dominant epistemological mode, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to enter into conjecture about pre-modern epistemology.

101 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 76.
of scripture, and a personal relationship with God was more authentic than the ritualised modes of relation dictated by the Church. This Protestant view that ritual was essentially ‘empty’ of meaning contributed to an emphasis on inner commitment and emotive experience as markers of true faith.\(^{102}\) Following the rejection of the institutional forms of relation, and with only the self as a guide in the psychic realm, the Modernists began to look to the past for new models of experience. In the era of the ancient Church, the moderns discovered heretical Gnosticism, and in the medieval period, the Christian mystics were singled out. Regardless of how mysticism and Gnosticism are understood today, for the Modernists, the mystic became archetypical of a direct and emotive encounter with the Divine, while the Gnostic came to signify the radical and suppressed spirituality of the West. Importantly, these traditions were imagined to form a lineage between ancient and modern, so that the intermediate era of institutional Christianity could be considered to be one long ‘dark age.’ As Wouter Hanegraaff and Roelof van der Broek have argued, the introduction these modernised forms of unmediated relation dissolved the clear dichotomy between faith and reason, irrationality and rationality.\(^{103}\)

Offering an example of the Modernist identification with mysticism, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1907) James claimed that “personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.”\(^{104}\) These states of consciousness, whether believed to be true encounters with the Divine, or psychologically explicable phenomena, represented unmediated experience for the modern individual. Similarly, Flaubert predicted that if society “continues to go on as it is now, we shall again see, I believe, mystics, such as there have been at all dark periods.”\(^{105}\) Seeking a spiritual lineage to bolster the authenticity of direct experience, in 1931 Ernst Troeltsch pointed to “the radical individualism of mysticism,”\(^{106}\) that he judged typical of the Middle Ages. According to Troeltsch, medieval mysticism had no desire for organised fellowship; all it cared for was freedom, for interchange of ideas, a pure fellowship of thought, which indeed only became possible after the invention of printing...The isolated individual, and psychological abstraction and analysis became everything.\(^{107}\)

Less a description of medieval mysticism than an observation of Modernist epistemology, Troeltsch’s claims nonetheless indicate the strength of the modern identification with the mystic mode.

In terms of Gnosticism, the concept of a rebellious and repressed alternative Christianity had enormous currency among Western intellectuals, and the terms ‘gnosis’ and ‘demiurge’ were frequently employed to refer to modern issues that had little to do with the historical Gnostics.

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\(^{105}\) Letter from Flaubert to Louise Colet, written between 1851-1854. Tarver, *Flaubert, Works and Correspondence*, p. 145.


As Jung observed, “The spiritual currents of our time have, in fact, a deep affinity with Gnosticism” and even went so far as to call Theosophy and Anthroposophy “Gnosticism in Hindu dress.” Similarly, a diverse range of modern thinkers have been connected with the term owing to the ‘Gnostic themes’ in their work. From the modern perspective, Gnosticism revealed that there was a spark of divinity hidden in each human being, while the Christian Deity was nothing but a demiurge, or false god. Most importantly, the path back to true Divinity was to be attained by means of “saving knowledge.” The Gnostic writings did not reveal this knowledge in a literal prescriptive manner, but concealed it in layers of meaning that could only be deciphered by those who were ready for these meanings to be revealed. Given the Modernist preoccupation with discovering truth via alternate paths than those prescribed by Christian doctrine or philosophical polemics, the ‘Gnostic’ approach to intellectual study became a way to bypass the conventions of the previous age. Importantly, scholarly pursuits became infused with the magic of discovery, and the project of re-writing the history of the world was undertaken with a ‘Gnostic’ understanding of layered meaning and hidden truth.

THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE WAR AGAINST THE CHRISTIAN SYMBOLIC

“What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons.”

When considering the intellectual works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is possible to overlook the affect that particular ideas had on the mythic constructions of society, if one is to view them merely in terms of rhetorical argumentation. Weber was able to account for the psychological antecedents of Western capitalism by tracing certain Christian beliefs as they were constructed socially, symbolically and epistemologically. Similarly, my interpretation of late nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers is based upon the psycho-social impact of their ideas rather than their intended meaning. The great insight that Weber’s analysis offers is that ideas governing the imagination are not rationally assessed for their veracity or usefulness before being adopted as units of symbolic interaction. For instance, it has been pointed out that Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity is cutting because it uses the language and concepts of the Christian faith and that no matter how savage his words, they are not written in the tongue of an outsider. That is, whether one is arguing for or against something, the symbols they chose to interact with are indicative of the prevalence of these constructs in the social imagination. In this section, a variety of modern thinkers will be featured, not in terms of their personal position on religion, but in light of the symbolic units that they favour in their discussion of Christianity and

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religion. As the modern love myth emerged as a psychological reaction to the symbolic environment of this period, it is with this in mind that the Death of God must be considered.

As was noted in the preceding section, the late nineteenth century experienced epistemological reforms through the relocation of authority and authenticity from social institutions to the self. It is evident that the anti-authoritarian basis of this mode is related to the social phenomenon of individualism, yet at the mythico-symbolic level, similar changes were taking place. Prevailing in the discourse of the period, Christianity was encapsulated by three symbolic constructions. These included the image of God the Patriarch, the Fall, and Jesus the man. ‘Christianity’ and ‘God,’ as they were represented through popular discourse, became frozen in these forms at the moment of their so-called ‘death.’ Certainly, this ‘moment’ extends over a broad period, and the constructions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be found much earlier, especially during the Enlightenment. It is, however, crucial to notice that only particular aspects of Christianity are associated with the Death of God, and that the Death of God is in itself a symbolic construct serving to delineate the Christian from the secular, both during early secularisation and retrospectively in the Study of Religion. In the post-Christian world of secular pluralism, Christianity continued to thrive in diverse forms, many of which bore little resemblance to the modern portrait that will be explored below. Likewise, in popular culture and New Age religion, Christian mythology has been appropriated and interwoven in myriad contexts, all of which have served to erode old associations, whilst forging new ones. Throughout the history of Christianity, God has been a symbolic construction of diverse meaning, and in modern times, especially so.115

When God was ‘killed,’ he was embodied in the Western mind as the tyrannical despot of the Old Testament. His rule was strongly associated with the Christian institution, and therefore, the authority of his earthly representatives. In Flaubert’s view, the Church misrepresented God, and priests “consider[ed] Him as if He were a man, and, what’s worse, a middle class man.”116 As the nineteenth century was defined by the rise of the middle class and the fervour of revolution, God was associated with the illegitimate status of figureheads whose rule was assured merely by ‘divine right,’ or the right of birth.117 This negative portrayal of the Christian God was not unique to the nineteenth century. However, in its earlier forms, it did not yet have the effect of discrediting Christianity as the religion of the West. In Weber’s consideration of the psychological effect of the sixteenth century Calvinist doctrine of predestination, he observed that “a religion of predestination obliterates the goodness of God, for he becomes a hard, majestic king.”118 Commenting on John Milton’s epic poem based on the Genesis myth, Paradise Lost (1667), Percy Shelley observed that “Milton’s Devil as a moral being

116 Letter from Flaubert to Madame Roger des Genettes, written 1858. Tarver, Flaubert, Works and Correspondence, p. 228.
117 Flaubert’s reference to God as a ‘middle-class man’ is therefore idiosyncratic, yet his assertion that God was imagined as a man with class attributes is telling in itself.
is...far superior to his God.” Similarity, William Empson saw Milton’s God as being “arid, legalistic, tyrannical, and cruel.” Regardless of the status of belief in God in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is nonetheless significant that God could be conceived as a fundamentally unlikable character. Given the prevalence of this image of the despotic Deity in the anti-clerical rhetoric of the nineteenth century, it would become increasingly difficult to reconcile such a God with the emergent focus on emotive experiences of God after Schleiermacher. Flaubert emphasises this when he referred to the God of the Church as a “fetish,” judging people’s affective response this figure as false, as they made the “pretence of falling down faint with admiration in its presence.” With the image of the cruel God alive in the Western symbolic, it would more than incongruous to imagine the experience of God to be nothing more than the Lawmaker’s mighty wrath. As will be later discussed, the tone of anti-clerical rhetoric created a powerful psychological undertow that would find its fullest expression in the sacralisation of the romantic love myth.

In his landmark essay, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784) Immanuel Kant defined the term as referring to “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage,” going on to explain that “[t]utelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another.” As much about epistemology as about religion, Kant presents reason as the individual’s ability to live in freedom and self-determination, in contrast to the credulity of traditional faith. The former position offered the modern man a way forward and “out of barbarity.” The latter, a dehumanised existence as a cog in a machine, a passive and domesticated being who lives under the yoke of a tyrannical master, and who does nothing but “obey” out of his own “laziness and cowardice.” This master-slave construction would prove foundational for later critics of institutionalised Christianity, so that in this discourse a great stigma was afforded to religious faith, as well as the ‘tyrants’ who were symbolically aligned with God; the greatest tyrant of them all. It is crucial to remember that these savage critiques of God; his character, his sanctions, and his Biblical deeds, were ventured not because God was believed to be real, but because he was increasingly understood to be a symbolic figurehead hiding the deeds of men. This figurehead,
However, still had great mythic power, even over his critics, and there was a need to speak in reference to the symbol owing to its living social currency.

For both Nietzsche and Jung, if God were to be imagined in light of his true symbolic nature, he would be equally good and evil. As these thinkers refrained from making metaphysical claims about God, they were discussing the worthiness (in Nietzsche’s case) and accuracy (in Jung’s case) of the current symbolic construct of God, as he was presented by the Church. In Nietzsche’s view, God should embody the will to power, while the "good God" of the Church was a creeping, impotent figure who was "continually moralising." Viewing the God-symbol to be a reflection of a people’s image of themselves, Nietzsche asserted that a proud people required a God that was “both useful and harmful, both friend and foe...One has much the need of the evil God as the good God.” In Jung’s philosophy of mind, all things existed in binary pairs, so that the self had a shadow, the conscious had the unconscious, and for each symbolic figure, an aspect of light balanced the dark. Therefore, God himself had a shadow side and was, in part, evil.

For the purposes of this thesis it is enough to note that when the symbol of God was imagined by Nietzsche and Jung, it was humanised. Given their binary premise, for the Godsymbol to be utterly good, something else must be utterly bad. As James put it, when one ceased to believe in God, evil became finite, and a matter of human responsibility. In an era that so valued self-determination and that accepted self-responsibility as the price for dissolving original sin, the Godsymbol, in his great omnipotence, had to accept responsibility for good and evil on a universal scale.

In Freud’s theory of religion, the father figure was fundamental. Viewing religion to be a projection of the human psyche, Freud speculated upon the development of these projections during the earliest human societies. In his theory of the primal horde, Freud proposed that primitive humans lived in small groups that were ruled by a dominant male patriarch. The father was both an idealised and indomitable figure who aroused the jealousy of his sons. In Totem and Taboo (1913) these sons rose up and murdered their father, and afterwards, felt such guilt that they fashioned the totem as a father-substitute. In symbolic form, the father continued to wield power over his sons and the law of the father persisted in the form of taboos, so that modern religion was as an example of this deferred authority. The myth of Oedipus, which told the story of a son who committed patricide and married his mother because he saw his father as a sexual rival, acted as the blueprint for Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. According to Freud, this myth brought about the first instance of father-figure worship, yet he also claimed that all (male) infants experience this selfsame sexual desire for their mother, and idealisation of a father whom they rival. This theme of patricide was particularly strong in the modern era, and one of the most

133 Alistair Kee, Nietzsche Against the Crucified (SCM, 1999) p. 62.
135 Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ, p. 126.
136 Palmer, Freud and Jung on Religion, pp. 102-103.
137 Palmer, Freud and Jung on Religion, p. 128.
138 “The evil which we feel so deeply is something that we can also help to overthrow; for its sources, now that no ‘Substance’ or ‘Spirit’ is behind them, are finite, and we can deal with each of them in turn.” William James, ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, and Human Immortality (Courier Dover Publications, 1956) p. 47.
140 Palmer, Freud and Jung on Religion, p. 15.
influential literary examples of this motif would have to be Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), which features strong Biblical and political overtones. In terms of the modern symbolic, it is significant that the Christian Father was so often aligned with both the political hierarchy, and the familial patriarch. Combined with the motif of patricide, this represents the wholesale rejection of the deified authority figure, in preference of the self and one’s brothers, who must rise up and take the reins no matter what the cost.

The cost of remaining subservient was to accept inauthenticity and childish illusions as reality. According to Freud, the modern individual continued to defer power to the symbolic father out of fear and psychological immaturity.\(^\text{141}\) In the story of the primal horde, the sons are able to overcome their father, yet are not quite capable of replacing him. Freud, however, believed that it is possible for humanity to live according to reason and to see religion for the comforting illusion that it was. He described this stage in the social evolution of the human race in terms of growing up and leaving the fantasies of childhood behind.

They will be in the same position as a child who has left the parental house where he was so warm and comfortable. But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot remain children forever; they must in the end go out into ‘hostile life.’ We may call this ‘education to reality.’\(^\text{142}\)

Similarly, in Jung’s symbolic typology of ‘individuation,’ his three stages included the Father-stage, the Son stage, and the Holy Ghost-stage.\(^\text{143}\) The Father-stage representing the most psychologically immature, was defined as a “ready-made pattern of existence which is habitual and has the character of law. It is a passive, unreflecting condition, a mere awareness of what is given, without intellectual or moral judgement.”\(^\text{144}\) As in Freud’s evolutionary model of human maturation, Jung’s trajectory to personal maturity was articulated in terms of overcoming the rule of the father.

Given the value of reason and the pursuit of knowledge following the Enlightenment, the Biblical story of the Fall of Man took on a new significance. When the serpent told Eve “God doth know, that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil,” (Gen. 3:6) the modern inference is that God uses his power to prevent humanity from developing their true potential, to keep them in perpetual servitude. Nietzsche’s aphorism “What is the seal of liberation?—No longer being ashamed in front of oneself,”\(^\text{145}\) clearly refers to this understanding of the Genesis myth. Free from the debt of original sin and the obligation to another’s will, Nietzsche’s ‘Will to Power’ involved the realisation that human beings had the capacity for self-determined existence.\(^\text{146}\) The Edenic theme in nineteenth century culture was concerned not only with going back to origins, but with rewriting the entire story of humanity in modern terms.\(^\text{147}\) This was apparent in the effort to redefine Christian myth by going back to the time of Christ, and “abolishing if possible the legacy of the many centuries between

\(^{141}\) Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, pp. 37-41.


\(^{143}\) Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, p. 156.


\(^{146}\) Kee, *Nietzsche Against the Crucified*, p. 97.

\(^{147}\) Kee, *Nietzsche Against the Crucified*, p. 97.
then and now. Literature was full of the theme of reversing history and starting over in a new Eden.” Like other thinkers of his era, Rousseau’s philosophy was concerned with “the passage of modernity, from slavery to freedom, from despotism to democracy, which announces the death of the old divinity, the Christian God, and the birth of a new divinity, humanity.” As time progressed, and with the rise of individualism, the doctrine of original sin embedded in the story of the Fall became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the Rousseauian belief in humanity’s inherent goodness. Rousseau’s assertion that “[t]rue Christians are made to be slaves,” provides yet another example of the rhetorical theme that left its indelible stain on the Christian symbolic.

For some, addressing the association between Christianity, ‘self incurred tutelage’ and modern humanist values warranted a total divorce from Christianity, while for others, the symbolic was to be retained and rewritten. If there were any redeeming feature left in the Christian mythological repertoire for the modern critics of Christianity, it was Jesus the man. Interpreted as a revolutionary who died professing his anti-authoritarian stance against the priests of his culture, even Nietzsche admired him. Jung chose Christ as the psychological symbol of the self, inviting a direct correlation between humanity and divinity. During the nineteenth century, a new literary genre was born wherein Jesus’s life was imagined. This genre was linked to liberal theology, and it has been noted that the figure of Jesus was instrumental in Schleiermacher’s experiential model of Christianity. As Jesus was increasingly imagined as an exemplary human being, his ethical qualities were emphasised over his supernatural ones. The idea that the true story of Jesus had become obscured by tradition led many liberal theologians to strive towards the ideal of a “purely ethical-spiritual religion, with no external elements whatsoever, whether churches, priests, rituals or dogmas.” Although Jesus was still considered to be divine, Kant famously asserted that “[e]ven the Holy One of the gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before we can realise him to be such.” Just as God’s rule had been tested by human ethical standards, the figure of Jesus was judged by similar criteria. Insofar as Jesus could be understood as good, loving, compassionate and revolutionary, he could be salvaged from the wreck of the Christian symbolic as a Modern saviour for a Modern age.

150 Roberts, The Total Work of Art, p. 15.
151 Rousseau quoted in Roberts, The Total Work of Art, p. 16.
152 Certainly, Christianity still flourishes today in a multitude of forms that have succeeded in writing out these negative Modernist constructs. As previously stated, however, this thesis is concerned with macro-mythology and not the diversity of individual religious positions that emerged in the modern period.
153 Kee, Nietzsche Against the Crucified, p. 161.
155 Berger, The Sacred Canopy, p. 159.
156 Woodhead, An Introduction To Christianity, p. 368.
In light of the above, it appears that in Modernist period, two general images of God found existence in the Western symbolic, and due to their opposed characteristics, became increasingly difficult to reconcile. There was the Calvinist God, the great tyrant of the earthly Church, the God who ruled in his own interest, and kept humanity as slaves. This God was a great demiurge, and for some moderns, there was the bitter realisation that this horrific figure was the collective dream of Western culture. On the other hand, there was the image of God as love, God as sensation, pleasure, generosity; a goodness freely given and affectively received. The Death of God debates at the end of the nineteenth century did not invent these symbolic constructs, yet it was in this period that the Great Tyrant was invoked so strongly that alternatives had to be sought. The values of individualism, free will, revolution, self-determination and democracy required a non-hierarchical deity. In each case, the recurrent focus on these particular depictions was of political significance regarding the rejection of institutional Christianity, yet also reflective of emergent trends in religious thought in a period of tumultuous change and increased awareness of the alternative religious positions that could be pursued in a modern world. The cruel Despot was representative of an earlier age of presumed ignorance and immaturity. Yet critiques against the old patriarch said nothing of the God of the Romantics who was “no longer represented as a named, personal God, but as a supernatural force, which whilst present throughout the natural world, also existed within each individual in the form of a unique and personalised spirit; that of his ‘genius.’”

As this thesis argues, the Death of God debates discredited the latter, whilst leaving the former relatively unscathed. Certainly, the rhetoric of the Death of God involved the discrediting of direct mystic experience, yet this was because experience had been used to justify the Deity’s tyrannical decrees and Nietzsche and his ilk were certainly not remembered for their defeat of a great ‘numinous feeling.’ Permeating these nineteenth century mythic renditions was a belief in the evolutionary progress of the natural, social, ethical, and spiritual worlds to greater levels of enlightenment. Whether or not this path was articulated in reference to reason, the focus was always upon enacting a shift from divine agency to self-determination, from a ‘slave’ mentality to that of the free individual.

The shift from a theocentric to anthropocentric universe, predicted in the following passage from Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, demonstrates how this religious reform inadvertently contributed to the sacralisation of love:

...we only need to destroy the idea of God in man...As soon as men have all of them denied God – and I believe that period, analogous with geological periods, will come to pass – the old conception of the universe will fall of itself without cannibalism and what’s more the old morality, and then everything will begin anew. Men will unite to take from life all it can give, but only for joy and happiness in the present world. Man will be lifted up with a spirit of divine Titanic pride and the man-god will appear. From hour to hour extending his conquest of nature infinitely by his will and his science, man will feel such lofty joy from hour to hour in doing it that it will make up for all his old dreams of the joys of heaven. Everyone will know that he is mortal and will accept death proudly and serenely like a God. His pride will teach him that it’s useless for him to repine at life’s being a moment, and he will love his brother without need for reward. Love will be

158 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 182.
159 For instance, Nietzsche’s aphorism “Mystical explanations - Mystical explanations are considered deep. The truth is that they are not even superficial.” Nietzsche, The Gay Science, p. 182.
sufficient only for a moment of life, but the very consciousness of its momentariness will intensify its fire, which now is dissipated in dreams of eternal love beyond the grave...\textsuperscript{160}

Mirroring Dostoevsky’s sentiment, Flaubert believed that in the Modern era, “universal weariness” and “the belief in the end of the world” would return, yet with “the theological basis wanting,” this “enthusiasm, which knows not itself” would be sought, not through the Church, but “in the flesh...in the old religions...in art and humanity.”\textsuperscript{161}

THE BIRTH OF LOVE AND THE MODERN SYMBOLIC OF THE HUMAN

As William James reflected, he and many others of his era found themselves no longer able to believe in Christian teachings. Yet this state of disenchantment generated a new conviction that human beings were responsible for their own fate and had only themselves to look to for salvation.\textsuperscript{162} This realisation was both empowering and terrifying, and James argued that one could attempt to restore some level of belief in God in order to relieve the psychic trauma inflicted by the advent of atheism. The idea that one could will themselves to ‘believe’ something they did not actually believe to be true, had radical implications for the epistemology of religion.\textsuperscript{163} As previously discussed, the movement from institutionalised to personalised religiosity, and the rise of religious pluralism in the secular sphere ensured that people became disinterested in objective truth and more concerned with their own truth. While this fundamentally altered the Western approach to religion in general terms, James’s theory of ‘live’ and ‘dead’ beliefs is of vital importance when considering the individual’s engagement with symbolic constructs. For James, ‘live’ beliefs have some basis in the mind due to an exposure to such concepts in daily life, and have the potential to be considered true.\textsuperscript{164} ‘Dead’ beliefs are those that have no basis in the mind and are unlikely to arouse a sense of credulity. Identifying Christianity as a ‘dead’ belief,\textsuperscript{165} it appears that the way in which Christian symbols were represented within the context of political and existential arguments of the modern era had a definitive impact on their ability to engender the type of ‘enchanted’ literalism thought possible in medieval Christendom.

As a part of the ‘psychological revelation,’ God was unmasked as the projection of humanity’s self-image. According to Freud, Nietzsche and others, the psychological explanation demonstrated religion’s illusory basis, however, this line of thought opened up the possibility that if God’s nature was related to human values, then the real forces which loomed over humanity (that is, the forces of nature) may be indifferent.\textsuperscript{166} For James, this realisation was terrifying, and while he chose to believe in a Deity he simultaneously doubted. The anthropocentric nature of


\textsuperscript{161} Letter from Flaubert to Louise Colet, written between 1851-1854. Tarver, Flaubert, Works and Correspondence, p. 145.

\textsuperscript{162} James, ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ p. 45.


\textsuperscript{164} James, ‘The Will to Believe,’ pp. 2-4.

\textsuperscript{165} James, ‘The Will to Believe.’

modern values ensured that where the Ultimate was personified, its attributes and concerns would be fully concordant with human ideals. As a reaction against the despotic and tyrannical personified God that modern rhetoric had burned into the public imagination, there was a need to rework the Ultimate in terms of the most holy quality that human beings possessed; that of love. Accordingly, some modern thinkers reinvented the Christian God in term of love, yet for others the image of the old patriarch had been sullied beyond redemption. As an example of the latter position, Auguste Comte’s ‘Religion of Humanity’ offers an interesting case in point. Described as “pseudo-Catholic” due to the retention of sacramental ritual, this anthropocentric religion was invented in the aim of replacing Christianity in its varied social and spiritual roles. What is most interesting for our purposes is that Comte’s motivation for creating this religion was his passionate, yet unconsummated love for Clotilde de Vaux. The ‘affair’ lasted from 1844 to 1846; until Clotilde’s untimely death when Comte “found solace in ritualising and prayerfully invoking her memory” through the creation of a new religion whose sacred tenets were written in dedication to her.

CONCLUSION

If certain aspects of the Christian symbolic had become incapable of embodying that which humanity desired from religion, it was through other myths that were ‘live’ in the Western mind that aspects of Christianity could be restored and combined with other modern ‘ultimate concerns.’ In terms of the romantic love myth, it was not that it was rationally assessed, found to be true, and established as a replacement for Christian mythology. Rather, it was that the war upon the Christian symbolic sought to condemn very specific aspects of Christianity, particularly those concerned with power and agency. The remaining qualities of the old system, that were associated with a personalised and authentic relationship with the Ultimate, were relocated in a variety of new systems, including the atheist, humanist, theosophical and aesthetic. Yet it was the romantic love myth that provided the most comprehensive embodiment of such qualities, and that came to infuse Western culture at the macro-level of collective mythology. As will be discussed in the chapters to follow, the love myth was already imbued with the ethos of individualism, self-determination and anti-authoritarianism, and was perfect match for the cultural values and ideals of modernity. Moreover, the love myth was built upon the most sacred emotion in the human repertoire, and its reality could be accessed in an unmediated fashion, in the form of intense emotions that had a long history of association with mystical transcendence. In the analysis of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, in chapter two, the first stage of mythologic transition will be explored, yet in the third and final chapter, the reality-status of the love myth will be shown to have reached its full potential in the contemporary period.

167 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 27.
170 Ritzer, Encyclopedia of Social Theory, p. 132.
Chapter Two
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Transitions

Sceptical Utopianism: Towards an Impossible Ideal
“Pleasure indeed becomes the crucial means of recognising that ideal truth and beauty which imagination reveals – it is the ‘grand elementary principle’ of life – and thus becomes the means by which enlightenment and moral renewal can be achieved through art.”

INTRODUCTION

Utilising Campbell’s *Romantic Ethic* as a heuristic tool, this chapter introduces the role played by consumerism in the maintenance of the love myth. In the Christian period the institutional regulation of social mythology was overt, yet in the modern period the role that consumerism and popular culture have played in the development and maintenance of particular ideas and modes of epistemological relation can be easy to overlook. Although Flaubert’s 1856 novel *Madame Bovary* may appear to have nothing to do with consumerism, the principal tenets of the romantic ethic are evident in the novel, demonstrating that these values affect all aspects of consumer societies and do not simply relate to acts of purchase. Such values include individualism, democracy, self-determination and the authority of the choosing self,¹⁷² and as Campbell has pointed out, there is an intimate connection between consumerism, fashion, taste, the modern novel and romantic love.¹⁷³ Revealing the link between consumer culture and the romantic love myth, this chapter foreshadows the contemporary form of romantic love, yet because Flaubert’s novel was published in 1859, the anti-clerical rhetoric discussed in the preceding chapter remains palpable on the fictive horizon of Emma Bovary’s world.

THE ROMANTIC ETHIC

As Campbell’s romantic ethic is intrinsically linked to the rise of consumerism, his insights are pivotal to understanding the progress of modernity and the type of cultural shifts that accompanied the transformation from Romanticism to Modernism. While many of Campbell’s observations mirror concepts raised in the first chapter of this thesis regarding the influence of psychology and secularism, by associating these cultural changes with the institution of consumerism, it becomes possible to see how the romantic love myth has been maintained through the secular systems that replaced the Church.¹⁷⁴ To review, the *Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* was designed as a companion piece to Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The latter had focused upon the changes in Western modernisation that had brought about a sense of disenchantment, along with an emphasis on qualities like industriousness, rationality, and the idea that one worked to achieve their ‘calling.’¹⁷⁵ In agreement with Weber, Campbell proposed that Western society operated in accordance with two ethics, and that the ethic associated with consumerism was Romantic in nature. For Campbell, the modern Romantic epistemological mode of intuitively and emotively ascertained truth can be traced through a variety of historical incarnations,¹⁷⁶ that each served to reinscribe the significance

¹⁷² It may seem as though the individual is actually endowed with all of these powers, yet they would be more accurately defined as social ideals, so that a distinction can be made between the psychological reality of the individual, and observations that can be made regarding social behaviour.


¹⁷⁶ “[F]rom the Arminian revolt against predestination to the Cambridge Platonists and Latitudinarian Anglican divines, and incorporating an ‘optimistic,’ and ‘emotionalist’ version of the Calvinist
of particular emotional states. By the eighteenth century, emotive qualities became the means through which human goodness could be judged, and it was the ability to feel, not the ability to rationalise that distinguished the virtuous. Unsurprisingly, this vision of the human, as a creature of feeling, emerged as God was being redefined as a manifestation of the emotive quality of love.

Revisiting Weber’s assessment of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, Campbell argues that emotional ‘signs’ became one way that people could know that they were counted as one of the saved, seeing as there was no other means of confirmation. Weber had described the Calvinists as anti-emotionalist, yet as Campbell points out, only particular emotions were repressed, while others, like melancholia and holy terror were fostered. In addition, people who believed that they had experienced grace spoke of their experiences and as others heard their testimonies, or read about the feelings that had convinced them that they were saved, “a common pattern could be discerned, and using this as a guide, an individual could judge how far his own experience gave grounds for hope or despair.” One of the most prevalent emotional signs that confirmed salvation was that of pleasure. Initially, pleasure was associated with the positive feelings that accompanied good deeds, yet eventually all forms of pleasure took on the tincture of virtue. Hedonism, in its traditional form, involved the pursuit of pleasure, yet according to Campbell, individuals were dependent upon creating visceral stimuli in order to engage with the senses. Exotic food, sex, hunting and the like involved corporeal engagement, so that one required great wealth in order to concoct new ways to excite the senses. As Wilhelm Wundt observed, the experience of pleasure was based upon the modulation and variation of sensation, so that if one was in a permanent state of satisfaction, they could not experience pleasure. Given that traditional hedonism was focused upon ‘satisfaction,’ hedonists had to go to great lengths to artificially recreate dissatisfaction in order to be able to satisfy themselves again.

Through increased use of the imagination combined with the emotional reflexivity that accompanied modern psychological thinking, people began to realise that pleasure could be invoked using the mental faculties. Campbell stresses, “[t]o pursue this aim, however, it is necessary not only for the individual to possess special psychological skills, but for society itself to have developed a distinctive culture.” The combined historical influences of the Modern West contributed to this culture, yet the skills of self-illusory hedonism were crystallised in the

document of signs, develops first into the cult of benevolence and melancholy, and then into a fully fledged Sentimentalism.” Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 137.

178 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 120.
180 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 71, 74, 123.
181 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 129.
182 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 68.
183 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 66.
185 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 65.
188 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 68.
189 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 69.
structures of consumerism, so that a consumer boom is often accompanied by an outburst of romantic thinking.\textsuperscript{190} In the contemporary West, “the pursuit of pleasure in the abstract is potentially an ever-present possibility,”\textsuperscript{191} when the individual can self-direct their emotional state. This ensures that pleasure can be derived from any experience, and that if “approached or undertaken in the right manner...[one can] extract the fundamental pleasure which ‘exists’ in life itself.”\textsuperscript{192}

In traditional hedonism, it was already understood that unpleasant feelings like fear, pain, anxiety, and risk could increase the intensity of emotive sensation and increase pleasure.\textsuperscript{193} In the Romantic period this is clearly demonstrated through the favouring of intense and overwhelming emotions that contain a note of darkness, loss, or terror, which served not only to amplify emotive experience, but to anchor these emotions in authenticity through the combination of positive and negative elements.\textsuperscript{194} With the rise of Sentimentalism, emotion became associated with the goodness of a person and their tendency to feel for others was a mark of their goodness. Soon, however, this efflorescence of emotion became the subject of suspicion, and excessive emotional displays began to be associated with false sentiment. During the Romantic period that followed, emotion continued to be of vital importance, yet it increasingly involved recourse to darker elements of the emotional spectrum. The favoured emotional states of the Romantic era were that of awe in the presence of nature, the sweet-pain of nostalgia, melancholy and romantic longing, and the excitation of fictionalised terror in the form of gothic fiction.\textsuperscript{195} That is, the Romantic emotions corrected the sickly-sweet tone of Sentimentalism, and as Modernism turned its gaze upon the Romanticism, this reformation would be repeated. While the Romantics found their Sentimental forbears to be insincere,\textsuperscript{196} by the time Modernism came into being, the Romantic emotions had been long enough established to be condemned as clichés.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the development of consumerism, the modern fashion pattern, the modern novel, the rise of romantic love, and the tendency to make ‘taste’-based decisions, fundamentally altered the ways in which one could experience pleasure.\textsuperscript{197} As taste and fashion were related to personally determined versions of beauty, by the end of the Romantic era, “whatever aroused feelings of pleasure was both beautiful and good.”\textsuperscript{198} As “both morality and aesthetics” were now determined by “emotional intuition...the classical test of beauty [was] applied to virtue independently of reason and tradition.”\textsuperscript{199} While the development of literacy and individualism proved crucial to the development of “true emotional self-determination”\textsuperscript{200}

\textsuperscript{190} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 206, 216.
\textsuperscript{191} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{192} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{193} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 64–67.
\textsuperscript{194} This point constitutes my own extended inference of Campbell’s argument. Campbell focuses more upon the means of intensifying emotion, and the primacy of emotion as a marker of truth. See Winfried Menninghaus, Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation (SUNY Press, 2003) pp. 386–399.
\textsuperscript{195} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 75, 135; Paige, ‘Permanent Re-Enchantments’.
\textsuperscript{197} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 5, 26.
\textsuperscript{198} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{199} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{200} Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 72.
and “control of the employment of symbolic resources.” Most importantly, emotional self-determination came as the result of the disenchantment of the world, so that emotions were no longer conceived as forces that acted upon the individual, but as self-originating forces that could be managed and controlled at will. As such, “the disenchantment of the external world required as a parallel process some ‘enchantment’ of the psychic inner world.” That is, when the individual ceased to believe that there was a single version of reality predicated upon Christian doctrine, and began to realise their own role in the construction of reality, nothing could be defined to be absolutely true. As “disbelief robs symbols of their automatic power,” and the individual begins to manipulate the meanings associated with their experiences, they become, in effect, “an artist of the imagination.” In the first chapter of this thesis, the critical distance that began to emerge between self and world derived strongly from the emergent field of psychoanalysis and psychology, yet Campbell and Paige have both argued that modern fiction played a central role in retraining minds. It is apparent that the combined influences of ‘psychological reality’ and ‘fictional reality’ as provisional truths became the modern preference to fundamental truth. Nonetheless, the concept of absolute truth is so well embedded in Western thinking as a correlate for the Ultimate that in the midst of provisional truths, individuals continued to seek out their own version of absolute truth.

The practice of daydreaming accompanying self-illusory hedonism is distinct from fantasy, as it is concerned with a “perfected vision of life.” That is, daydreaming involves the mobilisation of the mind in order to experience a fore-taste of something that may eventuate in real life. It is this anticipation that one is about to experience their own personal ‘Heaven’ here on earth, which intensifies the emotive experience of that which is imagined. Despite the knowledge that what has been experienced in the mind is not equivalent to reality, the fact that it has been experienced means that one will continually search for signs that imagined events are about to occur. In the consumer context, this means that “individuals do not so much seek satisfaction from products, as pleasure from the self-illusory experiences which they construct from their associated meanings.” As institutionalised Christianity no longer determines the specific nature of reality, “[t]he excitement of a new and unprecedented sensation – not the greed of acquiring and possessing, nor wealth in the material, tangible sense – is the name of the consumer game. Consumers are first and foremost gatherers of sensations; they are collectors of things only in a secondary and derivative sense. Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Tourists and Vagabonds: Or, Living in Postmodern Times,’ in Joseph E. Davis (ed.) Identity and Social Change (Transaction Publishers, 2000) p. 16.

201 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 72.
202 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 73; Hanegraaff, New Age Religion.
203 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 76.
204 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 78.
205 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 84.
207 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 87–90.
208 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 89. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman has argued that “[t]he excitement of a new and unprecedented sensation – not the greed of acquiring and possessing, nor wealth in the material, tangible sense – is the name of the consumer game. Consumers are first and foremost gatherers of sensations; they are collectors of things only in a secondary and derivative sense. Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Tourists and Vagabonds: Or, Living in Postmodern Times,’ in Joseph E. Davis (ed.) Identity and Social Change (Transaction Publishers, 2000) p. 16.
socially contingent, one’s ‘perfected vision of life’ may be very similar to that of others in the social body.

Although Campbell does single out romantic love as one of the four crucial elements that embody the Romantic ethic in the consumer context, he does not analyse this phenomenon in detail. Within Sentimentalism, he stresses that romantic love should only be seen as one element of a broader ethic of sensibility.\textsuperscript{210} Indeed, he argues that most features of romantic love find their corollary in other aspects of Sentimental culture.\textsuperscript{211} In modern society, romantic love is but one of society’s “central institutions” that are dependent upon self-illusory hedonism and the pattern of idealisation, longing, and the searching out of new experiences.\textsuperscript{212} In terms of the historical significance of romantic love to the Romantic ethic, Campbell notes that the birth of the novel was interrelated with the rise of romantic love, and that both of these developments occurred amongst the English middle-class of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{213} Campbell grants that this period was pivotal in the development of the modern ethic, as he observes: “Now, for the first time, romantic ideas so elevated the status of emotion that no such obstacles were to be endured; love, and love alone, was the sovereign consideration in the choice of partners.”\textsuperscript{214} This statement is in keeping with his general argument that romantic love is but one element of the total Romantic ethic, yet the special significance afforded to romantic love in this passage should not be overlooked. Acknowledging the pertinent nature of Campbell’s overall argument to contemporary secular culture, this thesis seeks to expand upon his brief consideration of romantic love as a specific instance of the romantic ethic. Unlike Campbell, however, I will argue that romantic love functions as a mythology that is of religious significance in a way that the three remaining elements of the ethic are not. That is, the novel, fashion and taste are functional categories that work as a part of the romantic love myth, which serves as the overarching narrative and meaning-making structure.

WRITING MADAME BOVARY: MYSTICS, BEAUTY AND ROMANTIC LOVE IN THE HARSH LIGHT OF MODERNISM

Madame Bovary tells the story of Emma Bovary, a young woman who spends much of her youth reading romances and fantasising about meeting her imagined beloved. After becoming disenchanted with her marriage to Charles Bovary, Emma searches for romantic fulfilment through a series of adulterous affairs, all of which end in disappointment. A victim of her own insatiable desires, Emma’s longing for true love leads her down a path of excess, monetary debt and emotional turmoil that ends, finally, in suicide. As Emma is, at times, an unlikable character, and her plight, the result of her childish belief in romantic dreams, it is unsurprising that the novel is generally understood to be ‘unromantic.’ It has been recognised, however, that Emma embodies “poetic feelings and mystical impulses that raise her beyond the inherent dreariness of

\textsuperscript{210} Campbell, \textit{The Romantic Ethic}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{211} Campbell, \textit{The Romantic Ethic}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{212} Campbell, \textit{The Romantic Ethic}, pp. 203–206.
\textsuperscript{213} Campbell, \textit{The Romantic Ethic}, pp. 26–27.
\textsuperscript{214} Campbell, \textit{The Romantic Ethic}, p. 27.
Employing an ironic style of juxtaposition and symbolic overlay Flaubert paints a picture of romantic love in three forms. The first is that of sensibility, that is mere formula. The second is the construct of love that conceals selfish and wicked behaviour. The third is the mystic truth of a love that transcends. The unromantic reading assumes that the first and second pictures of love negate the third. This thesis, however, maintains that Flaubert presents a holy and transcendent love, articulated in the modern sceptical tongue. This scepticism acknowledges impossibility; and yet the ideal remains.

A contemporary of both Auguste Comte and the notorious poet Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert wrote in a period when new models of existence and belief were being tested. In this period, retrospectively defined as the birth of Modernist literature in France, both Flaubert and Baudelaire played an important role in the rejection of the sentimental style of the Romantic poets. Flaubert was celebrated for his ‘realism,’ while Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life” became a key text in the theorisation of the experiences of modernity. Due to their disregard for literary conventions and their depiction of grotesque or lascivious subject matter, both Flaubert and Baudelaire were subject to French censorship. In particular, these writers sought to expose the sordid underbelly of life that had, up until then, been hidden by beauty, romance and stylistic formulae. The idea that beauty amounted to the absence of ugliness became, in itself, a form of censorship for the Modernists. It is true that the Romantics had indulged in the grotesque, and had generated images of dark and lascivious beauty, yet the Modernists sought truth in an era when truth was feared to be nothing but an idealised myth. This was something akin to ‘Freudian truth,’ repressed and unexpressed due to the conventionality that dominated artistic and literary practice. For Flaubert and Baudelaire, life must be described in all its imperfection, and it was this attitude of opening one’s eyes to witness reality, that lends their writing its legitimate sense of existential horror. Theirs was not a calm observational literature, and their personal reflections on artistic process demonstrate the frantic urgency that pervaded their existential quest through writing. As a legacy of their Romantic

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216 Exemplified in the following passage: “Emma was like any other mistress; and the charm of novelty, gradually slipping away like a garment, laid bare the eternal monotony of passion, whose forms and phrases are forever the same...Because wanton or mercenary lips had murmured like phrases in his ear, he had but scant belief in the sincerity of these.” Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 203.
217 For instance, Rudolphe lures Emma into a secluded place with the intention of sleeping with her, but she is disgusted and he finally takes her home. His use of romantic charm, in this scene, is sickeningly inauthentic. Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 173.
219 Levenson, Modernism, p. 106.
221 Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life.’
223 Menninghaus, Disgust, p. 56.
224 Menninghaus, Disgust, p. 386.
education, sensations came upon them with melodramatic force, while the speed of change and perceived social decay lent their work its distinctively Modernist pessimism.

For Comte, the fall of Christianity called for the rise of the Religion of the Humanity. For Baudelaire, as for many other moderns, the disintegration of old formulas allowed one to see the essential quality of the present moment in the manifest sensations of experience. As the formulas of Romantic literature had become suspect of inauthenticity, Baudelaire fashioned the modern artist as an entirely different type of individual:

Observer, philosopher, flaneur – call him what you will...you will certainly be led to bestow upon him some adjective which you could not apply to the painter of the eternal, or at least of more lasting things, of heroic or religious subjects...he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.  

Flaubert, however, became obsessed with finding le mot juste, the perfect word to describe the unique object or person. This search was conceived as a ‘mystic’ practice and accordingly, Flaubert has been referred to as ‘the hermit of Croisset.’

While writing Madame Bovary in 1852, Flaubert told his mistress and muse Louise Colet, “I am turning towards a kind of aesthetic mysticism,” a comment which invites a reading of the novel that takes mysticism and aesthetics into account. As discussed in the previous chapter, both mysticism and Gnosticism have a distinct cultural meaning in the modern period associated with the autonomous individual and the prospect of unmediated experience. As a self-fashioned modern ‘mystic,’ Flaubert viewed the artistic experience to be closer to the sublime than anything that could be offered by traditional religion. The experience of inspiration that occasionally burst forth during the arduous processes of study and writing was linked to “the ceaseless quest for Truth presented by Beauty” that could leave him “dazzled with joy...like Moses descending Sinai, with the light shining from his face because he has seen God.” In relation to God and the Church, however, Flaubert “found himself unable to believe” and considered “the acceptance of religious dogma as a form of consensual enslavement.” Undertaking research for his reimagining of The Temptation of Saint Anthony, Flaubert visited Jerusalem and was disappointed that he felt nothing in response to the place. Moreover, this trip convinced him that the Biblical Deity was nothing more than a caricature monarch, “unable even to contain the idea of God.” Despite his rejection of institutionalised religion, Flaubert’s reference to the ‘quest for Truth presented by Beauty’ highlights his Platonic understanding of the nature of the

227 Levenson, Modernism, p. 98.
230 Similarly, he wrote: “Let us love one another in Art, as the old mystics loved one another in God!” in a letter to Colet, quoted in Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 11.
Divine. In Plato’s *Symposium*, it is argued that the contemplation of physical beauty can elevate the mind to the contemplation of spiritual beauty, ultimately leading the mind to the Ultimate source.\(^{238}\) Marsilio Ficino clarifies the link between divine beauty and love: “When we say ‘love,’ understand ‘the desire for beauty.’ For this is the definition of love among all philosophers.”\(^{239}\) By equating, love, beauty and truth with the sacred, Flaubert draws the romantic love myth into Modernist revisions of these fundamental definitions.

**SELF-IllUSORY HEDONISM AND THE ICON OF LOVE**

For Emma Bovary, the testimonies of sacred experience that contributed to her ‘perfected vision of life’ were found in romance novels,\(^{240}\) and the romantically charged stories of the Bible.\(^{241}\) References to the novel are numerous, and it is Emma’s tendency to take fiction for reality that is highlighted as the cause for her crippling idealism. Noting the flowery language she uses, and the clichés she employs in order to define the salvic figure that would “introduce [her] to passion in all its force, to life in all its grace, initiate [her] into all mysteries!”\(^{242}\) Emma laments:

> Oh, if somewhere there were a being strong and handsome, a valiant heart, passionate and sensitive at once, a poet’s spirit in an angel’s form, a lyre with strings of steel, sounding sweet-sad epithalamiums to the heavens, then why should she not find that being?\(^{243}\)

A similar reflection could be made about the prospect of knowing God, if the Deity is defined as a being that exists, that is known to be intimately connected with the self, yet which remains unknowable. While Leon expresses a similar sentiment in reference to Emma, identifying her as “the shadowy ‘she’ of all poetry books,”\(^{244}\) in both cases, novels, poetry, or select Biblical passages have been imaginatively combined to form a sacred icon for romantic worship that is believed to stand at the gateway of spiritual ecstasy. This figure possesses attributes that are personalised, yet non-particular, so that Emma can continue to believe that this iconic figure may one day be encountered in the flesh.

As a conglomerate being that has been known through imaginative experience, Flaubert conjures a fractured god, a human-shaped ‘dream edifice’ built from Emma’s most profound experiences, to act as an icon for romantic worship. Flaubert highlights the constructed nature of this Being, yet such reflexivity does not diminish its power to elicit strong emotions. Emma’s belief in love and her search to find a Divine earthly spouse may have been fraught, yet this shadowy figure remained psychologically real. He was:

> a phantom made of her most ardent memories, of the finest things she had read, of her most violent longings; who became in the end so real and so accessible that he set her


\(^{241}\) “The metaphors of betrothed, spouse, heavenly lover, marriage everlasting, that recur in sermons, awoke in her soul an unlooked for delight.” Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 49.

\(^{242}\) Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 54.


\(^{244}\) Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 276.
thrilling with wonder, though she had no clear picture of him, for he receded like a god behind the abundance of his attributes—he would carry her away, body and soul, in his embrace...²⁴⁵

Linking the sacredness of this figure to the intense emotions triggered by Emma’s contemplation of him, Flaubert defines the moment of romantic revelation as the most significant moment in the soul’s existence. This moment of pleasure is never simply experienced as an isolated event, but rather, it draws heaven and earth, lover and beloved, human and god, future and past together in a profuse and eternal sensation.²⁴⁶ While this ‘peak experience’²⁴⁷ is sacralised, the lover lives primarily in a state of anticipation. Leon asks Emma, “Have you ever had the experience, while reading a book, of coming upon some idea you have thought of vaguely yourself, some dim picture that returns to you from afar, and seems completely to express your subtlest feeling?”²⁴⁸ This idea is echoed when Emma recognises Charles to be the embodiment of the lover she had already come to know through imagination.²⁴⁹ Rather than Charles being a stranger, he is someone that ‘returns to her from afar,’ so that the experience of discovering and re-discovering the beloved take place simultaneously.

THE MAGIC OF ROMANTIC LOVE

While the individual can apply self-illusory hedonism to any situation in order to experience the “fundamental pleasure”²⁵⁰ that exists in the present moment, in Madame Bovary, pleasure is accessed primarily via the imaginings of romantic love. It is suggested that the experience of true love or passionate connection initiates the individual into a new state of consciousness that is inaccessible by other means. Love galvanises the self with a strength hitherto inaccessible, as Rudolphe declares that if he had found love he would be able to “[conquer] everything, smash down every obstacle.”²⁵¹ In the following passage, the sublime beauty of Nature is able to be perceived due to the preparatory experience of romantic union.

It wasn’t the first time they had seen trees and blue sky and green grass, or heard the sound of water flowing and the wind rustling in the leaves; but they had never, surely, appreciated it all till now. It was as though Nature had not existed before, or had only begun to be beautiful since the gratification of their desires.²⁵²

Similarly, the physical proximity of Charles is enough to bring about an embodied experience of conceptual sensations that could not be felt through the efforts of the imagination alone.²⁵³ In

²⁴⁵ Flaubert, Madame Bovary, pp. 301–302. Also see p. 294.
²⁴⁶ “Her old desires became imbued with the sweetness of the present sensation, and, on this subtle breath of perfume that was being shed on her soul, they were tossed about like grains of sand in a gust of wind.” Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 160.
²⁴⁸ Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 96.
²⁴⁹ Flaubert, Madame Bovary, pp. 52–53.
²⁵⁰ Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 69.
²⁵¹ Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 152.
²⁵² Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 267.
²⁵³ “Then, the anxiety occasioned by her change of state, or perhaps a certain agitation caused by the presence of this man, had sufficed to make her believe herself possessed at last of that wonderful
terms of Flaubert’s use of the romantic love myth, it is clear that on one level, romantic love is the product of fiction and artifice, undeniably a product of human creation. On another, love functions as the primary ideal motivating behaviour.

The image of the God that is evoked by Christian mystics, who possesses ‘abundant attributes’ and exists as a manifestation of love, cannot be fractured or found to be absent because he can never be tested in the phenomenal realm. As Emma’s experiences demonstrate, the deity of romantic love is continually lost and found, intimately experienced then snatched away, shattered into pieces, or revealed as an illusion. Writing during the era of the Death of God debates, it is almost as if Flaubert utilises romantic mythology in order to express the desire for a ruined God who is still present in the form of a “phantom.” Certainly, Flaubert detested institutional Christianity, yet his deep interest in mystic and Gnostic religiosity suggests that there was something in the religious relationship that he found to be important. In Madame Bovary, most characters exhibit the tendency to idealise their icon of love, and when they recognise this phantom in embodied form, these characters do not act as if they have come upon a product of their own creation or psychological projection. The encounter with the beloved is profoundly affective, and agency is felt to lie undeniably with the other. This power is not of the other as an ordinary person, but the power of love, and the power of love manifest in human form. Here, Emma’s thoughts about love reveal that it is more than an emotional reaction within the realm of emotional self-determinism.

Love is a force that affects the individual and that radiates with the intentionality of the other. In Emma’s descriptions of romantic ecstasy, love is conceived as a force of nature, yet it is simultaneously understood within the context of human intimacy.

Love, she believed, must come suddenly, with thunder and lightning, a hurricane from on high that swoops down into your life and turns it topsy-turvy, snatches away your will-power like a leaf, hurls you heart and soul into the abyss.

In Campbell’s description of the ‘enchanted’ period of religious thinking that preceded the disenchantment, he explains that emotions were not understood to be self-generated responses to the world, but as affective states wherein one was filled with an emotion’s power. In romantic love, ‘peak experiences’ overwhelm the individual’s ‘will-power.’ Yet as this state of intimacy is desired, the rhetoric of self-determination that infuses the social dimension of the love myth can be cast off completely. While it has been argued above that the embodied beloved is sought because they can trigger sensations that imagination alone could not, once this figure has been

passion which hitherto had hovered above her like a great bird of rosy plumage in the splendour of poetic heaven.” Flaubert, Madame Bovary, pp. 52–53.

254 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, pp. 301–302.

255 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, pp. 301–302.

256 The source of this intentionality may be imagined as God, the ‘Universe’ or the ‘soul-mate’ as the archetypal template of the conglomerate romantic icon. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the sensation of the externally arising cause is a central aspect of the modern romantic love myth, yet there is very little reflexivity about the putative origin of this cause in the narratives of popular culture. Because the love myth is a part of social mythology and is not socially recognised as a religious ideology, it is not subject to the type of questions that are generally posed of religious doctrine.

257 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 113.

258 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 72–73.
encountered, their unique attributes can be brought to mind in semblance of true contact. Emma experiences this when "[t]he thought of her lover returned to her with a dizzy seductiveness, she gave herself up to it utterly, drawn to him with a new enthusiasm."259

**BEAUTY AND TRUTH: AN AESTHETIC EPISTEMOLOGY**

In the mid-nineteenth century, modernity and consumerism went hand in hand, and fashion, as the expression of taste, provided the new language through which modern life could be read. In “The Painter of Modern Life” Baudelaire observes how fashions of the past reveal “the moral and aesthetic feeling of their time.”260 For Baudelaire, the task is to apprehend this moral and aesthetic feeling, and to record it. Importantly, he argues that truth cannot be found if one focuses on metaphysical generalisms or ideals, for it is only through the observance of “visible, tangible things”261 that one can access the “suggestions of eternity” contained within.262 Aesthetic and moral values are in a constant state of readjustment so that one must be equally able to read and communicate through fashion in order to be properly understood. Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Man of the Crowd’263 provides an excellent example of the way that fashion and visual attributes became the primary means of distinguishing a person’s nature and class. In this short story, an anonymous man absorbs the aesthetic flavours of the crowd, slowly isolating them into more and more refined categories. At first he only sees the general “tumultuous sea of human heads,”264 but soon, he becomes attentive to “the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance.”265 Through physiognomic analysis, he is able to deduce the nature of those he observes through his ability to classify visual signs into the most sensitively articulated categories. In Poe’s narratives, illusion is aligned with superstition and the visual with rationality.266 This point is of particular interest, as consumerism is often described as a system of meaningless signs and visual surfaces which bear the gloss of deception and should not be trusted.267 Revealing the influence of Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the ‘hyperreal,’268 critiques that define consumer practices as superficial, vacuous and passive fail to recognise the social and psychological dynamics of consumerism that Campbell and Bourdieu have identified.

In *Madame Bovary*, Emma lives through ‘art’ in the sense that letters, keepsakes, fetish objects and opulent clothing constitute the primary ground for human interaction in the novel.

266 This use of visual evidence is also employed by Poe’s signature detective, Monsieur Dupin, in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” as he solves the mystery of a brutal crime through a process of close visual analysis. Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue,’ in David Galloway (ed.) *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings: Poems, Tales, Essays, and Reviews* (Penguin Classics, 1986) pp. 189–224.
The intermediary aesthetic layer, which separates Emma from other human beings, has led one critic to comment that relationships do not occur so much between people as between their clothing. Emma’s aesthetic relationship with love extends to her relationship with Christianity. In fact, her entire experience of religion is summed up in sensual or visual terms, as, early in the novel we are told “she loved the church for its flowers,” and later on, “[t]o elicit the divine aid she feasted her eyes on the splendours of the tabernacle.” While this kind of experience may be typical for Emma, the beadle of the church assaults those who enter his Cathedral with an inventory of its (or ‘her’) physical attributes. The beadle is as possessive of his Cathedral as a jealous lover. Inwardly, he scorrs Leon for presuming to admire the Cathedral on his own, which was tantamount to “a kind of stealing what was his – sacrilege almost.” The Cathedral, as such, becomes the icon representing God, and it is uncertain of what the beadle’s Christianity would comprise if it were not for this physical form which he has come to admire.

Emma’s “artistic sensibility” has been identified as the source of her weakness for trinkets, it is also clear that Emma is an ‘artist of the imagination,’ to borrow Campbell’s term. Emma actively combines aesthetic elements in order to compose an image for worship. When all elements are combined in such a way that beauty is produced, Emma experiences momentary satisfaction, as her aspiration ends in the adoration of art. Like the mystic, the ‘artist of the imagination’ has the “capacity for seeing into the nature of sacred truth,” wherein perception links “the aesthetic with the spiritual rather than the ethical.” Taste, fashion and visual language are then vital to modern epistemology as they remain linked to the never-ending metamorphosis of aesthetic codes, and are therefore associated with immediacy and truths that exist only in the moment that they are ascertained. The link that Campbell identifies between the aesthetic and the ‘spiritual’ in Romantic thinking is maintained by the Modernists, yet bearing the clause that the ‘eternal’ can never be linked to things merely experienced in moments of “great illumination.” Importantly, these insights were often horrific or terrifying, but insofar as they were related to truth (even in the contingent sense) they remain revelatory. In the contemporary context, these ugly truths, discovered in the immediacy of the moment, take on a sense of the sublime. In this early stage, however, it is sufficient to note the importance of ugliness, immediacy, and specificity as markers of truth as opposed to purified beauty, and fixed Forms that can be described in all their attributes and deified as the immutable Ultimate for all.

270 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 52.
271 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 252.
272 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 251.
274 The importance of process in the construction of art, an item of perfect “geometry,” can be found in Binet’s joyful absorption in his carving, and in the beadle’s comment that the man who cast the bell of Amboise “died of joy!” Flaubert, Madame Bovary, pp. 316–317, 252.
277 “Occasionally (at great moments of illumination) I have had glimpses, in the glow of an enthusiasm that has made me thrill from head to foot, of such a state of mind, superior to life itself, a state in which fame counts for nothing and even happiness is superfluous.” Flaubert quoted in Ellmann and Feildson (eds) The Modern Tradition.
A VISION OF LOVE: MADAME BOVARY AND THE PASSION OF MYSTIC DESIRE

In a letter to Madame Roger des Genettes, written in 1858, Flaubert revealed the spiritual inflections in his depictions of romantic love.278

That is a sad story of the young girl, your relative, who went mad in consequence of religious notions, but it is a common story. One must have a robust constitution to mount on peaks of mysticism without losing one’s head. And then in all that, and especially in the case of women, there are questions of temperament which complicate the malady. Do you not see that they are all in love with Adonis? What they ask for is the eternal husband. Ascetic or voluptuous, they still dream of love, of the great love; and to cure them (at any rate temporarily) they do not want an idea but a fact, a husband, a child, a lover. To you this seems equivocal. But I was not the inventor of human nature. I am convinced that the most extravagant material appetites are unconsciously formulated by bursts of idealism, in the same way that the most impure extravagances of the flesh are engendered by a pure longing for the impossible, an ethereal aspiration after the supreme pleasure. And further, I do not know, and nobody knows, what these two words soul and body mean; where the one ends and the other begins. We feel forces, and that is all.279

Although Flaubert speaks of the ‘female malady,’ it is also clear from his close identification with the character of Emma Bovary, and his rendition of male characters in Madame Bovary280 and Sentimental Education, that this desire for the ‘eternal spouse’ is not limited to women. The idealised, deified, and eternal lover is identified by Flaubert to be something that one desires as a result of ‘human nature’ and a ‘mystic’ relationship towards the world. The desire is posited to be the same whether ‘ascetic or voluptuous,’ yet most importantly, Flaubert recognises that the religious attitude of romantic love is the result of ‘unconsciously formulated bursts of idealism,’ understood as a ‘longing for the impossible’ and ‘an ethereal aspiration after supreme pleasure.’ Confirming Campbell’s observations regarding the relationship between pleasure, virtue and truth, Flaubert’s comments also verify the spiritual or ‘ethereal’ nature of the pursuit of the ideal, as well as the disenchanted Modernist acceptance of ‘impossibility.’

As Kern observes, “[b]y the nineteenth century the Romantic ideal of a love that unified everything – mind and body, man and woman, rich and poor, sexual desire and love of God – could make lovers hyperventilate.”281 Referring to Cathy’s impassioned realisation; “I am Heathcliff” in Wuthering Heights, Kern identifies Flaubert’s ironic treatment of the romantic fusion of identities as the beginnings of the realisation that this was an impossible and ethically deficient ideal.282 The Modernists may have come to doubt that one could truly experience all that the romantic love myth promised, yet this scepticism should be understood in terms of the general Modernist mistrust of formula, ritual, and power structures. What Kern’s in-depth study into the representation of love reveals is that love was reformed in order to disassociate it completely from the mechanistic functionalism of tradition. As Barthes lamented; “[d]ream of

278 Speaking specifically about the character of Salambo. Tarver, Flaubert, Works and Correspondence, p. 230.
279 Flaubert quoted in Tarver, Flaubert, Works and Correspondence, pp. 228–229.
total union: everyone says this dream is impossible, and yet it persists," the realisation that fusion is impossible does not diffuse the mythic power of this concept. Written as an aphoristic reflection upon mystic desire and its relationship to the experience of romantic love, Barthes evokes an image with clear religious connotations, but it is also evocative of the principal dynamic of consumerism. That is, the consumer strives towards that which holds potential, and so novelty becomes the means through which potentiality is maintained.

...The best and most delectable wine, and also the most intoxicating...by which, without drinking it, the annihilated soul is intoxicated, a soul at once free and intoxicated! forgetting, forgotten, intoxicated by what it does not drink and will never drink! This quotation from Barthes’ A Lover's Discourse, describes the idealisation ('the best and most delectable wine'), affect ('intoxicating'), and unclosable distance that remains between the lover or consumer, and the object of their deepest desire. Because their putative desire may be for a particular person or thing, this can obscure the underlying (and unending) impetus towards an ideal that is always just out of reach. The lover may never achieve full union, and the consumer may never be fully satisfied, yet they experience some form of rapture through the proximal closeness of the Ultimate.

In the history of romantic love, eleventh century Provence is often identified as the origin of the present form of romantic love in the West. In this thesis, medieval origins and prior cultural influences have been omitted due to constraints of space, as this study is concerned with the rise of love as a replacement for the Christian religious system in the context of secularism. It is, however, illuminating to consider key areas where Christian mythology blended with the romantic, as Flaubert evokes these symbolic forms in Madame Bovary, as their sacred tone is drawn in part from an association with traditional symbols of worship. Dante’s Paradiso, the final book of his Divina Commedia, provides the ultimate model of transcendence via the beloved. In the La Vita Nuova, Dante falls in love with a girl known as Beatrice, yet this love remains unrequited. As a result of her early death, like Petrarch’s Laura, she evolves from her perceivable physical form, into an image in the mind, able now to become a centre point between the lover and God. The basis for this notion of transcendence through the image of the beloved is clearly Platonic. Accordingly the Commedia places its primary focus upon the gaze, and the journey that Dante undertakes from his first meeting with Beatrice in human form, to his celestial experience of her divinity, is at its core, a visual and imaginative one. Upon Dante’s first sight of Beatrice, his spirit declared: “Behold a god stronger than I, who is to come and rule over me.” Beatrice has an affective power over him and the very sight or thought of her changes his emotive sense of being and behaviour towards others. As Charles Williams puts it:

[p]erfection in some strange sense exists, and walks down the street of Florence to meet him...she is the equivalent of heaven itself...He says that when she met him in the street

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283 Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, p. 228.
284 Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, p. 234.
285 Dante Alighieri and David R. Slavitt, La Vita Nuova (Harvard University Press, 2010).
286 Francesco Petrarch, For Love of Laura (University of Arkansas Press, 1987).
287 Williams, Religion and Love in Dante p. 35.
288 “Here gaze we on the Art that beautifieth its so great effect, and here discern the Good which bringeth back the world below unto the world above.” Alighieri, The Paradiso, p. 109.
289 Dante quoted in Williams, Religion and Love in Dante, p. 7.

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and said good morning, he was so highly moved that he was, for the moment, in a state of complete good will, complete caritas towards everyone...he [became] for one moment in his soul that Perfection which he had observed in Beatrice.  

In some sense, the existence and proximity of the beloved brings about a conversion experience, lifting the veil from daily life and revealing the inherent sacrality of the self, the other, and life itself.

In the culminating scenes of Paradiso, Dante approaches Beatrice as a holy vision of beauty, and she leads his gaze to the contemplation of Christ, and to God: “so wholly was my love committed unto him, it eclipsed Beatrice into oblivion. Her it displeased not; but she smiled thereat, the splendour of her laughing eyes parted my erst united mind amongst things multiform.” Dante’s experience of union with the divine is one of visual ecstasy, where the “Beatrician way” leads Dante to the revelation of the true source of beauty, goodness, love and ultimacy. As a text written within a Christian context, the Commedia offers an example of the combination of the romantic ideal and the desire to unite with God that has been embraced by subsequent generations as one of the great works of Western literature. That is, its imagery is not aligned with dogmatism, and so it has left an indelible influence upon the secular literary tradition despite its religious themes. Indeed, the concept of the ‘eternal feminine’ that remains particularly strong in the Romantic poetic tradition is drawn from the writings of authors like Dante and Petrarch. In courtly love, and the narratives of the troubadours, the Lady is similarly elevated as a nostalgic ideal. She is a focal point, representing eternal perfection, conceived in poetic form as a visual manifestation of ultimate beauty. While it may be tempting to suggest that courtly love describes intense pseudo-spiritual love between the knight and his Lady, C. S. Lewis points out, “the deepest of worldly emotions in (medieval times, were) the love of man for man, the mutual love of warriors... the affection between a vassal and lord,” and passionate love “did not cease to be wicked if the object of it were your wife.” Bearing this in mind, it is clear that even in the period when romantic love was ‘born,’ that the beloved is functioning as a figure of worship, not a person with whom one shares a loving relationship. De Rougemont argues that romantic love was essentially a spiritual love, and adoration of the Lady, a religious practice, and it is through the modern “adulteration” of the myth that ordinary people have come to believe that romantic relationships can give one access to the boundless love of God.

Demonstrating the continuation of this tradition into Flaubert’s time of writing, Comte idealised his beloved, in life, yet in death, her image was able to take on a profound sacrality. Where Dante’s Beatrice became the Platonic vision of beauty that transported his mind to the absolute source of divinity, for Comte, the “pure and selfless love” he shared with Clotilde became “a prototype for the universal love of Humanity.” The identity of the beloved may be defined as the Christian God for Dante, and Humanity, for Comte, yet the function of the

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290 Williams, Religion and Love in Dante, pp. 8–10.  
291 Alighieri, The Paradiso, p. 121.  
293 Williams, Religion and Love in Dante, p. 14.  
294 de Rougemont, Passion and Society, p. 76.  
297 Ritzer, Encyclopedia of Social Theory, p. 132.
beloved as an iconic figure of symbolic ultimacy is much the same. The relation between the individual and this symbolic construct is one of intimacy, desire and adoration, and in order for one to be able to cultivate these intense emotions, it is necessary to believe in the reality of this figure to some extent. For Emma, belief predicates her thoughts and actions despite spells of disenchantment. While Emma may be something of a “female Don Quixote,” Flaubert expresses the desire for transcendence and true love that persists in spite of the foolishness of this enterprise. For Emma, the ‘eternal feminine’ becomes the ‘eternal masculine,’ yet in the secularising context of disenchanted modernity, transcendence seems doubtful. In the Commedia, Dante is penitent before Beatrice as he admits his doubts and ‘adulteries,’ and is finally absolved, but no such closure is offered through Flaubert’s text. While Dante is able to yoke himself to the image of Beatrice with single-minded devotion, Emma is unable to find an icon worthy of eternal worship; and so cannot experience the final vision of God that lies beyond. Her desire is frenzied and unable to affix itself to a disembodied metaphorical Divine. Sensual desire becomes both the call to God, and the experience of physical magnetism towards the human chosen as the icon of devotion.

Despite Emma’s tragic demise, the novel presents a vision of passionate love that is nonetheless described as “the one beautiful thing there is on earth; the source of all heroism and enthusiasm, poetry, music, art, everything.” De Rougemont expressed a similar sentiment in his assessment of the predominant values of the modern West:

...everything within us glorifies passion. Hence the prospect of a passionate experience has come to seem the promise that we are about to live more fully and intensely. We look upon passion as a transfiguring force, something beyond delight and pain, an ardent beatitude.

As such, love is glorified at any price and, most ironically, it is this price that has ensured the long-term survival of the love myth as a sacralised model for Western culture. Love is not extinguished by scepticism, because the love myth itself is infused with tragedy. It cannot be proved illegitimate because its criticisms are incorporated in its very structure. Romantic love offers the promise of transcendence for the individual, yet they cannot know what form such transcendence will take. As the stories of great lovers reveal, the most profound depictions of love end in death, separation, or eternal longing. The lover will bear the most intense pain as long as belief in the existence of the Divine other persists. In the modern world, where all can be mystics, one can

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298 In the following chapter, the relationship between belief and emotional commitment will be further explored, yet I would argue that no matter how many times the individual attempts to unweave the psychological threads of past experience in order to rationalise those moments when they were swept away in romantic fervour, at some level, belief in the promises of the romantic love myth are engaged with in full credulity.
300 “Madame Bovary cest moi” Flaubert quoted in Reed, Manet, Flaubert and the Emergence of Modernism, p. 3.
301 Emma experiences the rapture of falling in love with figures from romance novels, Christian analogies of ‘union’, Charles (whom she marries), Rudolphe, a man singing at the opera, Leon, the sight of the landscape, and finally the conglomerate, faceless ideal that exists only in her mind.
302 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 157.
303 de Rougemont, Passion and Society, p. 16.
turn to the shining light of an untouchable Deity, or back to a disenchanted world, where spiritual longing becomes a psychological malady.

It is through Emma’s experience that Flaubert most clearly illustrates the sincerity of longing for a mystic experience of the divine, and the torture felt at its denial. This can be seen as a prime example of James’s “religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply.”304 Although Flaubert speaks of inspiration as being akin to what Moses must have felt upon Mt. Sinai, there is the sense that this feeling cannot be maintained, and that one is left in a perpetual state of abandonment, ‘seeking him, but finding him not’;305 waiting for the divine spark to reveal itself. Similarly, for all her passion, Emma is described to be like a shipwrecked sailor searching the horizon for the white sail of salvation.306 In traditional tales of tragic love, death offers some hope of post-mortem reunion, yet Emma dies without locating a person to love. Flaubert toys with images of transcendence when describing Emma’s death, however, such images are interspersed with grotesque and irreverent elements that serve to desacralise the scene. Upon her death bed, Emma is presented with a crucifix featuring the body of Christ, and she gives him “the most mighty kiss of love she had ever given,”307 referring to him as the “Man-God”308 as if he were just another one of her icons. The narrating voice that had offered psychological insights into Emma’s experiences throughout the novel recedes in this scene in order to describe the physicality of her death. This distancing technique, combined with the intrusion of the voice of the leper outside Emma’s window,309 sublimes a reading of spiritual absolution. Emma is thus painted in two transparencies, layered on top of one another. The transcendent mystic, or rapturous Teresa, transformed via the image of Christ and the foolish girl, obsessed with fantasies, who squandered her life and now lays dead; a grotesque organic body that will decay like the living corpse of the leper. The moral of the story appears to be that “[i]dols must not be touched; the gilt comes off on our hands.”310 And while Emma is left forever awaiting “election by omnipotent love,”311 her fate is no less tragic than that of Charles who conceived of the “future [as] an unlighted corridor with a stoutly locked door at the end of it.”312 In the disenchanted world of Modernist Europe, where the icon of the Christian God lay in pieces, the desire to re-bind with the Ultimate was conceived as a quest that could easily end in disaster.

DEFINITIONAL REVIEW: THE ROMANTIC LOVE MYTH: NATURE AND FUNCTION

As an exemplary case study, Madame Bovary marks the beginning of a Modernist, and religious, form of the romantic love myth. As Kern observed in the changing depictions of love from the Victorian to the Modern period, the modern reform of the love myth was associated with a

305 “I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broadways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not.” The Song of Solomon 3:2.
306 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 75.
307 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 328.
308 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 328.
309 As Emma tosses in her final death throes the leper sings “When the sun shines warm above, it turns a maiden’s thoughts to love.” Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 337.
310 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 293.
311 de Rougemont, Passion and Society, p. 144.
312 Flaubert, Madame Bovary, p. 76.
divorce from common formulas, in favour of subjective renditions. This movement mirrors the shift in religious belief from institutional affiliation to personalised religiosity. Regardless of any judgements regarding ‘authenticity,’ the most important aspect of this shift is that the love myth becomes part of a revolutionary project to reveal repressed truth. Because the true self is intrinsically linked to both the sacred and its manifestation in the beloved, the sense of being affected by an external source was profoundly different from the agency that institutional religion held over the individual. The vital element of the Modernist love myth was its tragic and disenchanted quality. Analogically speaking, the West had finally grown up, overcome the rule of the Father and put away childish things. As ‘evil became finite’ and a matter of human responsibility, the populace ‘knew good and evil.’ They knew of the evil of idealism and false sentiment, and accordingly, the great myths of union, salvation and absolution slipped into a nostalgic realm of impossibility. The mysteries of the psyche and religious imagination were now mere psychological riddles, and it was within the power of the individual to solve them. This was truly the age of disenchantedness, yet of a form of disenchantedness that lent itself to mythologising. The myths that grew in this dark hour retained idealism, but it was an idealism tempered with scepticism; a new beauty that was not simply the omission of ugliness.314

With the rise of individualism and the sacralisation of humanity as the Creator of religion (and therefore the Creator of God) it became possible to judge God on human terms.315 On the one hand, the essential truth of religion was being defined as a personal and experiential relationship, while on the other, the character of God was on trial. In their imaginary reconstruction of the universal story, the Modernists went back to Genesis and redefined the terms of existence. They found that the story of the world extended beyond Christendom, beyond Biblical narrative and into other myths.316 Going back to principles, they attempted to define the essence of religion itself, of human nature, of cosmos, and the entire course of social evolution. As was seen in James’s “religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply,”317 ‘God’s shadow,’ understood as the echoed structure of the religious relationship with God, found expression through the existing myth of romantic love. The modern attempts to reform the love myth in terms of authenticity saw it become far less formulaic, and once this process of continued re-alignment with authenticity became inherent to the romantic love myth, the taboos associated with romantic utopianism began to dissipate. During Flaubert’s era, these taboos were still in force, yet it is clear, in the manner that God was substituted with the beloved by a whole series of post-Romantics, that love would be retained as a symbol of the real in opposition to the falsity of institutional Christian.

The important point to note is that in the mid-nineteenth century, the love myth had only taken on pseudo-religious connotations, as romantic transcendence had not yet achieved the status of taken-for-granted reality. As Emma moved towards this ideal with the highest of religious

313 Kern’s argument utilises a Heideggerian notion of ‘authenticity’ as his primary methodology. Kern, The Culture of Love, 4.
315 As Berger Notes, from the eighteenth century onwards, questions became “typically anthropological rather than theological in character: ‘How could men act this way?’ rather than, ‘How could God permit this?’” Berger, The Sacred Canopy, pp. 78–79.
aspirations, her ascent was repeatedly denied through the introjections of ‘harsh reality.’ Madame Bovary acts as a key text in the transition from a God-based symbolic to one of romantic love precisely because love is approached with an attitude of sincerity and fearful doubt. Emma epitomises every romantic cliché and her fantasies appear both trivial and indulgent. In addition to committing the ‘modern sin’ of believing in romance, as a female, Emma is able to encapsulate a whole host of degrading stereotypes about foolish women who think that the world of the novel is real, and that the superficial surfaces of fashion can give rise to ultimate meaning. Presenting a world that is disenchanted of God and disenchanted of romantic absolution, the compelling note that sounds from Flaubert’s novel is that of the trembling hope for true love and spiritual transcendence in a tragic world.

318 Related to the Modernist view of Romanticism in general.
319 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 27.
Chapter Three

Consuming Passions

The Romantic Love Myth of Predestined Salvation
Just remember
To fall in love.
There's nothing else,
There's nothing else.\footnote{\textit{Swoon},” The Chemical Brothers, 2012.}
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the contemporary form of the romantic love myth will be analysed through the lens of popular culture. Unlike Flaubert’s tortured desire for transcendence through love, today’s popular love myths recognise the problematic nature of romantic ideals, yet simultaneously express a greater certainty that true love is something both sacred, and able to be experienced by all. By focusing almost solely on the conversion narrative from an unromantic state of disenchantment to the unshakable affirmation of love’s truth, romantic films of the dramatic and comedic varieties emphasise the dialectic nature of the love myth. That is, for love to be truly sacred and ultimate, it must be presented as an extraordinary experience that stands in distinction from the performance of love that is associated with social expectation. This narrative process serves to realign the myth with the authentic core of spontaneous love, and away from the falsity of those who claim that love can be defined by particular characteristics. While the value of ‘ultimate concern’ may be equally applied in the case of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, it is the increased reality-status of the contemporary love myth that becomes most important in the instatement of romantic love as the ‘undeclared religion’ of the West. Furthermore, this chapter reveals that those aspects of the love myth that have taken on a sense of taken-for-granted reality are deeply linked with the myths of self-determination and individualism enshrined in modern consumer-capitalism.

THE AFFECT OF ROMANTIC LOVE: EMOTIVE EPISTEMOLOGY IN AND OUT OF THE CINEMA

As Campbell has argued, the popularity of the modern novel enabled people to develop the psychological skills necessary to lead their lives in terms of the narrative of the self. Anthony Giddens mirrors this view when he says:

Romantic love introduced the idea of narrative into an individual’s life – a formula which radically extended the reflexivity of sublime love. The telling of a story is one of the meanings of ‘romance,’ but this story now became individualised, inserting self and other into a personal narrative which had no particular reference to wider social processes. The rise of romantic love more or less coincided with the emergence of the novel: the connection was one of newly discovered narrative form.  

As a medium, film extended the role already played by the novel by adding a sense of immediacy and reality through the recreation of other people’s experiences. That is, the novel could help one to imagine by drawing upon their existing repertoire of experiences, yet film could effectively add to this repertoire by showing audiences what it would be like to have certain experiences. As Kern points out, film “would revolutionise kissing by enabling movie-goers to see how it [was] done, perhaps for the first time.” At the most basic level, cinema could show people what it was like to fall in love, how to recognise the signs of true love, and how to know the difference between falsity and authenticity. Echoing this reading in relation to televisual entertainment, David Lyon

argues that “TV helps to frame modes of interpretation and response to the social world by
organising experience in particular ways. Thus it has the effect of contributing to a sense of what
the real world is all about.” The influence that storytelling has upon human cognition should
not be underestimated as these mythological units are what comprise one’s inner ‘dream edifice,’
and determine the mode of shorthand through which experiences are condensed in memory.

Many love theorists have challenged the social worth of the love myth on the basis that it
encourages individuals to have unrealistic expectations of their partners. It is important, in this
instance, to really specify what aspects of love and human relationships are sacralised under the
banner of romantic love. Given the characterisation of love present in Madame Bovary, it seems
that romantic love, at its height, is barely grounded in human-to-human relationships. The great
value that intimate relationships afford in Western culture is not fully concomitant with the
ecstatic elation of the soul that new love invokes. Whilst being interrelated, it is clear that the
monotonous everyday nature of the intimate relationship is not necessarily glorified. Kern
observes, “[good marriages do not make good reading” and in his own research he “found no
major love story before the twentieth century which focused on a fulfilling love between a married
couple.” As film has played, and continues to play, such a pivotal role in the continued
reinstatement of the romantic love myth, its representation on screen acts as a template for one’s
personal experiences of love. This is not simply the case of passive mimicry, involving the creation
of heteronormative stereotypes. Like the literature of ‘signs’ that enabled the Calvinists to know
that they were one of the saved, popular culture provides an adhoc manual detailing the ‘signs’
of true love. The very nature of the filmic medium and the sensational affects it produces in the
viewer create correlations in the mind between the filmic experience of love and the real
experience of love. One can believe that they will potentially experience that which has already
been experienced in the mind, and in the cinema, similar experiences of love can be re-
experienced at will. Rather than having to apply the imagination to the task, the cinematic viewer
can allow themselves to be affected to various degrees. Like the beloved affects the individual in
an intimate yet incorporeal sense, the cinema provides the opportunity to experience the divine
emotions of romantic love through an encounter with stimuli that originates from outside the
self.

According to Sean Redmond, at an “intimate and decidedly phenomenological level,”
romantic comedies “[burn] a hole through the transparency of the narrative, so that its ‘flavours’
directly assault its spectators, causing them to taste with these feelings.” While all films aim to
affect audiences, love stories must strive to make their audiences feel what the couple feels in
order to be engaging. Sutton agrees that in the romantic comedy, “a direct, affective relation with

323 Lyon, Jesus in Disneyland, p. 62.
324 Swidler, Talk of Love; May, Love: A History; Kern, The Culture of Love; Ben-Ze’ev and Goussinsky, In
the Name of Love.
the spectator is actively sought."328 While romantic films seek to affect the individual, Torbin Grodal has compared the experience of romantic affect in everyday life to the fictionalised experience of being put under a love spell. Accordingly he suggests that:

Modern psychologists are not in complete disagreement with the idea that love is caused by a magic potion. Pleasure related to sexual arousal in general is linked to the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine in the pleasure centre, the nucleus accumbens, and adjacent brain structures...even if there is no magic potion proper, humans may be able to forge extremely strong love bonds if sexual arousal is linked to those oxytocin-vasopressin mechanisms that are able to link erotic arousal to sense impressions of one individual person.329

As peak experiences and emotional signs reveal the authenticity of love, Grodal’s observation reveals that one’s icon of love can act as a chemical trigger just as easily as the filmic triggers provided by romantic films. Granted that experience and emotion are afforded such high epistemological value in the West, the love myth is particularly well endowed when it comes to the capacity for generating peak experiences. Being, at its core, a sexualised love, the romantic is able to take self-illusory hedonism to its fullest extent by engaging with every human sense.

Theorists like Anthony Giddens have also criticised the love myth in terms of its promises of eternal union.330 It seems, however, the ‘happily ever after’ ending of the love story and the notion that ‘two can become one’ serve an affective purpose beyond the literal meanings they infer. Arthur Lovejoy has observed a similar occurrence in regard to the inclusion of unimaginable metaphysical concepts in philosophical literature.331 When reading about concepts of eternity, it is not the idea of eternity that is sacralised, rather “the aesthetic pleasure which the bare abstract idea of immutability gives us...through the associations and the half-formed images which the mere conception of changelessness arouses...is sure to find its response in our emotional natures.”332 Similarly, concepts of true love, fate and the eternal bond evoke particular sensations. These emotions are felt during the moments that such thoughts are held in the mind. They are present in the climactic filmic moment, the novelistic scene, the imagined presence of the beloved, and the resounding strains of the love song. Love theorists argue that people cannot expect to sustain these peak experiences in their human relationships, and they may be correct, yet I would argue that the romantic love myth does not necessarily deify relationships in the manner that many love theorists assume. Clive Bell has commented that “Art and Religion are the two roads by which men escape from circumstance to ecstasy. Art and Religion are means to

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330 Giddens, The Transformation of Intimacy, pp. 184–204.
similar states of mind." One might add that experience of love is a third path that brings both the art of the imagination and religious significance together.

Campbell makes it clear that self-illusory hedonism and emotional self-determinism were only made possible through the disenchantment of the world, as this placed emotional life within the realm of personal authorship and control. By contrast, in the pre-modern period, awe was:

regarded primarily as a characteristic of God rather than of a man’s typical reaction to his presence...the main sources of agency in the world were viewed as existing outside of man, from whence they not only ‘forced’ him into actions but also ‘filled’ him with those distinctly aroused states called emotions...A significant corollary of disenchantment was the accompanying process of de-emotionalisation such that the environment was no longer seen as the primary source of feelings but as a ‘neutral’ sphere governed by impersonal laws, which, whilst they controlled natural events, did not, in themselves, determine feelings. A natural consequence of this fundamental shift in world-view was that emotions were re-located ‘within’ individuals, as states which emanated from some internal source, and although these were not always ‘spiritualised,’ there is a sense in which the disenchantment of the external world required as a parallel process some ‘enchantment’ of the psychic inner world.

Due to the nature of the filmic medium, the inner thoughts of characters can be read through facial expressions, dialogue or voice-overs. Yet films also commit the ‘pathetic fallacy’ on a regular basis, by dramatising character emotions in the external world of the film. This connection between the character and their world may not infer a sacralised or Romantic connection between human beings and the phenomenal universe, yet the expression of human emotions in the environmental setting of the filmic scene may also have some subtle effect upon contemporary epistemological thinking. In terms of romantic love, the universe is full of signs regarding the person one desires. The individual has been trained to read these aesthetic signs in the cinematic context, and there is no reason to believe that this behaviour should cease when one exits the theatre. Through this tendency to read the world romantically, the sense of emotional self-determination is blurred. The desire is to know that the one you love is thinking of you, yet self-originating thoughts on the matter cannot offer insight. In matters of love, self-determination and the ability to author one’s life have their role as ideals, yet a crucial aspect of the modern love myth involves the feeling of being acted upon, affected, loved, and changed for the better by their lover. Regardless of whether the individual ‘owns’ their emotional experiences in retrospect (especially when a relationship has failed or ended) during the peak experience of romantic love, it is the beloved that causes one to feel, and that fills them with emotions that they could never generate through imaginative effort.

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335 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 72–73.
TASTE: AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF PLEASURE

“What you call love was invented by guys like me to sell nylons.” Don Draper, Madmen, 2007.336

As a self-made man, and New York advertising executive, Mad Men’s Don Draper is at the top of his game due to his ability to intuit people’s needs, wants and desires and to guide consumer behaviour through clever advertising campaigns. This is a classic example of what Campbell refers to as the ‘manipulationist’ view of consumption 337 where the individual is identified as an uncritical being who can be duped into believing anything that skilful advertising encourages. Draper is entirely cynical in terms of romantic love, and the narrative style of Mad Men ensures that he will not be redeemed from doubt through the typical tropes of romantic comedy. The quote above sets the tone for the series and infers that because love is used to ‘sell nylons,’ it is, therefore, not real. Rejecting this idea outright, Campbell explains that people have to have pre-existing beliefs in order for advertising to have appeal in the first place. The idea that in an office somewhere, a group of executives are ‘inventing’ the ideals of society that will be subsequently injected into the popular mind is simply absurd. In consumer societies, purchase and persuasion work with extant social mythologies, and consumer behaviour is closely observed in order to be better predicted. One can sell nylons by associating them with the concept of love, and that when one consumes, they are consuming symbols, ideas and meanings above anything else.338

In relation to the association between religious organisations and consumerism, Adam Possamai has commented that “[i]t becomes almost a truism to state that for a group to spread its beliefs and values, it now has to speak a language that the majority of people understand: that of consumption.”339 Due to the association between postmodern theory and the consideration of religion and consumerism in Religious Studies, consumer behaviour has often been presented as superficial, transient, and ephemeral level.340 What is elided in this view is the fact that everyone that lives in a consumer society is involved in consumerism, and that if popular culture and consumerism are both damned for their vacuousness, then this would render the majority of symbolic interaction that occur in daily life devoid of significance. On the contrary, ideals like romantic love are deeply held and relatively consistent in nature, in spite of the plethora of ways in which the love myth is presented and engaged with through popular and consumer channels. As this thesis argues, the romantic love myth is so prevalent in the interactions of daily life, it becomes almost invisible. In terms of the prevalence of the love myth, and its status as the ‘secret religion of the West,’ it appears that for many the concept of religion itself has become so strongly associated with institutionalised power and unauthenticity that personally held beliefs of ultimate concern are preferred to official identification. As Nietzsche so astutely observed, “[w]hat is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons.”341 For those who hold strong values related to individualist thinking, only the self can intuit what is true, and because ‘religion’ in the traditional sense, is highly structured, this threatens personal authority.

336 Mad Men, 1:1 “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.”
339 Possamai, Religion and Popular Culture, p. 47.
340 Lyon, Jesus in Disneyland; Possamai, Religion and Popular Culture, p. 47.
Taste and fashion, being integral features of modern consumerism, are deeply linked to the romantic love myth and its operation in contemporary society. Taste is the process through which the individual judges using their perceptual senses rather than their rational capabilities. Thought of as one’s personal view, one’s taste is the expression of the unique self in relation with the world. Taste is the primary means through which consumer choices are made, through which the performative self is constructed for society, and is the primary means through which people choose their romantic partners. The individual is rarely aware of how their tastes are formed, especially in terms of choices that are deemed trivial like what one prefers to eat. As Bourdieu’s research has revealed, their taste-based distinctions recapitulate the hidden class structures that persist in society in spite of the democratic ideal that all individuals are free to exercise self-determination and transcend the limitations of birth. Acknowledging that this is the case, and that taste is not sui generis, one must not ignore the fact that the myths of absolute freedom and remain salient in Western society. At the level of experience and participation, taste remains the epistemological tool of choice. Campbell notes that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in response to the neo-classical aim to discover the universal laws of beauty, “a new emphasis [was] placed upon self-determination in matters of taste.” In the first chapter of this thesis, it was argued that the epistemological changes that occurred in the modernising West were articulated, almost invariably, as a reaction against the concept of external authority. Accordingly, in the realm of aesthetics “[t]here existed a strong conviction among the public that taste should be free from critics’ laws, that beauty cannot be analysed, and that every man is competent to decide for himself, by virtue of his sensibility, on works of art.”

In New York, where film, advertising, fashion and spectacle are a constant presence, the television series Sex and the City poses questions about the romantic love myth in the context of lives that are lived through the articulations of style. As fashion has featured prominently in the show, the language of style has become an important communicative medium. Following one of the central tropes of the New York romantic comedy, Carrie and most of her social circle are involved in the ‘manipulationist’ industries, and pride themselves upon their ability to discern the complex psychological meanings that are implied by body language, dress, and the interplay of visual signs. It is well known that consumer practices are bound up with identity construction, so that people are attracted to products that carry with them the idea of who they would like to become. There appears to be no end to what woman can be as Carrie and her friends ‘try on’ selves like clothes in the fitting room and crash-test them on the streets of New York. Charlotte tries on the idea of being Jewish by gazing at the products displayed in the Jewish cooking section

343 The obvious exception to this is the psychological reflexivity that contemporary Westerners often have in terms of why they are attracted to certain people. This reflexivity, however, is generally located in the narrative of the self rather than being anything to do with social trends that inform other aspects of taste.
344 Bourdieu, Distinction, p. 56.
346 Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 156.
347 E. N. Hooker quoted in Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, p. 156.
of the supermarket, and by staging a traditional Jewish feast where she dresses up in a traditional shawl. As Carrie is breaking up with Sean, a man she has been dating who clearly wants to settle down and get married, she tells him "I was just trying you on, you know, to see if it fit, but it doesn't, I'm sorry." Later, Carrie sets him up with Charlotte, who then breaks it off on the basis that incompatible aesthetics foreshadow personal incompatibility. Looking at china, Charlotte is repulsed by his taste, and Carrie's voiceover explains the impossibility of their relationship as if it were self-evident; "it would never work. He was American Classic, she was French Country." The function of a man is the same as an outfit or a table setting insofar as adopting these aspects imaginatively into the self brings about a reassessment of the true nature of one's identity. As Carrie says, the most important thing is the right 'fit,' so that until one finds those elusive aspects which fit and complete the self, one is bound by the romantic ethic to continue the project of self-perfection and self-discovery.

Correcting Berger on a 'small detail' in his novel, Carrie effectively claims that his heroine is not believable because he commits the fashion faux pas of having her wear a scrunchie to a hip downtown restaurant. Highlighting the fact that the language of fashion and taste are in a constant state of renewal, Bourdieu would refer to Berger's mistake as an example of the 'Don Quixote effect; "when the practices generated by the habitus appear as ill-adapted because they are attuned to an earlier state of the objective conditions." Understanding the language of fashion allows these women to communicate with others and to get what they want. In many episodes, fashion is used as a visual joke so that this relationship does not necessarily imply a calculated manipulation, but rather a confidence with the medium that demonstrates that they have moved beyond the stage of having to prove themselves. The primacy of the visual in the Sex and the City universe is so deeply entrenched that it would be impossible for Carrie to wear a neutral outfit that did not say anything at all. The point is not that these women use fashion to communicate, but that their communication is enunciated through an aesthetic vocabulary that can be understood by others. Their performative speech, as dress, is just as expressive, if not more so, than their spoken utterances. The world of Sex and the City does not question the authority of the visual, or attempt to position language above it. In fact, most of Carrie's column is concerned with the ultimate truth of visual communication, over the ambiguity and insignificance of language. These women discuss what he said, or she said, listening to phone messages repeatedly, and are left perplexed, yet that which is communicated visually, or physically, is clear and unequivocal.

Carrie and her friends are able to assume their elite position in New York society because they have mastered that particular space. Manhattan is sectioned off as a place with its own unique culture, so that elsewhere, these women are out of their element, in a foreign space where visual language has different constructions, and is as difficult to translate as spoken language. It is

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350 Sex and the City, 6:4 “Pick a Little, Talk a Little.”
351 Sex and the City, 1:3 “Bay of Married Pigs.”
352 Sex and the City, 1:3 “Bay of Married Pigs.”
353 Sex and the City, 6:4 “Pick a Little, Talk a Little.”
355 On her date with Mr. Big, Carrie wears her 'naked dress' in order to demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, that she wants to sleep with him. Sex and the City, 1:6 “Secret Sex.”
356 Clearly, Carrie utilises language as she is a journalist, and is often in conversation or speaking in voice over, but I would argue that visual communication plays a more crucial role.
for this reason that Carrie can be mistaken for a prostitute only by foreigners, or when she is
outside the zone of Manhattan.\textsuperscript{357} Baudelaire’s comments regarding prostitutes strengthen the
case, as he claims that one can spot a prostitute by “some small detail of their attire”\textsuperscript{358} that does
not properly emulate the prototype of respectable dress. If the New Yorker cannot psychoanalyse
people accurately in the foreign context, then they have no way of knowing truth. The cues of
performativity and authenticity are obscured due to cultural differences, and so the prospect of
true love is seriously threatened. While the romantic comedy stresses that superficial markers of
identity like race, gender, socio-economic background, disability, eccentricity and the like, should
not be mistaken for the ‘true self,’ it is also true that the aesthetic language of fashion and body
language that is interpreted in \textit{Sex and the City} is identified as a subliminal language of truth. A
person might say one thing, but visual cues tell another story. Because the love myth is
preoccupied with the revelation of hidden truths, one must be able to read the subtle signs that
speak between words. Accordingly, Carrie comments that she has “made a whole career” out of
“deciphering mixed messages”\textsuperscript{359} and shedding light on the grey areas which exist in the
interaction of the sexes. Yet, as the romantic comedy demonstrates, one can never know
everything there is to know about love from a theoretical standpoint. Experts in human
motivation, psychology and behaviour are chosen as protagonists for romantic comedies in order
to demonstrate that no matter how apt the observation, or subtle the commentary, human love
cannot be reduced into a systemised formula. Whatever the stated assumptions of the
disenchanted ‘expert’ or the blindly idealistic romantic theories of love will always fall short of
capturing the experience of true intimacy.

Despite the pragmatic attitude toward sexual relationships that is promoted by the show,
and the valuing of friendship over love\textsuperscript{360} it is well accepted that the love story between Carrie and
Big underpins the entire series.\textsuperscript{361} According to Akass and McCabe, “Big’s anonymity functions as
an elusive blank slate onto which Carrie projects and configures her romantic fantasies about Mr.
Right.”\textsuperscript{362} From the first moment she saw him, until their eventual marriage in the \textit{Sex and the City 2} (2010), Carrie is captivated by Big and views him as being ‘the One’ despite his
evasive demeanour and failure to commit to her. Unlike the conventional romantic comedy that subjects
the beloved to various character tests before breaking them down into a state of authenticity in
preparation for true intimacy, the relationship between Carrie and Big is more accurately
described as a case of ‘love at first sight.’ As Anthony Giddens points out, “this ‘first glance’ is a
gesture which implies the discovery of potentialities in the other for a life together, and not (or
not just) the compulsive erotic desire which it seems to indicate.”\textsuperscript{363} Both Campbell and Bourdieu
have written about this phenomenon, and while it may feel like fate to the individual concerned,

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21, no. 3, September 2007, p. 414. In reference to \textit{Sex and the City}, 1:5 “The Power of Female Sex,”
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de Mattia, ‘Mr Big’, p. 18.
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these theorists reveal that when one falls in love with a stranger, subtle signs still play their role. For Bourdieu, the magic of love at first sight that develops into true compatibility can be explained by the 'subliminal' processes at work in the mind where one reads the other through the tangible signs that they present, despite the feeling that one couldn’t know all these things simply by looking at someone. 364 Campbell, on the other hand, links the primacy of first impressions in love to a culture of sensibility where emotion and sensation were highly valued as ways of knowing. 365 While in Madame Bovary, inner visions of love were of primary concern because the pool of potential lovers was relatively small in provincial France, 366 in the “singles ghetto” 367 of New York, romantic encounters are an ever-present possibility.

**ROMANTIC POTENTIALITIES IN THE CITY OF DREAMS**

In terms of the love myth, Paris may have symbolic currency as the so-called ‘city of love,’ yet New York far outstrips its European equivalent as the (cinematic) romantic capital of the world. While the location of romantic love narratives may seem arbitrary, from a symbolic interactionist point of view, each city bears a particular significance, and the cultivation of a strong relationship between New York and the romantic comedy genre elucidates aspects of the myth that have become more strongly entrenched following the publication of Madame Bovary. While the Eiffel Tower has become synonymous with romantic love, New York’s Empire State Building has developed its own romantic mythology through the layering of filmic references from An Affair to Remember, to Sleepless in Seattle. 368 The romantic comedy has become so entrenched in the culture of New York that tours run on a regular basis, taking visitors to locations like Katz’s Deli and The Empire State Building that have become romantic icons after featuring in romantic films. 369 The romantic comedy genre is well known for its self-referentiality, and Sex and the City follows this tradition in its exploration of the tropes and symbolic motifs of a beloved city that is both the site of female independence and true love.

Strongly associated with modernity, cinema, consumerism and the values of democracy, New York typifies the claim that America is the 'land of opportunity.' As a site of “egalitarianism, enterprise and aspiration” 370 all are endowed with “[t]he ‘right’ to seek romantic love,” 371 because in New York City, “anything can happen for anyone.” 372 Like self-illusory hedonism itself, the

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369 See [www.screentours.com](http://www.screentours.com) for television and film inspired tours including the ‘Sex and the City Hotspots Tour’ and mixed tours that visit sites from *When Harry Met Sally*, Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1961), You’ve Got Mail (1998), Working Girl (1988) and Sleepless in Seattle.
myths of New York encourage the individual to “dream the impossible dream” and to strive to experience these dreams in the real world. In this way, the entire population can foster the belief that one day they will become rich, famous and successful; that if they really put their mind to it, they could meet their soul mate or become the President of the United States. While the romantic comedy embraces these myths, the strongest wish is that one will find their soul mate in the city of dreams, along with the perfect job and the realisation of their true potential. Unlike Flaubertian romance, the contemporary romantic ideal insists that true love is possible. Through the experience of this most authentic human emotion, one can satisfy the spiritual desire for pleasure, beauty and truth, yet this experience is also believed to act as a catalyst for self-realisation for both the individual and their partner. In a city of limitless possibilities, true love cuts the path that defines a life, signifies the self and the other in the formation of the love story. It is the dynamic tension that exists between the possibilities that the city of dreams offers up, and the narrative closure of the romantic choice that exemplifies the democratic values of freedom, self-determination, and the pursuit of happiness.

As the romantic love myth is concerned with the rejection of hierarchical decrees and the idea that one’s social position can be defined by birth, the romantic comedy takes up the feminist cause as a symbolic rejection of social prejudices that would hamper the individual’s right to self-determination. Perhaps failing to represent a true feminist message which would aim to empower women as a social group, these films demonstrate that if any individual tries hard enough (she) can achieve success. Associated with “the single, independent, desiring/desirable, urban woman,” New York has provided the backdrop for love stories combining the dual ideals of “romance and career” from the Depression-era to the present day. The woman, depicted as the “the hero of her own life” is able to live her dreams thanks to a capitalist model that can bypass the “rigid class demarcations of the past.” For the women of Sex and the City, New York is a progressive oasis in a world that might otherwise relegate women to a subservient role. Given the culture that New York provides, women are under no obligation to marry or enter a long-term monogamous relationship. As self-determination is central to the love myth, it is necessary for romantic ideals to be tested by people who are (apparently) most critical of them, and who feel they could ultimately do without them. According to the love myth, only those decisions that are made freely and consciously are truly authentic, so that when Carrie chooses Big, reflecting that “in a city of infinite options, sometimes there’s no better feeling than knowing you only have one,” it is Carrie that makes this decision, not some external authority. As a part of this

373 “The Impossible Dream,” a song from the 1965 musical Man of La Mancha based on Cervantes Don Quixote.
374 In Definitely, Maybe (2008) both Will and his roommate move to New York with the ambition of becoming President. Clearly mirroring the fairy-tale wish for true love, this utopian career goal is articulated in romantic terms and acts as a major motivational force despite the unlikelihood of its eventuation.
375 Giddens discusses the tendency to cast independent females. Giddens, The Transformation of Intimacy, p. 46.
382 Sex and the City, 1:7 “The Monogamists.”
decision-making process, it is also clear that the self-sufficient and cynical protagonist must be converted to a belief in the reality of love. In New York, love takes on a far less tragic character than was seen in Madame Bovary, and due to the capitalist ideals enshrined in this city of dreams, it is imperative that women, as the symbolic figures of 'low-birth' are shown to succeed in their careers and personal endeavours in addition to their conversion to love. This is because the love myth, in its contemporary form, is not only about the emotive fulfilment of the individual but also about the individual’s personal, social and spiritual elevation.

In the preceding chapter it was argued that modern love mythology contains within it a dialectic tension between absolute optimism and disenchanted pessimism. This description captures both the spirit of the contemporary romantic comedy and the spirit of New York City. As Jermyn puts it, New York facilitates "fulfilment as well as disappointment, hopefulness as well as anxiety, happenstance as well as crisis," so that while New Yorkers are known for their 'no-bullshit' attitude and are often considered abrasive by other Americans, the city is associated with fierce optimism and the will to strive for the impossible. Like the typical romantic-comedy heroine, New Yorkers "are not wide-eyed innocents questing ideistically for the perfect match." Rather, the stereotypical New Yorker knows all the tricks of the trade that go into psychological manipulation, and they navigate their social world in full acknowledgement of the performative nature of self. As previously mentioned most leading characters in New York romantic comedies work in 'manipulationist' industries such as advertising, journalism, public relations, or fashion. In the romantic comedy, this is played out through the character’s flaunting of social convention in a purposefully false performance. Sally’s faked orgasm in Katz’s Deli in When Harry Met Sally provides a classic example, but this trope can be found in most romantic comedies, as it is generally the revelation of performativity that sparks an authentic attraction between the cinematic couple.

It appears that in those modern cities where consumerism thrives, the romantic love myth also thrives, as individuals seek to follow their heart’s desire over the weight of tradition. The general link between the consumer-capitalist metropolis and romantic ideals has been identified in relation to developing nations like India and Thailand. While many cultures around the world look to Hollywood and American film as a primary source of entertainment, in India, Bollywood remains a formidable industry. In terms of symbolic interaction, those countries that regularly engage with the American romantic paradigm are likely to adopt similar associations between love and democratic values. Countries like India that develop their own distinct version of the love myth may develop a mythology of kindred nature, yet it is unlikely to be identical to

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386 The Romantic Ethic, pp. 46–47.
389 Love and Other Drugs (2010).
390 Redmond, pp. 65-78
that of the Western myth. Nonetheless, Sean Redmond has observed that in Indian romantic comedies love functions as a “utopian force”\(^{392}\) that can “heal or make invisible social divisions, overcome amoral desires and...unite social groups otherwise differentiated by income, wealth, caste and diaspora distance.”\(^{393}\) According to Redmond, the Indian love myth is not only related to democratic values, but is conceived as “an immutable, almost mystical force that guides two individuals who are ‘made for each other’ into one another’s arms.”\(^{394}\) While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the Indian conception of romantic love in detail, it appears that the spiritual or religious connotations of the romantic love myth may apply to cultures outside the West as well.

For American filmmakers, Paris is iconic of the most idyllic form of romantic love, and is distinguished from the gritty cynicism of New York. When Americans imagine Paris, however, this rose coloured vision becomes suspect of unauthenticity. As a fantasy space, Paris often fails to live up to imaginative expectation, and in accord with the conventions of the romantic comedy, the protagonist must become disillusioned in order to find truth.\(^{395}\) In terms of French films, Brigitte Rollet notes that “the rom-com in France is an extremely rare and recent phenomenon. Yet love is a key element in French films whatever the period concerned.”\(^{396}\) Where romantic love is represented in French films, its narrative structure is entirely different to the Hollywood romantic comedy.\(^{397}\) While this thesis has identified Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* as a transitional text that introduces the dialectical structure of the contemporary romantic love myth, this piece of nineteenth century French literature differs from the irreverent style that pervades the American romantic comedy. It is, however, significant that both America and France, New York and Paris, act as the embodied loci of romantic love. These are the foundational democratic nations of the world, and their prized cities act as shrines for both love and humanistic ideals.

THE DIALECTIC OF THE ROMANTIC LOVE MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

In contrast to Flaubert’s tragic depiction of love, romantic comedies are known for their happy endings where the fated couple generally live ‘happily ever after.’ However, romantic comedies also feature pointed critiques against the love myth, expressing a particular distain for stereotypes and clichés. In Ann Swidler’s fieldwork, where she interviewed a selection of middle-class Americans about love, she found a similar representation of blatantly contradictory views. Swidler

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\(^{395}\) The myth of Paris is equated with French characters in films like *Green Card* (1990) and *French Kiss* (1995) wherein a French-American couple who are initially repulsed by each other, struggle to reconcile their cultural differences. The American woman, in both cases, views the Frenchman unfavourable, denying the stereotype that the French are the greatest of lovers. Similarly, in the final double episode of *Sex and the City*, Carrie goes to Paris, expecting to find herself in a fashion utopia, full of romantic possibilities. The trip is a disaster and Carrie is forced to reassess her view of the city, after which she returns to New York to be with Big.


\(^{397}\) Rollet, ‘Transatlantic Exchanges,’ p. 94.
explained this in terms of the interviewee’s response to different contextual frames, yet I would argue that these divergent positions co-exist in a dialectic designed to ensure the authenticity of love. In romantic comedies, and in real life situations, critiques against the love myth are designed to purify the myth; to cast off the structural husk of past definitions of love that have ceased to correlate with the love’s internal truth. This is a classic example of the Don Quixote effect where elements of the myth that were previously identified as essential markers of authenticity instead become institutionalised markers of oppression if they are left unrevised.

Frank Krutnik has observed that romantic comedies dating from the 1980s, tend to embrace “the artifice of convention,” so that falsity is employed ironically as a path to authenticity. As was the case in Madame Bovary, the more that one is aware of artifice, the more passionate idealism becomes. Yet in contemporary romantic comedies, romantic ideals are presented with more confidence and playfulness than at any other point in film history. Due to the ironic use of clichés and critiques, neither can be taken at face value, and the message of the romantic comedy can be found in the dialectic space in between. It is for this reason that unlike the Hollywood classics, post-1970s romantic comedies are not so intently focused on marriage, and it has been noted that weddings have become “less centrally associated with the happy ending.” As the stereotypical markers of love have been rendered meaningless due to their ritualistic nature, meanings associated with actions become situationally contingent. Accordingly, it is often the case that the most overtly artificial performances of love are played out by the romantic couple, yet the audience can clearly ascertain that a supremely authentic connection is taking place between them, often through more subtle signs like eye-contact and body language. Similarly, the romantic couple is generally cast ‘against-type’ in order to highlight their resistance to social codes. The most common example of this is the tomboyish, unladylike woman, or ‘manic pixie dream-girl’ who exhibits a level of semi-jaded confidence in love and a general spirit of irreverence and bohemianism. Mirroring the masculinisation of female characters, romantic comedies of recent decades have focused more on the inexperienced male who needs to be guided in love by a headstrong female. Often, potential lovers are depicted in unflattering or grotesque situations; and swearing, sexual promiscuity, and anti-authoritarianism can easily be incorporated without reflecting poorly on a character’s inner virtue. Although these ‘little rebellions’ may do little to challenge norms, within the filmic

398 Krutnik, ‘Love Lies,’ p. 27.
401 This is most clearly related to the Protestant worldview presented by Smith. Smith, To Take Place, p. 102.
402 Love and Other Drugs, Friends with Benefits.
403 See: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ManicPixieDreamGirl
405 In The Proposal, Margaret is depicted as a selfish, career centred woman who transforms into a kind person when she discovers love. In Friends with Benefits the romantic couple swear frequently and emphasise their propensity for sexual promiscuity, before they decide to form a lasting monogamous relationship.
universe, that which diverts from the rigid codes of the classic stereotype highlights the character’s uniqueness, as well as their overt deployment of ‘free will’ in the face of social expectation.\footnote{Indeed, Swidler’s research indicates that “no external obstacle, however obdurate, can negate the individuals’ freedom to determine their own destinies. Neither resignation to one’s fate, nor loyalty to kin or community, nor submission to God’s will, for example, seems to these middle-class Americans adequate justification for action. Only the self’s free choices make action legitimate.” Swidler, Talk of Love, p. 149.}

Similarly, Kern observed that a greater sense of authenticity was afforded to grotesque or unconventional depictions of love in the progression from the Victorian period to the modern. The more individualised, quirky, or socially unacceptable; the greater the sincerity of the lovers. Through the active rejection of iconic moments associated with narrative formula, modern artists and writers became obsessed with ‘in-between-ness,’ and the sublime glow of moments from the marginalised realm of the mundane. Instead of describing the person one loves in terms of the grace of their neck, the purity of their brow, the depth in their eyes, and the beauty of their countenance, modern writers focus on previously ‘taboo’ descriptors relating to sweat, scent, pubic hair, genitals, and aspects of the beloved that are seasoned with the grotesque.\footnote{Kern, The Culture of Love, p. 63.} It is for this reason that when considering love in Western culture, if one steps out of the glossy world of Hollywood where conventions of beauty are rarely challenged, grotesque and imperfect renditions of love cannot automatically be read as critiques of the ideal of love itself. In terms of the romantic comedy, Hollywood films work within the limits of their context, so that the embrace of imperfection may simply involve the pursuit of love in spite of parental expectations, through the choice of a partner who is of the ‘wrong’ culture, gender or economic background by normative social standards. In contemporary art and art-films, however, there is far greater scope to embrace the ‘unacceptable’ in challenging ways. Despite these differences of extent, both the mainstream and alternative arts seek to reject false structures in favour of an inner truth that is represented as being imperfectly perfect.

As Giddens has argued, romantic love is structured as a personal quest narrative, both within texts, and in people’s lives, “in which self-identity awaits its validation from the discovery of the other.”\footnote{Giddens, The Transformation of Intimacy, p. 45.} This mode of ‘romantic seekership’ posits that the individual is absolutely unique, and that their future (and future partner) should not be determined by society. Their future partner will be as original as they are, and the authenticity of their union will be proven by the degree to which the couple consciously defy social expectation, in favour of ‘following their hearts.’ As the quest is always for true love, that which is determined by society must be overcome in favour of that which deemed authentic by personal emotive knowing alone. An example of this can be found in the indie romantic comedy Chasing Amy (1997) that tells the story of Holden, a comic book illustrator who falls in love with a lesbian. When Amy, in turn, falls in love with him, she tells him that she didn’t want to limit her chances of finding the One by only sleeping with people from one gender. As the story progresses, Amy’s history of sexual experimentation becomes an issue for Holden who just wants them to be a ‘normal couple.’ When Holden attempts to resolve the schism between them by proposing a threesome with Amy and his best friend, Amy is offended because she views her own quest for self-identity as being sincere, while his is not. The fact that Amy’s position is depicted favourably, and Holden is made to look immature and foolish, exemplifies the way that true love has been redefined in contemporary
romantic comedies. That is, those who are ignorant of true love only experience the semblance of it because they mistake institutionalised criteria as essential, and fail to realise that love is an emotional truth that can transcend other criteria.

Given that the quest for true love is synonymous with the quest for self-identity, it is interesting that Giddens phrases his claim, not in terms of the establishment of a relationship, but in relation to the discovery of the other.\textsuperscript{409} The romantic dialectic, then, can be seen to utilise the tension between false and true performances of love, in order to bring about a conversion experience where both love and identity are confirmed. In this way love reveals ‘who you are,’ by challenging the individual to step outside of their comfort zone and take the ‘leap of faith’ without knowing whether such actions will be rewarded. Of course, in the filmic world, they are always rewarded, even if it is in an abstract sense. For instance, in the concluding scene of Chasing Amy, all three major characters are single once more, yet their willingness to reveal themselves through intimate experience enabled them to transform, and to become more truly themselves. While in its Modernist incarnation, the romantic dialectic revealed an irreconcilable state of unfulfilled mystic desire, in the contemporary context, this dialectic unveils the essential nature of the self, of love, and of human nature. Romantic comedies may flaunt the lie,\textsuperscript{410} yet they are able to do so with such bravado because of the confidence of their belief in true love.

\textbf{THOSE THREE MAGIC WORDS}

To take the Lord’s name in vain is considered to be a sin in the Christian religion, yet to utter the most sacred phrase of romantic love with insincerity is tantamount to blasphemy. Romantic comedies have policed the use of the ‘three magic words’ (I love you) in an attitude of seriousness that equals that of a religious tradition seeking to delineate what is sacred from the influence of the profane. The power that these words hold is strikingly evident in Western culture, and it is a common occurrence in film for characters become so overwhelmed by the prospect of uttering them that other words are used instead. The terror that accompanies the confession of love is matched only by the extent of the social stigma attached to false confessions. In the world of film, if a character swears on the Bible and lies in the courtroom, an audience could forgive them if they had a good reason for doing so.\textsuperscript{411} If, however, a character says ‘I love you’ without meaning it, they become utterly reprehensible and unworthy of sympathetic allegiance.\textsuperscript{412} In the world of relationships, romantic comedies tease out every possible sign of false performance in order to define what is true. As contingent as these signs may be, the declaration of love comes closest to the essence of love itself, and because love is a direct correlate for truth in Western culture, it is the single constant in a sea of change.

\textsuperscript{409} Giddens, \textit{The Transformation of Intimacy}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{410} Krutnik, ‘Love Lies’, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{411} This trope is often evident in courtroom dramas like \textit{Law and Order} (1990-Present) where individuals lie to protect their loved ones.
\textsuperscript{412} For example, the character of Griffin in \textit{Sidewalks of New York} (2001).
THE MEDIUM AND ‘THE MOMENT’

In the context of personal experience, Campbell and Bourdieu noted that love-at-first-sight was linked to modern epistemological modes. Importantly, it is also at the “structural heart” of classical cinema, as can be seen in its “highly developed system of point-of-view and glance/object editing.” While Hollywood romantic comedies tend to signpost important moments very clearly, it is only really in retrospect, after the moment of love has been established, that the events that follow and proceed can be mapped as part of the love story. As a ‘mystery love story’ Definitely, Maybe provides a good example of this. The protagonist, Will Hayes, tells his daughter about three of his most serious romantic relationships, and she has to guess which of these women is her mother. As he promises to change their names during the telling of these stories, the audience does not know what relationship will retrospectively be cast as ‘the One.’ As each woman is introduced on screen, the audience experiences a repetition of Hayes’ moment(s) of love-at-first-sight. Paul Sutton makes a similar point regarding the narrative structure of Groundhog Day when he argues that “spectators remake films as part of the very process of spectatorship and that beyond the actual cinematic experience they carry a remade and remembered ‘film’ with them.”

Given that one of the central functions of the love myth is to cite, parody, question, and reform the signs of true love, the cinematic medium continues to employ a set of recognisable visual, aural, and atmospheric techniques in order to represent true love on screen. Due to the time constraints of the medium, it becomes necessary to convey the life of the romantic couple in a condensed fashion. Whether it is through the use of a montage, or simply the emphasis of a particular event, love is presented as a series of moments. These moments resound with significance and are designed to fill in the blanks of time omitted from the filmic narrative. It is the representation of similarly iconic moments of love that is utilised in advertising, news reporting, magazine articles, love songs, and the like. While modern art, literature and film remain conscious of the reductive and iconographic presentation of human experience, to some degree, it is unavoidable. Even if an in-between moment is chosen rather than a traditionally iconic image of love, these in-between moments then become familiar enough to be iconic to contemporary audiences. Moreover, the audience must be given definitive signs that a new symbolic construct is intended to convey old meanings.

Outside of the romantic comedy genre, ‘romantic’ scenes are often represented in such a way as to be almost identical with the general cinematic depiction of the sublime. American Beauty provides a perfect example of the conflation of romantic love, the sublime moment, and God. When Ricky and Jane are walking home from school, Ricky describes the experience of filming a dead homeless woman:

Ricky: “When you see something like that, it’s like God is looking right at you. Just for a second. And if you’re careful, you can look right back.”
Jane: “And what do you see?”
Ricky: “Beauty.”

In the following scene, Ricky shows Jane a film he shot of a plastic bag blowing in the wind. A plastic bag is rubbish, and so is in some sense abject, and the action of a floating plastic bag would not generally be considered to be of any interest or significance. The presentation of this footage, however, reveals the beauty inherent in the most trivial aspects of existence. As the viewer watches the footage on the television screen from behind the couple, this ‘God-presence’ hovers in between them while Ricky explains the experience as being one of heartbreaking profundity, to the accompaniment of a film score evoking a delicate sense of expectancy. Ricky recalls that the plastic bag was like a child begging him to come and play drawing upon the Romantic sense that the phenomenal world mirrors one’s inner emotions. Conjoining this spiritualised experience of aesthetic awe and intimacy with the sacred through the revelation of the sublime moment, this scene adopts a similar cluster of themes as Madame Bovary. The ability of the artist to perceive the magical nature of existence is associated with the sensations of falling in love and the realisation of the inherent sacrality of the universe. This scene culminates in the couple’s first kiss, and draws aesthetic and romantic intimacies together into a single moment.416

Recalling Dostoevsky’s prediction that love would be “sufficient only for a moment of life, but the very consciousness of its momentariness [would] intensify its fire, which now is dissipated in dreams of eternal love beyond the grave,”417 the contemporary romantic love myth has indeed sacralised ‘the moment’ as a direct replacement for the paradisiacal afterlife of Christian mythology. The filmic medium utilises ‘moments’ as narrative shorthand for the fuller version of the romantic narrative and its association with the social values of the romantic love myth. Perhaps it is due to the constraints of the medium that love-at-first sight features so strongly, or that peak experiences of love are depicted almost identically to religious experiences, yet in every love story there is one moment that is identified as the moment. That is, a moment when one transcends their ordinary mode of being in the world, feeling a spontaneous sense of the sublime wherein time slows down and all things appear in a different light. It is relevant here to recall the Modernist concept of truth and Baudelaire’s “painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains,”418 who was distinguished from “the painter of the eternal, or at least of more lasting things, of heroic or religious subjects.”419 While both figures sought the ‘eternal,’ the former found it in the fleeting moments of daily life, while the latter posited something akin to Plato’s eternal Forms,420 by favouring a formulaic approach to art that could be achieved by a solitary painter in a dark room, who had seen nothing of modern life. As a part of the self-deterministic reform of Western thought, the immediacy of ‘the moment’ infers an unmediated form of relation that is free from institutional influence. The relationship between the moment and romantic experience demonstrates the extent to which love is linked to

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416 As films are designed for a pluralistic audience, the tendency to present the sacred in a broad rather than definitive sense may be one way of explaining why sacredness is depicted in its most ‘essential’ form through light, sound and atmospheric cues rather than overt references to particular deities, doctrines or religious iconography. Yet it may also be argued that these vague descriptions of the divine are widely used because they are generally accepted to be apt descriptions of the transcendent. Because love is depicted in such similar terms, it is, at the very least, clear that love is defined by filmmakers as an Ultimate experience.

417 Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, pp. 615–616.


420 Interpreted in the neo-classical sense that the universal laws of beauty could be defined. Campbell, The Romantic Ethic, pp. 154–155.
broader social ideals relating to beauty and truth.421 In the moment of romantic revelation, the moment of aesthetic sublimity simultaneously occurs.

Depicted in film as a transcendent sensation enabling connection with the sacred realm of metaphysical truth, ‘the moment’ unlocks the inherent goodness and wisdom of the human heart, and the whole world is revealed in its true beauty. As May observed, love, as the ‘secret religion of the West’ appeared to be practiced most wholeheartedly by “the militantly irreligious.”422 This becomes less surprising when one considers that the secular or disenchanted view of existence renders the Christian Heaven untenable, and if reality (as it is experienced) is all there is, then sacredness must be expressed in terms of the immediate human relation to the phenomenal world. The ‘dream edifice’ comprising the traditional concept of ‘Heaven’ is therefore relocated within the limits set by the secular sphere, where it becomes, more literally, a ‘perfected vision of life.’ More importantly, ‘the moment’ is presented as an antidote to the typical state of “ever renewing desires”423 that is endemic in consumer societies. As romantic comedies remind their audiences, one can easily mistake the semblance of love for true love, and can just as easily come to believe that the practice of self-illusory hedonism will eventually provide that longed for state of satisfaction. By locating true love in ‘the moment,’ it is situated in a true and eternal sense that absolves the requirement of continual striving.424 Effectively, this distinguishes certain experiences of love as being authentic, as true love is inevitably linked to the ‘true self’ and an enlightened state of being in the world.425

DEFINITIONAL REVIEW: THE ROMANTIC LOVE MYTH: NATURE AND FUNCTION

From these observations it can be concluded that while the love myth may have its roots in Christianity and Western philosophical culture, it is equally defined by passionately held Enlightenment values relating to freedom, democracy, anti-authoritarianism, humanism, self-responsibility and the desire for the betterment of humankind. Due to the love myth’s intense

421 For example, Maggie comes to terms with her illness through a sublime moment of love that is described as if it is exceedingly ordinary, yet the inference is that the ordinary is profound. “...just how happy I am, in this moment right now the way the light’s hittin that face of yours, there’s this little breeze coming through the window, and it doesn’t matter if I have ten thousand more moments like this or just this one, because...right now this moment – I have this.” Love and Other Drugs.
422 May, Love: A History, p. xiii. An excellent example of this can be found in seasons one to four of Doctor Who, where the outspoken atheist Russel T. Davies (acting as Head Writer) reformulated the Doctor’s character as an anti-religious humanist. While these four seasons express a great distain for religion, Davies introduces the Doctor to true love for the first time in the series’ history. It is also interesting to note that the bond between the Doctor and Rose Tyler is expressed in quasi-mystical terms, reintroducing both meaning and magic to the narrative world.
423 In Before Sunset Celine and Jesse compare the mode of being associated with environmental activists who are “in the moment” and Buddhists who practice ‘mindfulness’ with their own experiences of being “designed to be slightly dissatisfied with everything.”
424 Ironically, however, the ideal of enlightenment and ‘not striving’ becomes something that the Western individual strives for.
425 In Two Days in Paris (2007), Marion associates being ‘in the moment’ with the authentic experience of love: “Taking pictures all the time turns you into an observer, it automatically takes you out of the moment. For our trip to Venice I wanted to be in the moment, with Jack. But instead of kissing on the gondola, he took forty-eight pictures on the gondola. Instead of holding hands walking across Pia san Marco, Jack took seventy two pictures [of the] Pia san Marco, et cetera, et cetera.”
‘this-worldly’ focus, Campbell’s concept of potentiality becomes vital, as a deep level of psychological engagement with the love myth depends upon the individual’s belief that true love can be experienced during their lifetime. Linked to the spirit of consumer-capitalism, the love myth promises every individual that their salvation is already assured, if they can only come to realise this fact. There is no telling what the individual can achieve if they are willing to ‘dream the impossible dream’ and ‘take the leap of faith’ in love. Deeply linked to the ethos of New York City, the love myth presents the world as a land of opportunity that welcomes the self-deterministic individual and helps them on their journey to success, self-hood and romantic absolution. The strength of the association between romantic love and the prized cities of America and France reveals the democratic and revolutionary overtones of love. Further, the deregulatory power of the myth that was first demonstrated in mid-eighteenth century Britain, has been employed extensively in Western popular culture as a means of rejecting prejudicial limitations that would challenge the liberty of love. More than simply rejecting institutional writs on marriage or the laws, the primacy of the love myth signals a shift from external to internal agency, from obligation to freedom, and from clear structures to a world of choice that can only be navigated by the impetus of desire and a ceaseless striving towards the ideal.

The individual, now free to make their own decisions based upon personal tastes and values, must, nonetheless, have some way of knowing what is good, real, true and beautiful. Intuition and feeling have been identified as being crucial to modern epistemology, yet it is also clear that this mode is intrinsically linked to the project of interpreting culturally contingent signs. As Bourdieu has argued, taste-based decisions function as a means of maintaining hidden class-structures. Although this fact may be sublimated by the love myth as it undercuts its central ideals, ‘signs’ form another important facet of the religious functionality of romantic love. Just as the Calvinists developed an adhoc collection of religious testimonies that revealed the experiential criteria for knowing that one was ‘saved,’ in contemporary popular culture, film provides a consistent set of experiential cues that provide a definitive account of what true love is, and how one can recognise it in their own life. Equally, literature from the Platonic and Christian mystical traditions provided Flaubert with a model of authentic spiritual experience that he translated into his presentation of the love myth. While the revelation of true love, constitutes the ultimate ‘sign,’ this sublime moment does is not necessarily followed by a stable, long-term relationship. As a moment of enlightenment, this conversion experience, rather, unveils the true nature of existence, and the inherent goodness of the self, the world and of humanity in general.
Conclusion

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The Romantic Love Myth: Definitional Review

The Nature of a Contemporary Religious Worldview
INTRODUCTION

In this concluding chapter, the romantic love myth will be reconsidered in terms of the findings of chapters one, two and three, and a hypothesis of love’s future will be put forward. Tracing the trajectory of the love myth from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, the evolution of romantic love’s religious significance will be identified.

DEFINITIONAL REVIEW: WHAT IS LOVE?

Love, more than any other emotion, has been notoriously difficult to define. Introducing the topic of this study, I stressed the cultural contingency of emotion and the impossibility of defining love in an absolute sense. The definitional reviews that concluded chapters two and three have provided an outline of the cultural associations of the love myth, yet in terms of love itself, this thesis has provided something of a via negativa definition through the claim that love is true by not being false. This, however, remains the most appropriate means of defining love, as the West’s understanding of this ‘holy emotion’ is contingent upon the changing definitional criteria of beauty, truth, and ultimacy. As a subtle and abstract emotion that has been granted great power in Western culture, it has become imperative that love’s qualities mirror ultimate social ideals. As Flaubert observed, this was one of the reasons that Christianity fell out of favour as the “ideal that humanity form[ed] for itself of God [did] not go beyond that of an Oriental monarch surrounded by his court. The religious ideal [was], in fact, several centuries behind the social ideal.”

Being a term as broadly defined and widely contested as ‘God,’ ‘love’ has nonetheless maintained its position at the pinnacle of the Western imaginary by remaining in-step with social values.

THE ROMANTIC LOVE MYTH FROM MODERNISM TO THE PRESENT DAY

In chapter one, it became evident that the decline of Christianity was instigated by the rise of anthropocentric thinking. That is, once ‘Christianity’ came to be understood as a system that was psychologically real, rather than objectively so, its symbolic constructs were judged according to humanistic ethical criteria. God, Jesus, and the myth of original sin were reviewed, and by human standards, God became a despot, Jesus a revolutionary, and original sin became the myth designed to prevent human enlightenment. Rather than going through institutional channels to access the Source of truth, beauty and love; these values, that had traditionally been associated with the Ultimate in various schools of Christianity, became accessible to the individual. While Rousseau had located human goodness in the pre-socialised self, similar philosophical shifts were occurring in innumerable schools of thought. In the Christian tradition, Schleiermacher and the

427 Kant, ‘What is Enlightenment?’
428 Particularly the Platonic strains of the Christian mystic tradition and Liberal Theology.
liberal theologians taught that God could be known directly through feeling. In intellectual circles, mysticism and Gnosticism became new models for accessing secret knowledge that lay concealed in-between the lines, in the symbolic inferences of myth and history. Psychology, and the cultivation of 'self-illusory hedonism,' ensured that the individual was no longer the passive receiver of emotive 'forces,' but could exert a large degree of self-determinism in their emotional life. In this new state of self-management, the threat of falling under the yoke of the institution remained ever-present, yet this same fear was not associated with the power exerted by the lover.

An expression of free will, and of the purest sentiment a human could bestow, true love became symbolic of the rejection of all that was corrupt about institutionalised Christendom. Beauty sparked desire for the beloved, and if one's love was true, there could be nothing more authentic than the personal expression of romantic love. The 'truth' of this beauty became less closely associated with the 'perfect' as Modernist aesthetics came to influence culture more widely, and as the uniqueness of the self became ever more valued, the corresponding uniqueness of the beloved followed suit. Given that an epistemology of taste had been promoted through consumer culture, that which was chosen according to the laws of taste was granted a superior truth-status because such choices reflected the uniqueness of the self. Through the continued process of self-illusory hedonism, new stimuli (products, people, films, artworks) could be tested and judged according to emotional 'signs.' Through the repeated association between certain emotional states and 'true love' through film and popular culture, the individual could confirm that their intuitive verification of love was justified through the recognition of common 'signs.'

As discussed in chapter three, the mythology of consumer-capitalism is integral to modern romantic love. Love, success and happiness are considered to be the individual's birthright, and in this sense, their fulfilment is 'pre-destined.' According to the romantic love myth, as it is presented in romantic comedies and popular culture, all individuals have a soul mate, yet all must prove themselves worthy of this Ultimate gift. Suffering and trails of faith are necessary in order to progress, psychologically, to a level of perfection that will enable this fated union to occur. Self-improvement becomes essential to the project of salvation via romantic love and the lover is rewarded, by being able to experience 'heaven on earth.' Certainly, the promise of 'heaven on earth' of 'forever' and 'eternal union' may not literally be experienced, yet in the moment when the individual feels that these abstract ideals have become a living reality, this is a conglomerate event where personal narrative and macro-mythology work as one. In the moment, when love reveals its essence, it is no longer a case of 'willing' oneself to believe, as the emotional signs of truth overwhelm the individual. Like the 'saved,' love's converts preach, "it will happen to you too!" and as believers in possibility, potentiality and self-determination, Western individuals find themselves, in Barthes' words, 'intoxicated' by the anticipatory euphoria of all that could be.

THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION?

Although love theorists have exposed the love myth to critique, calling for a greater degree of reflexivity about this fundamental Western ideal, it is clear that romantic mythology has become so deeply entrenched in the taken-for-granted reality of the West, that it is unlikely to dissipate at any point in the near future. Moreover, because the love myth is linked to the preferred epistemological mode of modern culture, and its principle economic system, consumer-capitalism,
these social structures actively promote the recapitulation of the myth. Given the correlation between the revelation of the ‘true self’ and the discovery of the other, the values of individualism drive romantic seekership. Finally, as the love myth seeks to align itself with contemporary definitions of beauty and truth, it is able to maintain a strong connection with authenticity. In Western culture, beauty, love and truth have remained linked to the Ultimate, and the strength of this conceptual bond has not been undone through the process of secularisation. While the love myth underwent a significant transformation from the Modernist to the contemporary period, it is unlikely that it will ‘die out’ as long as romantic love remains intrinsic to so many Western cultural institutions.

CONCLUSION

Defining religion as that which is considered ultimate in the individual’s worldview, the concept of ‘worldview’ has been realigned with the collectivity of world-building, which determines the nature of taken-for-granted reality. As the question of how one could know was irreversibly altered through the influences of modernity, the tendency to make intuitive, emotive and taste-based decisions, also affected what would be believed. Accordingly, the love myth has been analysed in terms of its mythologic content in addition to epistemological and experiential factors that contribute to meaning-making. It is concluded, therefore, that romantic love works on an ideational level as a system of social ideals, yet that the experiential aspect of the myth serves a pivotal function in the determination of love as a religious experience of ultimacy. The desiring relation toward the divinised other may never be satisfied, yet the very notion of love’s possibility drives the individual forward in their quest to realise their ‘perfected vision of life.’ As a formidable motivating force, romantic love continues to shape the behaviour of individuals in the West. Regardless of one’s religious or irreligious self-identification, the romantic love myth infuses Western culture and has become the primary mythology of the sacred, in the collective tongue.
References from Popular Culture

KEY:


Cited Films

Adjustment Bureau, dir. George Nolfi (2011) – RD
Almost Famous, dir. Cameron Crowe (2000) – C/D
American Beauty, dir. Sam Mendes (1999) – C/D/AH
An Affair to Remember, dir. Leo McCarey (1957) – RD
Breakfast at Tiffany’s, dir. Blake Edwards (1961) – RC/NYC
Joe Versus the Volcano, dir. John Patrick Shanley – RC/nyc
Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, dir. Edgar Wright (2010) – RC
Sex and the City 2, dir. Patrick King (2010) – RC/RD/NYC
Sister Act, dir. Emile Ardolino (1992) – C
Thank God He Met Lizzie, dir. Cherie Nowlan (1997) – RC
The 40 Year Old Virgin, dir. Judd Apatow (2005) – RC
Thumbsucker, dir. Mike Mills (2005) – AH

Additional Examples of Romantic Films Set in New York

27 Dresses, dir. Anne Fletcher (2008) - RC
Annie Hall, dir. Woody Allen (1977) - RC
As Good as it Gets, dir. James L. Brooks (1997) - RC
Autumn in New York, dir. Joan Chen (2000) - RD
I Hate Valentines Day, dir. Nia Vardalos (2009) - RC
Kissing Jessica Stein, dir. Charles Herman-Wurmfeld (2001) - RC
Maid in Manhattan, dir. Wayne Wang (2002) - RC
Manhattan, dir. Woody Allen (1979) – RC/RD
Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist, dir. Peter Sollett (2008) - RC
Picture Perfect, dir. Glen Gordon Caron (1997) - RC
Prime, dir. Ben Younger (2005) - RC
Puccini for Beginners, dir. Maria Maggenti (2006) - RC
She’s Got to Have It, dir. Spike Lee (1986) – RC/RD
She’s the One, dir. Edward Burns (1996) – RC/RD
The Goodbye Girl, dir. Herbert Ross (1977) - RD
The Object of My Affection, Nicholas Hytner (1998) - RC
Two Days in New York, dir. Julie Delpy (2011) - RC
Two Lovers, James Gray (2008) - RD
Two Weeks Notice, dir. Mark Lawrence (2002) - RC
West Side Story, Jerome Robbins (1961) - Musical
Music

“Heaven is a Place on Earth” – Belinda Carlisle
“Swoon” – The Chemical Brothers
“The Impossible Dream” – from the 1965 musical *Man of La Mancha*
“You Got the Love” – Florence and the Machine

Television

*Law and Order*, NBC, created by Dick Wolf (1990-Present)
*Mad Men*, AMC, created by Matthew Weiner (2007-Present)

  Episode:
  1:1 “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”

*Sex and the City*, HBO, created by Darren Star (1998-2004)

  Episodes:
  1:3 “Bay of Married Pigs”
  1:5 “The Power of Female Sex”
  1:6 “Secret Sex”
  1:7 “The Monogamists”
  3:10 “All or Nothing”
  6:4 “Pick a Little, Talk a Little

*The Bachelor*, ABC, created by Mike Fleiss (2002-Present)

  Episode:
  16:7 (location: Belize)

Miscellaneous

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Academic and Literary References


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