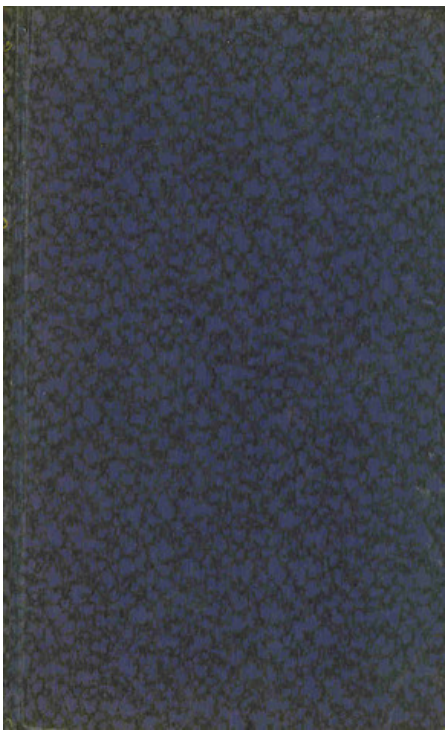

The True Heart

Sylvia Townsend Warner

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The True Heart Details

Date	:	Published 1929 by Chatto & Windus
ISBN	:	
Author	:	Sylvia Townsend Warner
Format	:	Hardcover 297 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Novels, Romance, Clean Romance

From Reader Review The True Heart for online ebook

Kay Robart says

See my review here:

https://whatmeread.wordpress.com/2016...

William Leight says

“The True Heart” has an almost mythic quality to it at times, which makes sense given that it is based on the myth of Cupid and Psyche. It’s very loosely based, to be sure, and I’m not too surprised that (according to this edition’s introduction) nobody except Warner’s mother actually figured it out: Sukey for Psyche works and Mrs. Seaborn is a clever name for Venus, but the name Eric, though close to Eros, seems (with apologies to all you Eric’s out there, I would have said the same thing no matter what name she picked) a little too workaday for the god of love, and as Warner hardly keeps any of the original story’s plot it’s quite easy to miss it. What Warner does do very effectively, though, is preserve a sort of mythic atmosphere, despite the fact that the book is full of prosaic scenes and down-to-earth people. It helps that the book is told from Sukey’s perspective: as she is living outside of the orphanage where she grew up for the first time, everything has a larger-than-life quality to her. Further feeding the atmosphere are the myth-y plot devices that Warner preserves: in particular, the way that Sukey, like Psyche, finds someone to help her at every step of her journey, even, as upon her arrival in London, when she is at her most vulnerable and the sudden appearance of a kindly stranger is least plausible. By the same token, nobody but Mrs. Seaborn ever tries to thwart her attempt to reclaim Eric, or really to hurt her in any way. This gives the impression that the whole world is on Sukey’s side and that her success is inevitable, despite the fact that, in the late-Victorian England that Warner brilliantly evokes in numerous scenes of everyday life, a poor teenage family-less housemaid had nobody at all on her side, and her quest to marry a member of the gentry (even one not quite in his right mind) would almost certainly be fruitless. Sukey’s belief that obtaining a bible from Queen Victoria can overcome all the social barriers that stand in her way also smacks of a fairy-tale quest for an object of power, and makes for a strange contrast with her generally practical nature. In fact, the book is full of contrasts between highly realistic scenes and everyday characters on the one hand and a plot that is often far from realistic or everyday. Yet rather than make "The True Heart" seem incoherent, this combination — call it social unrealism — instead helps heighten the impression the work gives of being a legend as much as it is a novel.

Of course, it is a novel, and since a novel is not a myth, a number of changes are required to successfully transform the latter into the former. As mentioned above, Warner ditches most of the plot of the Cupid and Psyche story, even if some of the plot mechanisms are similar, but what’s just as important for the novel’s success is the way she rethinks all the characters, starting, of course, with Sukey herself. The original Psyche is a bit of a drip: very beautiful but not too bright (easily manipulated, for one thing) and always on the verge of doing away with herself in despair before some friendly animal or plant or building tells her how to get through her current difficulty. Sukey is also not too bright, though much of that is ignorance born of innocence rather than actual stupidity (and the way that Warner gets us to laugh at Sukey while simultaneously reinforcing our sympathy with her is genius), but otherwise she is Psyche’s opposite in every way, and the novel is better for it. Her lack of experience and naivete are more than counterbalanced by an impressive strength of character and determination. She recognizes the difficulties she faces, but unlike

Psyche, she only comes close to despair once (from which she is, naturally, rescued by a kindly stranger). Otherwise, she simply makes a new plan and does her best to carry it out. The reader, with his or her superior knowledge, can probably tell that the plans are not always good plans, even before they fail — appealing to Mrs. Seaborn was fairly disastrous, and in the end Queen Victoria's bible doesn't actually help her at all — but she carries them through as best she can, undaunted by social, geographical, or any other sort of obstacles. To be sure, she gets some lucky breaks when she needs them, but if she wasn't trying to win out single-handedly, she wouldn't have been in position to take advantage of the help that she is offered anyway.

The other prominent characters from the myth are not so much rethought as reduced so as to add to the work's realism quotient. Mrs. Seaborn, Mrs. Oxey (Juno), the Godmother (Demeter), and Queen Victoria (Persephone) all retain some of the mythic qualities of the goddesses they replace, but their roles are each limited to a few pages. Eric, our Cupid, is universally referred to as an idiot, though "simple" might perhaps be more accurate: he has a slightly larger role, as his and Sukey's romance needs to be established in some way, but he is considerably less godlike than his predecessor — Sukey may love him, but she is not in the least in awe of him. The more prominent characters are not gods but rather those that Warner has invented, most of whom are associated with the farms where Sukey works: Mrs. Seaborn's husband; Mr. Noman, the good farmer who is her first employer, and his sons; Mr. Mollein, the bad farmer who is her second employer, and his wife; Prudence, the social-climbing servant girl who Sukey is replacing at the Noman's; and assorted children and laborers. None of these people exhibit any sort of mythical quality: instead, they are quite human, in some cases all-too-much so. The Reverend Smith Seaborn is one such case, and an especially prominent one as he is the only character besides Sukey whose perspective we are given. Presumably this is to counteract the majesty and terror that Mrs. Seaborn has hitherto inspired, as her husband has neither of those qualities and is solely concerned with how the presence of Eric in his home will affect the petty small-town status squabbles that he is engaged in. (It also allows Warner to elide the process by which Sukey, who left her last job with no references and a minor scandal, manages to wangle another one: she's a legendary heroine, of course she manages to get a job without a problem, but for Warner's purposes it's better not to show the process.) The final character, and the one that grounds the book most firmly in the real world, is the Essex landscape. To Sukey, a London girl, the sea and the marshes are a revelation, and the impression they make on her is comparable to that of any of the book's other characters. Some of the book's most lyrical passages are descriptions of the scenery around Mr. Noman's farm.

The most important difference between the novel and the myth, though, comes not from the elements that Warner introduces but one that she leaves out: the iconic scene of Psyche spying on Cupid does not appear in any form in the book. Partly this is because the necessary context — the marriage to an unknown, never-seen person — would be difficult to arrange in late-Victorian England, but mainly it's because of the kind of novel Warner wants to write. The myth is, at bottom, one of punishment: Psyche lets herself be manipulated into doing something wrong — breaking a rule that she agreed to — and pays the price. Her punishment is unjust, which is why she is eventually pardoned, but the central dynamic of the story is Psyche desperately trying to atone for her sins. Warner, by contrast, has no interest in punishment. Sukey may make mistakes, and she does break a rule about social interactions between classes (though Warner suggests it's not really important when compared to something like love), but she does nothing under duress. Once she leaves the orphanage and is out in the world, every step she takes -- leaving the Noman's, going on her quest for Queen Victoria's Bible, etc. -- is her own choice and taken in pursuit of her own goals. Sukey is, in fact, just a hero like any other, struggling to win her beloved against the forces that have unjustly separated them: the only thing that's unusual about her is that she, unlike most of the heroes of novels where this kind of thing happens (certainly most of the heroes of such novels in the 1920s), is a woman. The only slightly jarring note comes from the fact that, in order to take Eric more or less out of the equation, as he would be if the genders were reversed, Warner has to make him retarded. (This could, of course, also be regarded as a commentary on female passivity in novels of the Victorian era in which this book is set.) With that one exception, Warner

has written the best kind of feminist novel, one in which the action is driven by female characters who are pretty much ordinary people, such that if all the genders were reversed the book would work just as well.

Chrystal says

A beautifully lyrical retelling of a Greek myth in fairy-tale form.

Eileen says

A deceptively simple book that ends up strong and compelling, bringing the story of orphan-turned-servant Sukey Bond from a straightforward narrative into a serious quest exploring the mundanity and mystery of human experience.

Lesley says

Not really up there with Summer Will Show or Lolly Willowes, perhaps

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Patricia says

An imaginative interpretation of the story of Cupid and Psyche with characters who are mythic but also realistic enough for sympathy.

Leah says

Difficult to complete, a strange and unnerving retelling of a myth I'm unfamiliar with.

Warner's real strength lies in her subversive, unrelenting depictions of women as whole and challenging characters, and in the occasional asides about the plight and rights of women in her worlds.

Ali says

My knowledge of old myths is pretty sketchy – I know the basic outline of some but I have never had much interest in them if I’m honest. The True Heart is apparently a (very loose) re-telling of the story of Cupid and Psyche – though don’t let that put you off. If you weren’t aware of that then it wouldn’t matter – and it wouldn’t alter the delightfulness of this imaginative love story.

The story is set in Victorian Essex, the Essex marshes, Southend and London in 1873. Sukey Bond is just sixteen when she leaves the Warburton Memorial Female Orphanage. A positon has been found for her as a

farm maid in the Essex Marshes. Sukey is taken part of the way with Mrs Seaborn, the wife of the rector of Southend. Sukey – whose record of behaviour at the orphanage was so exemplary she won prizes, is immediately impressed with Mrs Seaborn.

"…raising her eyes to Mrs Seaborn's face she knew that this lady could only take her where it would be good for her to go. Mrs Seaborn's grey silk dress, as it swept over the lawn, seemed to sing a low tune. Her shoulders were rounded and drooping, her voice stroked the ear. She was like a dove, and the small onyx buttons on her dress were like doves' eyes."

New Easter is the farm where Sukey is sent, the landscape charms her, and though young, she is quite capable of the work. Prudence is the young woman who greets her, she used to have Sukey's job but now she is about to become engaged to one of the sons. Sukey mistakenly believes there to be three sons in the family, though one, Eric is treated with derision by the other two and their father. In time, we learn that Eric is not a member of that family, he is in fact the son of Mrs Seaborn, sent to live at the farm, out of the way, as gentle, country loving Eric is deemed 'an idiot' and subject to seizures. Mrs Seaborn is ashamed of her son, and Sukey soon must revise her previous opinion of the woman who had so charmed her previously.

Full review https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2016/...

Leonie says

The calm, rich writing gives this a lovely atmosphere.
