



Valentino and the Art of Silent Romance

by Julia Ann Charpentier

In 1926 the world lost one of the silver screen's biggest idols. Rudolph Valentino was known for his continental charm and Alpha man dominance. His roles were sometimes controversial, such as his portrayal of a seductive chieftain turned abductor in *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926). They were based on novels by Edith Maude Hull, a forerunner in the romance publishing business.

Though few have given him credit, Valentino was largely responsible for the sudden surge to popularity of the romance novel. Throughout his film career, which began in 1918, he played to a female audience. His fans were fascinated by the gentle touch of his lips to the back of a woman's hand, the insistent pressure of his arm around the curve of a woman's back, and the penetrating gaze of his eyes in the heat of a woman's passion.

When he danced, every woman dreamed of being the one he held. His famous role as an Argentine gaucho in *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) brought his dancing skills to the attention of the public and launched his career as an actor. His tango sequence showed off his agility and sensual rhythm, capturing the deprived hearts of a generation of women only beginning to realize their sexual independence. He went down in history as the first of the great foreign lovers.

A native of Castellaneta, Italy, Valentino emigrated to the United States in

1913. Part of his appeal stemmed from his heritage. He once remarked, "In my country young girls are so carefully guarded that a man is not free to speak to them of love except through the eyes, the expression of the face, or some other form of subtle pantomime." These elements are so very important in today's romance novel.

Limited by the constraints of the silent cinema, Valentino developed the ability to convey emotion through his actions and reactions alone. Whenever a writer is tempted to rely on dialogue to highlight a love scene or advance the plot, she is taking the risk of shadowing her intent. A character's physical presence is more powerful than words.

Valentino allowed his screen presence to fill every theater with desire. He was the forbidden fruit of the Twenties, the decade of flappers and Prohibition. Seduction and sex emanated from his black and white flickering image. His admirers trembled as they watched him.

He was puzzled by his own popularity. When questioned about his appeal, he replied, "This is a matter-of-fact age, and everyone is starving for romance. I suppose they like me because I bring that romance into their lives for a few moments."

Little has changed. Women still crave escape from a reality often crude, cruel, and coarse.

During Valentino's early days as an actor he played tough bad guys, preparation that made him more aware of the sensitive balance between Alpha and Omega man in the ideal lover. He capitalized on this knowledge and gained a following that stayed with him long after his death. His restrained technique as a romance artist has since been ridiculed and emulated. The press treated him with an odd mixture of respect, ignorance, and contempt. Romance novelists often complain of similar treatment.

Though he tried, Valentino could not break out of a comfortable niche and eventually became typecast in the motion picture industry. Producers and his pub-

lic refused to accept his versatile nature and insisted on placing him in parts he considered cheap and repetitious. He was dubbed *The Perfect Lover*. His other worthwhile qualities were ignored.

He was a proven draw and his marketable talent was what everyone wanted. No one wished to experiment. In a 1926 interview he said, "I wanted to make a lot of money, and so I let them play me up as a lounge lizard, a soft, handsome devil whose only aim in life was to sit around and be admired by women."

Perhaps the one element his image lacked is substance. A male character whose sole purpose is to soft-soap and seduce a beautiful young lady only leaves the viewer or reader feeling cheated. Just as it's not a rich man's money but his ability to make it that impresses a woman, it's a romantic hero's strength of character that gives him his seductive power.



Julia Ann Charpentier is a freelance journalist. Her work has appeared in newspapers, editorial and romance trade journals, singles, sports, and entertainment magazines. She specializes in profiles of regional and international personalities. Her bio-bibliography on Valentino is under consideration with a publisher.