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***True Heart Susie* (1919)**

D.W. Griffith (1875–1948)

OVERVIEW

Director D.W. Griffith (1875-1948) earned his place in film history as a Hollywood pioneer. Including all of his shorts and projects, Griffith produced nearly 500 films, many of which have been lost. His 1914 *Judith of Bethulia* was one of the first feature films produced in the United States, and many know him from his controversial 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. Only three of his films include recorded sound. Many film and editing techniques that are now commonplace were first used by Griffith in the early 1900s. Despite his many accolades and firsts, D.W. Griffith remains widely criticized; *The Birth of a Nation*, for example, is often said to be one of the key factors in the Ku Klux Klan's revival in the interwar period.

Film *True Heart Susie* was released in the summer of 1919 after the success of Griffith's previous project, *Broken Blossoms*, and it was overshadowed by that success. After some previews from film critics in magazines like *Variety*, there is little said about *True Heart Susie* in 1919. The review published in *Variety* highlights Lilian Gish's naturalistic acting ability and Griffith's masterful eye for visual storytelling, and both of these points of praise are repeated by modern viewers and critics. The very simple plot is a bit of a turn for Griffith, setting *True Heart Susie* apart from huge productions like *Intolerance* and *Hearts of the World*.

Background Often regarded as "Griffith at his most Victorian," *True Heart Susie* was made and released firmly in the Edwardian era. While modern viewers can view it as a sort of pastoral fantasy, what Griffith portrays is close to the reality of 1919: cars were a new invention, and only 2% of American farms were electrified. This movie is incredibly unambitious, nearly the opposite of Griffith's massive epics like *Intolerance* and *The Birth of a Nation*. What is most striking about the film is how effectively makeup and exquisite acting turns the leading lady and man from awkward youths into self-assured young adults as the film goes on. Even with the help of CGI, I've never seen de-aging as effectively done as it is in *True Heart Susie*'s first scenes: Harron appears to be half his age. Beyond the skillful stagecraft on display in this film, *True Heart Susie* remains a foundational example of American romantic drama film.

CHARACTERS

True Heart Susie – Susie lives on a small farm with her aunt, just across the road from William.

William Jenkins – Bill, as he comes to be called, goes to college mostly on Susie's dime but fails to notice her as a romantic interest for years.

Bettina Hopkins – A young former milliner from Chicago who manipulates William into marriage

Sporty Malone – A 'close friend' of Bettina who often 'shacks up' with her at parties

William's father – An older man who owns the family farm

SYNOPSIS

Susie is a young girl living with her aunt on her parent's property after the death of her mother. As she nears the end of her schooling, she sells the family cow to help pay for William's, her sweetheart, college education. Despite all she does for him, William believes that his financial aid comes from a rich man from their town, and the young man returns with a theological degree. After William takes over as pastor at the

local church, a young and flirtatious Bettina catches his wandering eye, and the two soon marry. Their life as husband and wife is far from happy, William expecting a typical traditional marriage while Bettina lounges around all day, refuses to cook, and parties with her friend, Sporty Malone, late into the night. One evening when dining with his neighbors, William finds Susie's cooking and manner to be more suited to the life he wants and begins to regret his marriage. A few days later, regretting her marriage, Bettina sneaks out to go to a late-night party with Sporty where she loses her key. Upon returning home, she is trapped in the rain before begging for help from Susie, whose kind heart cannot refuse someone in such obvious need. Susie backs up Bettina's lie to William the next morning, and just a few weeks later, Bettina is dead from pneumonia. William swears to never marry again, but one day he learns of Bettina's repeated infidelity, and he confesses his love for Susie. True Heart Susie happily accepts his proposal of marriage.

SCENES

Questions about Life- A series of title cards begins the film: "Is real life interesting? Every incident of this story is taken from real life. Do men look for the true heart in women? Or are most of them caught by the net of paint, powder and suggestive clothes? To the Women of the World, enslaved by Civilization—Woman is supposed to be allowed her choice—and yet, not one in ten ever has the chance to marry any but one man. To these Women, and their pitiful hours of waiting for the love that never comes, we dedicate our story."

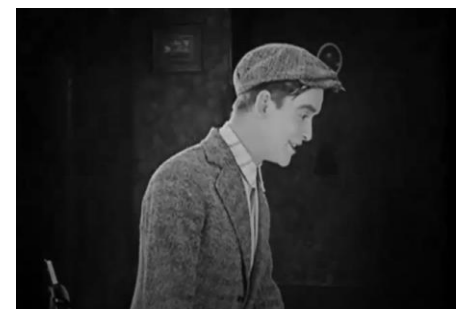
Friday at the school house- The scene opens on a road between two houses, one small and homely, the other rugged and pioneering. A title card introduces William's father as he steps from the porch of the more rugged home to perform his morning chores in the field. Inside the cottage across the way, Susie's aunt mends a piece of clothing. A title card reads: "At the school house—The Friday afternoon spelling class." The children in a one-room schoolhouse stand with their backs to the wall as the teacher quizzes each student on their spelling skills. The camera singles out the oldest students, William and Susie. Susie overtakes William in line when she correctly spells "anonymous" after he fails. The children all wander out of the schoolhouse after class is finished, and a title card appears: "Susie, like the girl in the verse: 'I'm sorry that I spelt the word, I hate to go above you, because', The brown eyes lower fell, 'Because, you see, I love you'."



The undying proof- Susie and William walk toward home together, Susie tailing William back and forth like a duckling behind its mother. A title card reads: "Of course they don't know what poor simple idiots they are—and we, who have never been so foolish, can hardly hope to understand—but—" In the woods by a large tree, Susie and William try (and fail) to kiss before William pulls out his pocket knife and carves their initials deep into the bark of the tree. They try (and fail) to kiss once more before wandering away from the tree.



William's dream- The pair split outside their homes, and Susie greets her aunt before entering her bedroom. There, she sees a picture of her mother, telling her, "He walked home with me, Mother." In William's home, the boy says something excitedly, and his father responds harshly, saying, "College! We can hardly make a living—let alone college! A good farmer is better than a poor lawyer or preacher."



Trip to the village- A title card reads: "She manages to be along on his trip to the village." Walking the path to the village, Susie and William run into another young woman. She starts talking energetically to William, and Susie becomes jealous, tugging on William's sleeve impatiently and nodding her head toward the village. She manages to pull William away from the other girl and they walk to the village together.



The rich man- Another title card reads: "The Gent from the great outside world—four-flushing—even for no greater audience than a pair of brown country eyes." A crowd of people mingles around a well-dressed man in the back of an automobile. William and Susie soon approach, and William strikes up a conversation with the rich man. "My Boy," says the rich man, "I see in you the makings of a great man!" He writes something on a piece of paper and passes it to William, saying, "Many a famous man owes his position to my aid—You will doubtless hear from me." The man signals to his driver to continue down the road, and the townsfolk wave before going back to their work and shopping.



Passing days- A title card reads: "Passing days bring no letter or results of any kind to the simple-hearted dreamers." William is disappointed when his father returns from the post office with no mail. Susie watches as William glumly enters his home before moving to the rear of her property to "confide her sorrow to sister Daisy." Daisy is Susie's beloved milk cow, who comes galloping excitedly toward the girl. "—and I want him to go to school—" Susie says, stroking the cow's head. "I MUST marry a smart man."



Farewell to Daisy- Susie hatches a plan. As her mother left everything to her, she asks her aunt to help her sell the cow and some other valuables to help William pay for his tuition. After getting her aunt to agree, Susie surveys the small farmyard where chickens and turkeys peck at the ground. Another title card appears: "The various stepping stones upon which William is to rise to fame." Soon, Susie bids a tearful farewell to Daisy.



Susie has her way- A title card explains that Susie sends a letter from a nearby town to William with the money, styling the writing to trick him into thinking it's from the rich man. Soon, the boy receives the letter, reviving his faith in the rich man. With a shout of joy, he startles his father from his nap on the nearby chair. "A great man is going to fix it so I can go to college," William explains, showing his father the letter. With even more fervor, the boy clumsily runs from his house to tell Susie of the news. She awaits him expectantly, but puts on a display of surprise for his sake.



William leaves for college- William says goodbye to Susie with his suitcase in hand. Susie's aunt gives him a snack for the road before giving him a farewell kiss. Susie tries for the same, but neither she or William lean in close enough. We learn through a title card that, despite Susie's generous gift, he must still work his way through college, earning him "the unwelcome nickname, 'Butter'." In a dining hall, William works as a server, dishing out pats of butter to richer boys who mock and bully him, throwing food



on his work uniform and insulting him. One flings soup into his eye before showing off his new watch.

Over-enthusiasm- Back home, Susie reads a letter from William. The camera jumps to her point of view, highlighting the phrase, "...and so far, I haven't met anybody I like better than the people at home." After looking over her shoulders to make sure her aunt isn't watching, Susie begins kissing the letter repeatedly. A title card reads, "Susie receives this somewhat noncommittal message with great enthusiasm." Susie dances around the room when her aunt enters and scolds her for her childish behavior. While William studies hard at school, Susie reads book after book to try and keep up.



Fight for honor- Outside the steps of a building on the college campus, two well-dressed boys approach William, who is hard at work with a push broom. "Hey, *butter!*" one says, "It's on your vest!" Fed up with the unkind nickname and treatment, William lashes out, throwing a punch. Several more boys come into shot, holding William and the other student back.



On the battlefield- A bit later in a field, a ring of students watch as William and the other boy square up. Both get some last-minute advice from another student before they begin their "honorable" fight. His opponent seems familiar with boxing and manages to knock William to the ground. William soon gets up however, unleashing a flurry of blows and knocking the other boy down. He gets back up, but throws his hands up in surrender before falling down again, cradling his jaw. Breathing heavily, William faces down the other boys and says, "My name's Bill—not Butter!" The boys cheer and carry William away.



Bill's return- A title card reads: "So Bill it is, until graduation, when he returns in a blaze of glory— also a mustache, imitating his supposed benefactor." Outside Susie's house, William trots up. Susie joins him at the gate, looking quite taken by his new mustache. Susie's aunt rushes to greet him. When she leaves, the two old friends sit for a moment on the front step before Susie says, "Let's go to the store and get a sody [soda]."



Dream coming true- Susie scampers inside, excited to tell her aunt that she's going into town with William. She manages to contain herself when she walks back outside and joins William. A title card reads: "Sir William and lady advance before the admiring court." In the town, William greets each person he passes, and Susie can barely contain her pride.



Ice cream- Distracted by all the familiar faces, William starts to walk past the general store that holds the town's soda counter. Susie seems to draw him back in with just a look, and they enter the store together. Inside, several women chatter at one end of the bar as Susie and William sit at the opposite end. After the young couple orders, a title card explains that the women are from a larger nearby town. They make flirtatious faces at William before he whispers to Susie, "You see those two, painted and powdered?—Men flirt with that kind, but they marry the plain and



simple ones." Susie seems to take this comment as confirmation of William's attraction to her instead of the off-hand comment he meant.

The little milliner- A title card reads: "The little milliner from Chicago, who believes thoroughly in paint and powder, tight skirts and silk stockings,—bestowing a few new steps on the little fast set of Brightville." People dance around a small room. Amid the chaos, the camera singles out a young woman who attempts to teach some new dance moves to a couple of men. After punch and more dancing, she leaves with a relative and her escort, Sporty Malone, to visit the small community outside of town. They hop into an automobile bearing Sporty's name and drive down the road.



Trial sermon- Deep in the woods, Susie sits as William stands in front of her, orating. A title card explains that he's hoping to impress the conference elders with his trial sermon and needs to practice. Susie smiles and comments helpfully as William emphasizes his words with his hands. Meanwhile in town, the milliner, who we come to know as Bettina, greets her aunt who welcomes her into her home. In her own house, Susie writes in her diary. She muses about asking William to marry her now instead of waiting until a "better" time that would allow for a spring wedding. Soon, the village gathers at the church for an ice cream social bidding the departing minister farewell. William is there as a guest of honor, ready to take the older man's place. After talking to the old minister, William crosses the chapel to talk to Susie and her aunt.



Going home- After a slight embarrassment from her aunt talking about her love of ice cream, Susie becomes jealous when Bettina monopolizes William. Bettina invites him to walk her home, and William accepts. "Oh, he had to be polite to the stranger," Susie says to her aunt, mostly to reassure herself. They leave arm in arm, following William. Upon returning home, Susie gives William's house a frustrated glance before latching the gate.



Scheming- At Bettina's aunt's home, William shakes the women's hands before a title card appears: "William's great, simple heart cannot believe that all are not like himself." They say goodbye and part. Inside her aunt's home, Bettina speaks: "Oh, he's only a punk county minister— but I'm tired of working—haven't a cent left. I've got to marry *somebody*!" "He writes, too!" her aunt replies.



Spying- Bettina sits with William on a bench, flirtatiously stroking his shin with her foot. Back at her home, Susie works hard trying to put a modern spin on one of her old dresses. She puts down the needle and thread to admire her handiwork and show the dress to the portrait of her mother above her desk. Later, Susie works hard in her large garden, tilling the earth with a hoe. William and Bettina pass outside her property, and Susie rushes to hide in a nearby bush. She watches jealously as Bettina plucks a rose from a bush growing on the fence and puts it in William's lapel. Susie looks away and closes her eyes as if wishing the interloper would disappear. William points toward his home and leads Bettina away.



A correction- Susie enters her home and pulls out her diary, adding a note below the last entry: "Perhaps after all will wait until spring." A short scene unfolds where Susie practices putting on corn starch for powder and dressing in her newly altered dress. Her aunt sees this, scolding her. Remembering what William said at the soda parlor, she takes her aunt's advice.



The Sunday afternoon parade- Susie sits on her front step while churchgoers pass on their way to the church. William joins them, tipping his hat to Susie and walking away, but he suddenly stops and turns, making Susie grin to herself as he enters her yard to speak with her. Seated on the step beside her, William asks, "Susie, don't you think I should get married?" "Oh yes," Susie says, playing coyly with her hair. "They have more respect for a married minister." William smiles and nods, thanking Susie for her advice before leaving to join the parade of churchgoers. Susie watches him go, looking hurt.



A proposal After the service, William greets Bettina and her aunt at his home. "Now's your chance!" Bettina's aunt says after asking William's father to get her a glass of water, leaving the young people alone. William shows Bettina a letter from a publisher saying they're interested in his writing. She reacts proudly. When Bettina hands the letter back, William asks, "Will you marry me?" Bettina is shocked by the sudden proposal, asking, "Just give me fifteen minutes to think it over." William nods and leaves her alone, attending to the guests who have shown up at his home for post-service tea. Bettina moves outside, fanning herself with a handkerchief.



Susie sees the truth- Inside her home, Susie seems to come to a decision and exits her house with a determined look on her face. As she crosses the road from her yard, she sees Sporty park his car and meet in private with Bettina. Peeking through the ivy growing over William's porch, she spies Bettina and Sporty locked in a kiss. Susie looks triumphant and walks back toward her house before a title card appears: "Believing Bettina has found her real mate, Susie re-determines on an overwhelming assault."



An answer- William leaves his father and guests in the dining room to check on Bettina. Not finding her in the foyer, he moves back to the parlor. She soon surprises him, approaching William while he's standing confused in the parlor. At the same time, Susie exits her bedroom dressed in her altered dress and corn starch powder. Bettina, meanwhile, grabs the front of Williams, leans in close, and says, "I've thought it over." She wraps her arms around William's neck and holds him close. Susie knocks gently at the open front door of William's home before entering and finding him and Bettina in an embrace. Susie recoils and stumbles from the room, her heart broken. In the dining room, William's guests leave. Finding herself alone, Bettina's aunt grabs a slice of lemon from a nearby pitcher and hides it in a handkerchief (presumably to help trigger tears) before crossing to the parlor.



Unexpected celebration- Outside, Susie's aunt encourages her to go back and try again, forcing her into the betrothal celebrations in William's parlor. William approaches Susie, who bashfully shakes his hand before he says, "I've taken your advice, Susie." As the guests all settle down, William approaches the organ in the corner of the room and begins playing hymns, the reason everyone had gathered that evening. Using her fan to both cover and reveal her face, Susie stealthily wipes away tears as she watches William sing to Bettina.



The merry wedding bells- Bettina prepares for her wedding, looking at her wedding dress in a mirror as her aunt fidgets nervously. The camera's aperture flips open, showing Susie and her aunt are also helping with the wedding preparations. Susie watches glumly, shaking her head gently as Bettina complains about every little thing, demanding her appearance be spotless and perfect. In a comic parallel, William scrambles around his room under his father's command, placing items in his pockets and straightening his suit and tie frantically.



Suffering in silence- In the chapel, the town gathers to watch the wedding. The camera finds Susie, her face showing a deep longing for William as he stumbles through his vows. Bettina and William share a dispassionate kiss before turning to shake hands with their friends and family. A bit later, Susie stands in her front yard waving a handkerchief as the new couple's carriage carries them away on their honeymoon. As the carriage fades into the distance, Susie stumbles away, collapsing in tears among the flowers in her garden.



His dream, and his reality- A title card reads: "Some time afterwards—As he thought it was going to be—" In a dreamy haze, the scene opens on William and Bettina sharing a warm kiss as she places platters heaped with delicious food on the dining table, festooned with fresh flowers. The dream fades quickly, and another title card reads: "—and—as it occurs." William breaks his fast with coffee and leftover meat from dinner while Bettina ignores him, reading from a magazine with her curlers in her hair and bed clothes still on. "Darling," William says, trying to get Bettina's attention, "we have had nothing but cold meat for the last month. Don't you think— —" Bettina curls up her nose in a grimace and tells him, "Eat it and like it!" The fight between him and Bettina escalates when she throws a plate on the floor and screams, "I hate this damn place!" William tries to comfort her, but she pushes him out of the door. Later that evening, Susie serves the new couple a delicious chicken dinner. While eating, William realizes he may have made the wrong choice in choosing his mate.



Sporty and Co.- A title card explains that William is away for work. Outside his home, Sporty and his friends call on Bettina. Bettina answers their knocking grumpily, still in her curlers, and goes scampering up the stairs to change when she realizes it's her friends. They let themselves in and begin to party in the parlor. Bettina soon joins them, wearing a new dress. She closes the blinds and begins dancing with Sporty.



Get the right one- In her garden, Susie decides to tear up her letters from William. At that moment, William walks by, returning early from work. He greets Susie and strikes up a conversation when he notices her letters. "Love letters, Susie?" he teases. "Well, I suppose you'll be getting married—" After a sad look crosses his face, he warns her, "Be sure you get the right one." With that, William tips his hat and walks away, passing the tree where he carved his and Susie's initials. He remembers the time they had almost kissed and walks away sadly. Soon, he changes his mind and begins walking back toward Susie's home, but he changes his mind again and turns back for home. Similarly, Susie has decided to keep her letters intact, holding them close to her chest.



Party crashed- William is surprised to see Sporty's car in front of his house. He opens the front door of his home and catches a glimpse of Bettina in Sporty's arms, and they seem to be kissing. William closes the door, softly shaking in anger. He silently enters the home after a moment, catching all the party-goers off guard. William just smiles pleasantly while Bettina stammers to introduce everyone. Sporty and company move to leave quickly after shaking hands with William, leaving Bettina alone with her husband. "Did that man kiss you?" William asks. "How can you say such a thing!" Bettina snaps. "Of course he didn't!" She mocks crying, throwing herself against the door, saying, "You don't trust me at all!" After watching her display, William decides to trust Bettina, pulling her into an embrace.

Single-track heart- A title card reads: "After all, there are single-track hearts." A dreamy haze shrouds Susie as she reads through her diary, kittens crawling all over her shoulders and lap. She thinks back to a time she almost kissed William, rubbing out her latest entry angrily.

Plausible deniability- At home, William mentions to Bettina that he needs to borrow a book from a neighbor. Bettina holds her head and excuses herself to go upstairs and rest. There, she greets Sporty and a friend on the road below. A title card reads: "Bettina having arranged to sleep alone in the spare room on a pretext of being indisposed." They wave her down, but she waits to make sure William is going to bed before getting her belongings and stealing away downstairs and jumping into Sporty's waiting car. She carefully folds her house key into a handkerchief and stows it in the front of her dress. They make one stop on the way to the party, grabbing the book William needs as a cover story for Bettina's absence.

Bettina drops her key- A long party sequence begins as Bettina makes everyone swear to keep her presence a secret. The party-goers begin dancing and taking part in rowdy games like follow the leader, rearranging furniture into a makeshift obstacle course. During one of these games, Bettina's key falls out of her dress and is kicked beneath a couch. Meanwhile, Susie tends to her sickly aunt, and William looks out of his window at a gathering storm before going back to bed. Back at the party, Bettina smokes cigarettes two at a time on top of the piano before a dance competition begins. Soon, she says goodbye to her friends and leaves with Sporty. On their way back home, Sporty and Bettina are caught in the rain. He quickly drops her off behind her house and drives away, leaving her stranded when she realizes she's lost her key and all the doors and windows are locked.



Forced to trust her fate to Susie- A title card reads: "Forced to trust her fate to Susie." Bettina, now soaking wet, makes her way across the road to Susie's house. Susie is surprised to see Bettina pounding on her door, and lets her in. "Susie," Bettina explains theatrically, "I stole out—went to a party—and lost my key! I'll have to stay with you—and you must lie for me!" Susie blinks in shock and disbelief, but eventually caves to Bettina's crying and begging before helping her out of her wet clothes. She and Bettina crawl into bed, and despite her anger and jealousy, she pulls Bettina



close and comforts her through a nightmare. The next morning, William—having heard or seen nothing from Bettina all morning—breaks into the spare room to find it empty. Across the street, Susie dresses quickly as Bettina coughs and coughs. Susie goes over to Williams house, and he opens the door in a panic. “Your wife was nervous,” Susie explains, “and—and she stayed all night with me.”



Again, William believes- William follows Susie over to her house where Bettina sits in a rocking chair, coughing. William looks at her sternly as she explains: “I was so worried about things—came over to see Susie—took a walk, and—and *I got your book!*—Then, the rain caught us.” She passes the book to William as if to prove her story, and he takes it with a look of surprise and suspicion. A smile overtakes his face as he believes his wife’s story. Susie, biting her lip to hold back her inner conflict of being forced to lie, moves into her bedroom and neatly packs Bettina’s party dress in paper before seeing the couple off.



Results of the ride in the rain- A title card reads: “Results of the ride in the rain prove serious.” In William’s bedroom, Bettina lies in bed, friends and family looking over the couple as William sits beside her, looking sorrowful. A title card explains that in this moment, William makes a vow to never marry again if she dies. William leans in close, stroking Bettina’s outstretched hand. “The book,” she says, “I want to speak about the book.” William comforts her, saying, “Don’t speak, dearie. I can never forget that service to me.” Bettina’s eyes seem to roll up in her head for a moment before a title card appears: “So she dies, as she has lived—a little unfaithful.” With a final breath, she falls limply against the pillow. A doctor checks her pulse before closing her eyelids. William clings to her outstretched hand.



All Susie’s done- Over an image of the country road running between the two houses, a title appears: “Susie would never break his faith.” Alone in her room, Susie sits with a sad expression. As this short shot fades out, another title card appears: “Later, the aunt, not knowing of his vow, takes a hand.” Susie’s aunt works on some sewing on the front porch when William approaches her. She hands him a letter and says, “That’s the receipt for your tuition at college. Susie sacrificed much to get the money.” William looks shocked and conflicted before wandering back to his home. He remembers finding his and Susie’s initials carved in the bark, but he also remembers his vow to Bettina.



The truth about Bettina’s last days- Sometime later, William sits on his porch with a book when Sporty and one of Bettina’s friends drive up. The woman gets out of the car and walks to William, telling him, “My conscience has troubled me so! How could I—ever dream—all this would come of your wife’s going to our little party!” William is shocked to hear this news and looks troubled for a moment, but he eventually shakes the woman’s hand, forgiving her.



Freed from the mistaken vow- The scene fades out, and a title card reads: “Freed at last from his mistaken vow.” While watering her roses, Susie begins crying to herself. A sound and a shadow startle her: It’s William. “I’ve learned the truth,” he says, holding the receipt Susie’s aunt gave him. Susie looks embarrassed and darts away from the window to hide. “Is it too late, Susie?” William asks. “I know now I have loved you all my life.” Susie reappears, and the two lean toward each other, mirroring the awkward near-kisses of their youth, when suddenly William leans forward and kisses her. Susie smiles and leans into a deeper kiss. Harkening back to the beginning of the film, a short scene of young Susie and William walking into the village together plays before the film ends.



THEMES

Society

Education The film begins in a schoolhouse, cementing the idea that education will be important to the plot. Susie beats William in the spelling test, but instead of feeling pride, she feels nervous about her future: “I must marry a smart man,” she tells the portrait of her mother when she gets home. In order to ensure William is a smart man, Susie sells her beloved cow and her farmyard fowl to help pay for William’s college expenses. And while she cannot follow him to college, Susie does her best to keep up with William academically, reading and studying while she does her household chores. William returns from college and quickly enters the workforce as a preacher, but his education doesn’t stop. He is frequently seen reading and writing, both to further his career as a preacher and his blossoming career as a writer. His need for a reference text from a neighbor gives Bettina an excuse for her unexpected absence on the night of Sporty’s party.

Illustrative moment Early in the film, Susie is shown doing school work on her own while William is away at college. This is a small moment, but it shows the value of intelligence to Susie. Not only does she want to have a smart husband, she wishes to be able to appreciate his intelligence.



Gender Gender emerges in small ways throughout the film. Griffith approaches gender stereotypes in varied ways, echoing some of the more egalitarian portrayals of women in *Intolerance*. Susie is strong-willed and intelligent. She’s also put in a place of economic superiority over William at first, funding his college education. Susie has a more traditional side too: she doesn’t aspire to anything more than being a wife and mother despite her intelligence and moderate wealth. Similarly, she eschews modern fashion for the most part, only experimenting with corn starch to replicate powder when competing with Bettina. William, like many of Griffith’s “boys”, is a bit paradoxical in character. While he is simple, gentle, and kind, he is also shown to be capable of great violence when pushed. He is goaded into many “boys will be boys” situations where someone who is gentle cannot come out on top, and yet he does through a sudden shift in personality. In the same scene, we see Susie chastised by her aunt for acting childishly, showing the disparity in expectations of maturity for young men and women.

Illustrative moment One of the clearest displays of gender and the difference between men and women comes fairly early in the film. Sick of being called “butter” by the rich boys at school, William lashes out and begins a fight that the other boys break up. A bit later, away from school grounds, the two boys square off in an impromptu boxing match. The camera jumps back to Susie’s home, where she jumps and dances giddily after reading a letter William wrote to her. Susie’s aunt enters the room and scolds her for her “unladylike” actions. William then wins the fight and earns the acceptance of his peers.



Relationship

Affair Bettina's infidelity and frequent lies to William are key to the plot. While she tries to manipulate William into a marriage for appearances, she often runs off with Sporty and her friends, dancing closely with Sporty and kissing him on multiple occasions. The first of these on-screen kisses appears the same evening that William proposes to Bettina. She requests "fifteen minutes to think it over", and during that time, Sporty shows up, and the two kiss passionately on William's porch, unknown to William. This happens again when Bettina parties with her friends in William's parlor after their marriage. He returns home early, hoping to surprise his new wife, only to open the door to find her in Sporty's arms. The third time Bettina's infidelity comes into the plot, it results in her demise when returning from the party, she is caught in the rain and develops a deadly case of pneumonia.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of Bettina's affair with Sporty comes when William is away for work. She invites Sporty and her friends into her home without his permission and throws a raucous party. In between dancing and games, Sporty grabs Bettina and kisses her, and while she is seen to protest for a moment, she leans back in and kisses him again. Unbeknownst to her, William is returning early from his work responsibilities and opens the door just in time to catch her in Sporty's arms. When he confronts her about this, he is persuaded to disbelieve his own eyes by Bettina's emotional manipulations.

Attraction Attraction is one of the key themes explored in *True Heart Susie*. The theme is well established from the beginning when Susie feels bad for beating William in the spelling competition. After they leave the schoolhouse for the day, Susie follows closely behind William, much like a duckling. Her attraction for William is clear, but he seems oblivious, fumbling multiple chances to kiss her or confirm a similar attraction. Despite the unclear message, Susie remains taken with William, so much so that she secretly funds his college education. While upon his return William derides the habit of modern women to dress scandalously and paint their faces (and Susie takes this as confirmation of his love), William falls for Bettina's painted face and lies. She manipulates him into marriage for her own appearances, often striking out with her secret lover, Sporty. When things are made clear to William at the film's end, he realizes his long-time attraction to Susie and proposes to her.

Illustrative moment The school-age crush Susie has on William never really goes away, and we learn most about it at the beginning of the film. Susie is very obviously taken by William, although he doesn't seem to recognize it. We see them walking home from school together, William leads them on a somewhat nonsensical path with Susie following close behind, trying to hold his hand. This moment is revisited at the film's end, showing the importance of childhood attraction on the pair's relationship.



Marriage Marriage comes up early on in the plot when Susie says to her mother's portrait, "I must marry a smart man!" Her one goal seems to be becoming William's bride and shaping William into a worthy husband. Despite her desire to marry him, she never speaks to him about love or marriage directly, trying to manipulate him into a storybook romance that never comes to be. Instead, William marries Bettina, a formerly wealthy woman from Chicago who is only interested in William's position as minister to make herself look better in the eyes of the public. While William is hoping for a loving marriage, what he gets is a dissatisfied and unfaithful bride who isn't really interested in him, and it shows in her treatment of him. After Bettina's passing, William swears never to marry again, extending his vows in ignorance of her infidelity and lies. When he does discover the truth, however, he reveals his true feelings for Susie and asks to marry her.

Illustrative moment the marriage centered in *True Heart Susie* is used as a cautionary tale against hasty betrothal. Manipulative Bettina decides to pursue a marriage to William because of his position as a minister: This will raise her social standing without any effort, and it's all she cares about going into the relationship. During her wedding preparations, we can see Bettina acting out, heavily concerned with her appearance. Although there are no obvious flaws with her dress or veil, she panics and complains about things not looking or fitting right, and Susie does her best as bridesmaid to fix these nonexistent issues. One might call Bettina a "bridezilla" today, and her behavior makes clear that she's more interested in what others think of her than in William's love.



Psychology

Loss Loss is a recurring minor theme in the film. Susie lives with her aunt long after the death of her mother and father, and she seems to be living well with the loss. She has a healthy relationship with her grief, speaking with her mother through a portrait in her bedroom. Susie also faces loss when she must sell her beloved cow—an animal she calls “sister”—to help fund William’s college. William has also seemingly gone through loss, as he lives with only his elderly father. Nothing is revealed to us about the loss of his mother, showing that it must be a painful issue for his father. Bettina has lost her wealth and her fast-paced city lifestyle, and this drives her to act dishonestly with William, sneaking out to parties and carrying on a secret affair with Sporty Malone. In Bettina and William’s marriage, Susie loses out on her dreams of marrying her school-age sweetheart and struggles with the feelings this brings up throughout the film: She doesn’t want to act out, but she also doesn’t know what to do or how to move on.

Illustrative moment The most obvious loss in *True Heart Susie* comes after Bettina’s death. In her final moments, she tries to tell William the truth, but she passes before she can. As the doctor checks her pulse, William is distraught, having just lost his wife. A title card tells us that he vows never to marry again in order to repay Bettina’s debt of service, much to Susie’s dismay. However, Susie’s aunt, not knowing about Susie and Bettina’s lie in the days before her death, tells William about Susie paying for his college tuition. William states his regret for his vow, and sometime later, one of Bettina’s friends visits him and comes clean about the party and Bettina’s other infidelities. Now freed from his vow, William moves past the loss and proposes marriage to Susie.



Regret Regret is a small but persistent theme in *True Heart Susie*. It comes up first when Susie learns of William’s proposal to Bettina. Having thought for a long time that his lukewarm comments about the appearance of other women were statements about her own suitability for marriage to the young pastor, Susie has to hide her tears when she accidentally walks into the celebrations surrounding his proposal to another woman. Bettina is quick to regret her marriage, wishing she could live like a free woman and keep her status as a minister’s wife. Around the same time, William comes to regret his marriage to Bettina when she proves to be a lazy housewife without cooking skills, as well as manipulative and verbally abusive. Susie’s regrets begin to flare at the film’s end, and she even begins contemplating destroying William’s letters to her.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of regret in the film comes during Bettina and William’s wedding ceremony. Forced to participate in the marriage as a bridesmaid, Susie keeps a pleasant smile on her face until the reading of the vows. With all eyes on the new couple, her smile slips, and for once we see Susie’s negative feelings revealed. She looks at William with an odd mix of longing



and regret, wishing she had been more forward in displaying her attraction.

Life Stages

Coming of Age This minor theme emerges quickly but is referenced in the film's final moments. As the oldest students in the school house and neighbors, Susie and William spend a lot of time together. The young people are on the cusp of adulthood when they first start experimenting with romance together, awkwardly trying and failing to kiss many times. This doesn't seem to matter much to both of them, and William shows this by carving their initials into a tree as a show of love. William is dejected when he learns from his father they have no money to send him to school, but Susie comes through, anonymously sending him money to pay for his tuition. While William studies at school, Susie studies at home, hoping to become a perfect bride for William when he returns. During his time at school, William learns how to stand up for himself, earning the respect of his peers. When he returns home with a mustache, this signifies his passage into manhood.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment that the two main characters have come of age arrives just after William's return. Susie asks him to take her into town for a "sody", and he does so. The pair walks into town side-by-side just as they did in their youth, but now all the townsfolk seem to notice the changes in William's appearance: no longer is he the gangly youth that wanted to go to college. Susie, while still not being forceful or forward, manages to get the ice cream date from William she has long dreamed of, proudly displaying herself beside him as if to ward off all other interested women. While both characters are now adults, they still retain some of their more childish traits, such as being unable to communicate their attraction clearly.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

True Heart Susie – Susie is a young woman who lives with her aunt after her mother's passing. She runs a small chicken farm and garden when she's not pursuing William. Despite Bettina marrying William, Susie seems to not give up, treating the new couple no differently than before.

Traditional Susie is shown to have a very traditional view of life. In an era where many women were pushing for gender equity and egalitarianism, especially those who were educated, Susie only dreams of being a wife and mother. Perhaps Susie's mother's passing early in her childhood has led to this desire in some way. Similarly, Susie is reticent to utilize makeup and fashionable dress because of her traditional values: one should not try to improve on "God's work." The only time she tries them is when she is competing with Bettina for William's attention. Her inability to be forward with William is another sign of her traditional views. She refuses to be the one who pursues the relationship, since her position as the woman is supposed to be meek and receptive not pushy and demanding. Susie's aunt seems to feed into these views, often scolding the young woman for acting unladylike and pushing other views about makeup and the like.

Hopeful/Optimist While we do see Susie doubt and struggle, she never really gives up on her dream. Deep down, she can't let go of William, even when he chooses another woman over her. She is willing to give up so much to see him succeed and be a perfect mate for her that she sells her beloved cow to fund his college tuition fees. Ever the optimist, Susie often takes William's lukewarm or simply friendly conversation and letters as proof of his love. Similarly, when William speaks poorly of the makeup-laden women at the general store, Susie takes this comment as William saying he likes her. While she begins contemplating destroying William's letters at the end of the film, she demurs, and her patience pays off when the truth about Bettina is made clear to William after her death, and he realizes he's always loved Susie.

Selfless Susie shows many moments of selflessness. The first comes when she decides to fund William's college education. She then does her best to stay out of the way once Bettina is married to William, going

as far as being her bridesmaid. The reality of the situation brings her obvious pain, but she does her best to make sure William is happy. While there are many small moments of selflessness in the film, Susie's most important act of selflessness comes at the film's end when Bettina asks her to take her in during the rainstorm and then lie to William about it. Susie does this for her, hoping to keep William ignorant of Bettina's lies and keep him happy.

William Jenkins – William is a simple lad who lives on a small farm with his father right across the road from Susie. His cluelessness leads him to overlook Susie as a potential mate despite her obvious attraction and their compatibility. As a minister in the small town, he is a high prize for manipulative Bettina, who seeks his hand in marriage to build her own reputation.

Unaware This is perhaps William's most obvious trait. He is completely oblivious about much of what happens in the film. Even when evidence is produced in front of him, such as when he sees Sporty kissing Bettina, a little bit of emotional manipulation is all it takes for him to put the idea aside. It takes him the entire film to realize that someone other than the rich man paid for his education. His lack of awareness—and, in a sense, confidence—leads him to be easily manipulated by Bettina.

Conventional Much like Susie, William has a very conventional view of the world and how things should be. While he does push against parental boundaries by going to school, William quickly falls into a traditional head of the household role when his new profession allows his father to retire. This character trait comes out clearly right after his marriage to Bettina. In his mind, he dreams of a simple conventional marriage of the time, but Bettina is cold, uninterested, and a poor cook. Susie seems to win him over with just a forkful of a Sunday dinner, making him regret his sudden marriage to Bettina.

Bettina Hopkins – Bettina was once a milliner in Chicago, but having run on hard times, she moves to the village to live with her Aunt. She loves to party, especially with Sporty Malone and his gang of single girls. She is oblivious to Susie's attraction to William, calling on her neighbor when she is locked out of her home in a rainstorm after losing her key at a party.

Selfish Bettina is obsessed with her desires and appearance. She manipulates William into marriage just because of her desire to have the moral and social standing of a minister's wife. At her wedding, she complains about the appearance of her veil and dress although they are already fluffed and pinned to Hollywood perfection. Unhappy to be living the life she desired and bored of her minister husband, Bettina sneaks out to parties often with Sporty and his gang. This behavior leads to her untimely death, when she loses her key and is locked out in a rainstorm.

Disloyal Bettina has no strong loyalties it seems, unless you count Sporty, but we don't see enough of him to really tell. She frequently acts in an unfaithful manner, kissing Sporty and lying to William about her plans and whereabouts. Bettina pretends to be indisposed to sneak out to a party. In this instance, her disloyalty extends to Susie when she is forced to lie on Bettina's behalf.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does *True Heart Susie* support and contradict traditional gender values?
2. What themes and situations of *True Heart Susie* are still common in romance films today?
3. Does religion play a larger, smaller, or similar role in this film compared to Griffith's past projects? Elaborate on your answer.
4. Was the de-aging used in the film's beginning convincing to you? Why or why not?