

*Reading the Romance*  
*Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*



J A N I C E A . R A D W A Y

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*Introduction*



*I am twenty-five, a wife and mother. Sometimes, like so many other people, I get low in spirits. Maybe from reading the paper, from an encounter with someone hateful, whatever. I can pick up one of her [Essie Summers's] books and see the goodness staring out at me. The heroine makes me feel it's a lovely world, people are good, one can face anything and we are lucky to be alive. What a wonderful feeling! . . . and if it wasn't for Harlequin, I'd never know this uplift. . . . Your books stand for decency and beliefs. That's rare these days.*

From a letter to Harlequin Enterprises written by a regular reader of romances<sup>1</sup>

*Because readers are superior in wisdom to the heroine at the same time that they emotionally identify with her, the reading process itself must lead to feelings of hypocrisy. Since we know the outcome of the story, we feel pleasure in those episodes which further the desired and expected ending. We tend to doubt from the beginning the heroine's avowed dislike of the hero, and, moreover, we are pleased whenever her expressions of this aversion have effects contrary to what she intends—that is, whenever they excite the hero rather than alienate him. . . . We consider most of the heroine's emotions important only insofar as they subvert*

*themselves. Reading Harlequin Romances, one has a continual sensation of being in bad faith.*

Tania Modleski, Professor of English<sup>2</sup>

*Well, it does take you away from your dishes and your kids hollering at you. It gives you something to think of . . . and you can put them down and you can come back to it. There's an awfully lot of new words that you can learn which you wouldn't be coming into contact with your children and if your husband, like maybe he's working two jobs, . . . so you are kind of covered by all these kids all day long and these bring in a new vocabulary at least.*

From a comment made to researcher Margaret Jensen  
by a regular reader of romances<sup>3</sup>

*Admittedly incomplete surveys of readers suggest that Harlequins . . . are consumed not only by schoolgirls but by "normal" active women in their 30s, 40s and 50s. If true, this statistic hardly assures us that the Harlequins are harmless, . . . but provokes instead serious concern for their women readers. How can they tolerate or require so extraordinary a disjuncture between their lives and their fantasies? . . . [T]he women who couldn't thrill to male nudity in Playgirl are enjoying the titillation of seeing themselves, not necessarily as they are, but as some men would like to see them: illogical, innocent, magnetized by male sexuality and brutality.*

Ann Douglas, Professor of English<sup>4</sup>

Although the four women quoted above made their comments in different contexts and for different audiences, the intent or purpose of each statement was the same. Indeed, all were attempts to explain why women read Harlequin Romances. Harlequins are two-hundred-page examples of the popular literary genre that now accounts for more than one-third of all mass-market paperback sales. These particular stories, literary critics have claimed, differ from many other versions of the genre *only* in their relative lack of emphasis on explicit sexual description. Except for that distinction, they are merely condensed versions of a plot formula that is common to all instances of the generic type.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the important differences in the foregoing explanations of what women find in romantic fiction suggest that these readers do not understand the books in the same way. Indeed, the first reader's comments that Harlequins give her cause for hope contradicts Tania Modleski's assured assertion that they must lead to feelings of hypocrisy and bad faith. Similarly, Ann Douglas's argument that Harlequin readers enjoy the books

because they need to identify with an inferior heroine contrasts markedly with the second reader's observation that romances enable her to do something constructive for herself even when she is restricted by other duties and responsibilities. These contradictory interpretations of the meaning of the romance and of the motives giving rise to its reading raise important and difficult problems for anyone who might be interested in explaining the increasing popularity of the genre during the last ten or fifteen years.

Perhaps the easiest way to deal with the contradiction is to dismiss it. This can be accomplished very simply by ascribing the troubling disagreement among readers to more or less comprehensive recoveries of the meaning contained within a singular, objective, literary text. Such a move enables one to explain away the comments of the real romance readers as the untrained and self-deceptive perceptions of women who either do not know what the novels really say or who refuse to admit that meaning to consciousness. Their statements about why they read romances become, in this theory, mere rationalizations and justifications, false consciousness, as it were, which masks their actual reasons for spending money on books that only covertly perform their proper function. The true, embedded meaning of the romance is available, then, only to trained literary scholars who are capable of extricating the buried significance of plot developments, characterizations, and literary tropes. It is their specialized training that enables them to discern the nature of the connection between these tacit meanings and the unconscious needs and wishes that readers have but cannot acknowledge because they conflict with their conscious beliefs. In this view, a literary text is a complex but fixed object containing several layers of meaning that can be peeled away like the shell and skin of an almond to reveal the text's true core of significance. Once that core has been articulated and made present to consciousness, it is assumed that an accurate reading has been produced and that the critic is free to present it formally as the full cultural meaning of the text and to suggest that a need to have the meaning asserted is an adequate explanation of the book's popularity.

In so dismissing the explanations of the romance readers themselves in order to privilege the critic's reading of the novel and her explanation for why it is read, one would merely be repeating an analytic strategy commonly employed throughout mass-culture studies. In such studies, the critic typically selects a particular popular genre for analysis in the hope of generating some conclusions about the ideological function of the genre upon the people who read it.<sup>6</sup> Most critics assume initially that because these popular genres appear to be formulaic, all differences and variations exhibited by particular examples of them are insignificant. As a result, it becomes possible to analyze a few randomly selected texts because they

can be taken as representatives of the generic type. The actual process of interpretation is itself a translation procedure whereby the critic rereads the text's manifest content as a blind or mask concealing the true ideological message of the work. The Western, we are told, is not an innocent story about cowboys and Indians, but a symbolic discourse on the merits of individualism and its value as the foundation of a whole social order.<sup>7</sup> Although readers may believe they read Westerns because they enjoy the former, in fact, they do so because they need to participate in the reassertion of the latter. They are controlled, then, by the ideological content of the form because it justifies, if it does not actually create, their values and beliefs. The form itself is subsequently deplored, then, because most mass-culture critics can show how the consciousness created by popular literature reconciles readers to a social order dominated by others.

To be sure, there is a certain validity to this view of mass culture. Only a critic committed to a total denial of the unconscious or the covertness of culture could maintain that the stories are simply innocuous entertainment. But, at the same time, the view is troubling because its conception of ideology and domination seems to preclude the possibility of any kind of social change or resistance from the very start. It does so by reifying human process itself and by according extraordinary and preeminent power to the commodities produced and used within such processes rather than to the human activities themselves.

Because readers are presented in this theory as passive, purely receptive individuals who can only consume the meanings embodied within cultural texts, they are understood to be powerless in the face of ideology. The text's irreducible givenness prevents them from appropriating its meanings for their own use just as it thwarts any desire on their part to resist its message. Furthermore, it is precisely because readers misunderstand their reasons for liking particular stories that they can easily be persuaded to purchase tales that contribute to their continuing oppression by perpetuating a false view of their social situation. In this theory of mass culture, ideological control is thought to be all-pervasive and complete as a consequence of the ubiquity of mass culture itself and of the power of individual artifacts or texts over individuals who can do nothing but ingest them.

Indeed, it is this very analogical conception of reading, viewing, or receiving as ingestion or consumption that is the centerpiece of this traditional view of mass culture and of the recently elaborated explanations of the romance's popularity. That analogy had its origins in the largely accurate perception that most individuals ceased creating their own cultural forms with the coming of industrialization and mass production. Forced to purchase those forms from others, as they purchased processed food, they became, in effect, cultural consumers. While this is certainly true enough, the consumption analogy is dangerous when it is carried too far,

as it is when it is employed to characterize the actual process of text comprehension itself. To do so is to petrify the human act of signification, to ignore the fact that comprehension is actually a process of making meaning, a process of sign production where the reader actively attributes significance to signifiers on the basis of previously learned cultural codes. It is conceived on a simple physical or biological model as a confrontation between two distinct objects, the text and the reader. Because the text is fixed and already given when the reader encounters it, all he or she can do is to swallow it whole, to incorporate its ideological content in unaltered form.

Although I have exaggerated them here, these are the premises and assumptions that have governed recently developed romance critiques. Based as they are on the compatible poetics of the New Criticism, these studies begin by assuming that the romance, like every literary text, is composed of fixed textual features and devices that have certain undeniable functions and effects on the reader.<sup>8</sup> Like the New Critics, these students of the romance have assumed further that differing perceptual modes do not alter a text by selecting particular features for interpretation, but rather attend to the features that are undeniably *there* with more or less success. The quality of an interpretation of the romance, they believe, is therefore a function of the ability to describe fully the effects *necessarily* produced by the text's rhetorical devices and literary tropes. Because the typical romance reader is untrained in the techniques of literary analysis, it is thought unlikely that she will be able to identify all the relevant features or to describe their effects upon her. As a result, her reading can be discounted as incomplete rather than as one that is fundamentally different.

It is, then, this belief in the irreducible givenness of the literary text and in the coercive power of its features to control reading that permits the romance critics to maintain that they can account for why people read romances by reading those romances themselves. When coupled with their further assumption that women read specifically because they *need* to recover the text's meaning as they, the critics, explicate it, rather than for material reasons having to do with literacy levels, production and distribution techniques, or availability, this initial premise obviates the necessity of locating real readers in order to discern exactly what romances they read or how they understand and respond to the texts they choose. The behavioral explanations and sociological theories the romance critics advance to account for the genre's popularity have been produced, then, by a process that is hermetically sealed off from the very people they aim to understand.<sup>9</sup> Like many other mass-culture critics, these students of the romance finally produce their explanations simply by positing a desire in the reading audience for the specific meaning they have unearthed, a meaning that they then declare to have been there from the start.

In sum, it is clear that the commonplace view that mass cultural forms like the romance perform their social functions by imposing alien ideologies upon unsuspecting if not somnolent readers is a function of a particular theory and method. The theory assumes that cultural commodities control those who purchase and use them because the meanings they conceal within cannot help but be revealed to readers, even if unconsciously, and thereby must affect their values and beliefs. The method consequently discounts what readers *do* with texts and the various statements they make about them as irrelevant or mistaken. The condescending treatment of the mass-culture audience is, in the end, the final, logical consequence of a theoretical position that reifies human activity, ignores the complexities of sign production or semiosis, and transforms interactive social process into a confrontation between discrete objects.

Another view of human behavior and culture has been developed, however, whose basic premises not only undermine the validity of this analytical procedure but also point the way to the fabrication of a new one. Though articulated in many different fields and thus in varied jargon, this view is essentially a semiotic one in the sense that it focuses on the various ways human beings actively *make* sense of their surrounding world.<sup>10</sup> Not merely concerned with the mechanics of human behavior, the semiotician searches for the particular ways in which that behavior is comprehended both by those who carry it out and by those who are its viewers. As Clifford Geertz, perhaps the most prominent of symbolic anthropologists, has observed, human culture is not reducible to sheer behavioral occurrence alone.<sup>11</sup> Nor is it "a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed."<sup>12</sup> Culture is, rather, "a context, something within which [such things] can be intelligibly—that is, thickly described."<sup>13</sup> It is the "complex web of significance" spun by human animals that gives public or communal sense to the private acts of individuals.<sup>14</sup>

To know, then, why people do what they do, read romances, for instance, it becomes necessary to discover the constructions they place on their behavior, the interpretations they make of their actions. A good cultural analysis of the romance ought to specify not only how the women understand the novels themselves but also how they comprehend the very act of picking up a book in the first place. The analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading where a woman actively attributes sense to lexical signs in a silent process carried on in the context of her ordinary life.

If we want to know why more people are reading romances in the 1970s and 1980s, it is necessary to ask, then, in addition to a question about the story itself, what precisely is "getting said," both to readers and to others each time a woman turns her attention away from her ordinary routine

and immerses herself in a book.<sup>15</sup> Such a question should automatically rule out the tendency to conceive the romance's cultural significance in narrow, literary terms. In thus escaping myopic concentration on textual meaning alone, it should be possible to see that a whole set of reasons, including quite practical ones having to do with availability and length, often prompt women to turn to romantic fiction.

It is essential to point out here that in formulating a hypothesis about the significance of romance reading as an act, that hypothesis inevitably will be a critic's construction of the reader's construction of the import of her reading behavior. This is an essential observation because it suggests that the methodological addition of investigating the ways real readers read cannot do away with the need for a critic's interpretation or all the dangers that such an activity implies. Interpretation is, in fact, unavoidable because the analyst is inevitably trying to render the complex significance of events and behaviors as they are experienced by members of a culture *for others not in or of that culture*. Such a situation obviously necessitates the activity of translation whereby meanings usually expressed in one set of codes are equivalently rendered into another.<sup>16</sup> Interpretation enters the process because codes neither structure the world in identical ways nor refer to exactly equivalent entities. As a consequence, no matter how accurately a cultural critic may try to render the semiotic webs of those under scrutiny, she cannot avoid introducing some measure of distance and therefore alteration as soon as she chooses to write that web in terms not ordinarily used to embody or express it. In effect, then, any semiotic account of a culture, termed by anthropologists an ethnographic account, is the product of an interrogation of one cultural system by another, carried out through the interaction of ethnographer and informant. The ethnographic account is never a perfectly transparent, objective duplication of one individual's culture for another. Consequently, the content of that account depends equally upon the culture being described and upon the individual who, in describing, also translates and interprets.<sup>17</sup>

I raise this issue here in order to prepare the reader for the fact that, although the following account attempts to render as closely as possible the way particular romance readers consciously understand romances and explain their leisure-time activities to themselves, that account does not stop with a simple reiteration of their folk theories for such behavior. Beginning first from an anthropological perspective that assumes that cultural rituals also carry covert or tacit meanings in addition to those that are explicitly recognized, I have attempted to infer from the women's conscious statements and observable activities other unacknowledged significances and functions that make romance reading into a highly desirable and useful action in the context of these women's lives. This inferential process has been guided by my own consciously feminist perspective, a

perspective that situates the social practices of courtship, sexuality, and marriage within the analytic category of patriarchy, defined as a social system where women are constituted only in and by their relationships to more powerful men.<sup>18</sup> Assisted additionally, then, by previous investigations of the various ways in which similar women commonly experience the merits and problems of patriarchy, I have attempted to offer an explanation of my informants' self-understanding that accounts also for motives and desires very likely felt by them but not admitted to consciousness precisely because they accept patriarchy as given, as the natural organization of sex and gender.

This effort is obviously an interpretive one and thus it is open to dispute. But in making the interpretation, in formulating what might be called my informants' covert agenda, I have always worked first from their conscious statements and beliefs about their behavior, accepted them as given, and then posited additional desires, fears, or concerns that complement rather than contradict those beliefs and assertions. As a result, the account oscillates back and forth between the readers' perceptions of themselves and their activities and a more distant view of them that makes an effort to include the unseen cultural ground or set of assumptions upon which they stand. This latter perspective further tries to uncover the unintended, sometimes unperceived, consequences of their behavior and self-understanding. In the end, what I intend to offer here is a comprehensive explanation of why the women I interviewed find romance reading not only practically feasible and generally enjoyable but also emotionally necessary as well. Although the explanatory hypothesis will venture beyond the explanations offered by the women themselves to account for their own repetitive reading, it nonetheless begins with those explanations because I believe they are the essential key to unlocking the significance of the romance as it is selected, constructed, and judged by these very real women in the midst of their very real lives.

Of course, in order to unlock the significance of the romance, it will be necessary to examine the novels themselves, to specify as clearly as possible what they in fact mean. However, since I have abandoned the particular theoretical assumptions that would have justified the presentation of my own reading as a legitimate rendering of the meaning of the genre for those who usually read it, it was necessary to formulate another method for discovering the significance of the romantic narrative. I have developed the method employed here, which depends heavily on questionnaire responses and on intensive interviews, as a consequence of my belief that the semiotic view of reading as a process must ground new research into the cultural meaning of texts. In treating reading as a temporally evolving act by an individual who attributes sense to textual signifiers encountered on a page, I am thus accepting the fundamental premise of reader-re-

sponse criticism that literary meaning is not something to be found *in* a text.<sup>19</sup> It is, rather, an entity produced by a reader in conjunction with the text's verbal structure. The production process is itself governed by reading strategies and interpretive conventions that the reader has learned to apply as a member of a particular interpretive community.<sup>20</sup>

Because my ultimate goal is the formulation of an explanatory statement capable of accounting for why actual individuals read a given text, it has been necessary to attempt to produce the text as those individuals do in order to duplicate their meaningful construction of it as a story. Had I not attempted such a reconstruction or simulation, I might well have run the risk of explaining why my informants read something that does not even remotely resemble the text as they encounter it. I have also made the effort to describe their way of reading because I suspect that the difference between their stated interpretations and explanations and those of the romance critics is not so much a function of their lack of consciousness as of different interpretive strategies and goals brought to bear upon the texts in question. Indeed, it seems entirely possible, given the constructive power of interpretive assumptions, that romance critics may actually read "different" romances than do typical romance readers precisely because they construct a story from quite other internal features than do the people they aim to understand. Because I agree with Stanley Fish's point that "linguistic and textual facts, rather than being the objects of interpretation are its products," I have assumed that it is first necessary to identify those particular textual features or elements that the women understand to be the core of the romantic plot.<sup>21</sup> As a result, I have attempted to elicit those essential ingredients from the women themselves and subsequently tried to determine how they understand the story they make from them.

It might accurately be said that the following study is founded on the basic assumption that if we wish to explain why romances are selling so well, we must first know what a romance *is* for the woman who buys and reads it. To know that, we must know what romance readers make of the words they find on the page; we must know, in short, how they construct the plot and interpret the characters' intentions. Such knowledge, however, cannot be derived from a self-conscious examination of what we as literary critics do with the language of romantic fiction, for we have no evidence that we even know how to read as romance readers do. We are forced, finally, by the nature of meaning itself as the construct of a reader always already situated within an interpretive context, to conduct empirical research into the identities of real readers, into the nature of the assumptions they bring to the texts, and into the character of the interpretations they produce. *Reading the Romance* has been conceived, therefore, as the study of a complex social process beginning with the publication of books within an institutional matrix and culminating in the actual con-

struction of texts by real women who inhabit a particular social world. It is grounded in an ethnographic examination of an actual community of romance readers who buy nearly all of their books from a single salesclerk named Dorothy Evans who has earned herself a local reputation as an "expert" on romantic fiction.<sup>22</sup>

I first discovered my principal informant and her customers with the aid of Sally Arteseros, a senior editor at Doubleday, whom I had been interviewing about the processes of romance publication. Sally told me of a bookstore employee who had developed a regular clientele of fifty to seventy-five romance readers who relied on her for advice about the best romances to buy and those to avoid. When I wrote to Dot Evans to ask whether I might question her about how she interpreted, categorized, and evaluated romantic fiction, I had no idea that she had begun to write a newsletter designed to enable bookstores to advise their customers about the quality of the romances published monthly. She has since copyrighted this newsletter and incorporated her work as a business. Indeed, Dot is so successful at serving the women who patronize her chain outlet that the central office of this major chain occasionally relies on her sales predictions to gauge romance distribution throughout the system. Her success has also brought her to the attention of editors and writers for whom she now reads manuscripts and galleys.

My knowledge of Dot and her readers is based on roughly sixty hours of interviews conducted in June 1980 and February 1981. I have talked extensively with Dot about romances, reading, and her advising activities as well as observed her interactions with her customers at the bookstore. I have also conducted both group and individual interviews with sixteen of her regular customers and administered a lengthy questionnaire to forty-two of her women, most of whom are married, middle-class mothers. While not representative of all women who read romances, the group appears to be demographically similar to a sizable segment of that audience as it has been mapped by several very secretive publishing houses.

I have deliberately delayed the introduction of Dot and her readers until the second chapter of this book where the issue of their representivity is dealt with in greater detail. I have done so in order to emphasize the important fact that romantic novels do not appear miraculously in Dot's hands or in those of her readers. They are, rather, the end products of a much-mediated, highly complex, material, and social process that involves writers, literary agents, publishing officials, and editors, as well as hundreds of other people who participate in the manufacture, distribution, and selling of books. *Reading the Romance* begins, then, with an investigation of this process and with a consideration of the possibility that recent changes in its organization and structure may well have contributed substantially to increasing romance sales.

In situating the recent efforts of romance publishers in a historical review of the development of the mass-market paperback, Chapter 1 demonstrates that the houses have neither pioneered new methods of manuscript acquisition nor discovered even cheaper means of rapid duplication. Nonetheless, by perfecting the *distribution* techniques that characterize mass-market publishing generally, through the marketing of romances as brand-name products, they have made the entire process so efficient that high levels of production are no longer as financially risky as they once were. Thus Chapter 1 suggests the extraordinary sales figures achieved in the romance genre must be attributed, at least partially, to the way the books have been advertised, marketed, and distributed to their readers.

After this detailed description of the process by which romances are introduced to potential readers, Chapter 2 focuses on this particular group of women who deliberately search for romantic fiction and repetitively select certain kinds of romances to read from the plethora offered each month by the many competing publishing houses. It begins with a summary of the findings of the interviews and questionnaires with respect to the demographic characteristics of the group and of the reading histories and habits of individual members. Then, after attempting to specify as carefully as possible how representative Dot and her women are of other romance readers, the chapter proceeds to describe their own working definition of the genre and to detail their preferences for particular kinds of romances, heroines, and heroes. In effect, the chapter attempts to represent schematically the geography of the genre as it is surveyed, articulated, and described by the women themselves.

I have taken the Smithton readers' discrimination and selection procedures seriously in order to counter the typical assumption in mass-culture studies that formulaic works are understood to be identical by the people who buy and read them. Grounded as they are in textual samples chosen by the critic, such mass-culture studies automatically fail to consider whether readers might not select texts from a corpus of published material in ways significantly different from the procedures employed by the critic. They also assume that to read the analytically selected texts, however they are chosen, is to read a group of texts that are representative of those actually selected and read by real readers. To test the validity of such a hypothesis, I have attempted to determine whether the Smithton women actually distinguish among romances, tried to describe the criteria they use to do so, and summarized the characteristics of the categorical distinctions they make as a result. The chapter suggests, finally, that an accurate statement about why women read romances can only be developed if we begin with a sample of texts that duplicates or represents the books actually read and enjoyed by the women themselves.

The third chapter of *Reading the Romance* extends this preoccupation

with the Smithton women's perspective by focusing on the significance of the event of reading as they interpret and explain it to themselves. Such a description is possible in large part because Dot and her customers are acutely aware of the fact that their preference for romantic fiction is often ridiculed in the news media as well as by members of their own families. As a result, they have defensively elaborated a coherent explanation for why they find them so satisfying. Their explanation is especially useful because it inadvertently reveals some of the emotional needs that are met by their romance reading and thus provides an important clue to the way the activity fits into the context of their daily lives.

Chapter 3 explores in some depth the surprising assertion that romance reading constitutes a "declaration of independence" from these women's duties and responsibilities as wives and mothers. It also explores their argument that romance reading is a beneficial form of escape because it sparks hope, provides much-needed reassurance, and helps them to learn about the world around them. Although this chapter stops short of a full-scale elaboration of the connection between the Smithton readers' conceptualization of the act of reading and the nature of the romantic fantasy itself, it sets the stage for such a discussion in Chapter 4 by taking the women's self-understanding seriously.

Chapter 4 is indeed the first of three that moves beyond the simple description of what readers say about romances and reading to an exploration of the books they select and actually read, on the one hand, and those they reject, on the other. Together, the three chapters attempt to show precisely how the structure and features of romantic fiction address and resolve the problems these women must encounter in their ordinary lives. Each of the three chapters makes use of varying techniques of scholarly literary analysis in an effort to plumb the surface of the reader's conscious understanding. This is done in order to develop an account of the activities probably engaged in by those readers at a tacit, covert level. Beginning with clues provided by my informants' observable behavior, usually in the form of statements about plot devices, characters, and narrative development, I have then relied on my theoretical understanding of texts and of the reading process in order to infer the nature of the interactions between text and reader that might have resulted in such conclusions. This consciously inferential process was guided by my use of a theoretical construct, the composite Smithton reader.

Because I did not want to speculate about how some ideal reader may construct the romantic narrative, nor did I want to offer my own concretization of the text as that from which conclusions about the activity of text construction might be drawn, I have attempted to posit a representative reading process. This process was meant to accord with the Smithton

readers' explicit statements about reading and to account for their overt conclusions about the structure and import of the tales. I have assumed, then, that this hypothetical reading process approximates the way these real readers read in the sense that it describes the strategies and operations they all engage in because they are part of an interpretive community characterized by common assumptions about reading books and the subject matter of the romance.

The abstract generality of both the composite reader and the inferred reading process described in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 makes the entire account vulnerable to the charge that real readers have been left behind once again, as they always are in literary criticism. While this is true to a certain extent, such a move is unavoidable unless critics interested in the import of a particular reading process do one of several things. They can assume first, as Norman Holland has, that all reading is individual and idiosyncratic and thus investigate a particular reader's concretizations of particular texts.<sup>23</sup> Although this assumption might be methodologically useful in the sense that it would automatically limit the scope of one's study, it would also prohibit the formulation of general cultural conclusions about the likely causes of the romance's increasing popularity.

Second, critics could rest content with readers' explicit statements about how they read and what they understand the story to say and therefore refuse to speculate at all about the tacit import of the processes through which their conclusions were formulated. Again, while the resulting account might seem gratifying because all of its conclusions could be tied to observable evidence, its conception of reading, not to mention human understanding, seems much too mechanical and unnecessarily superficial. Finally, the critic could assume, as I have, that some of the significance of a text or a reading process is unavailable to consciousness but pursue in an even more rigorous fashion the covert procedures through which the explicit meanings are constructed. One could question readers, for instance, about their interpretations of every single sentence in a story, much as Roland Barthes did in interrogating himself about the constitution of Balzac's "Sarrasine" in *S/Z*.<sup>24</sup> Not only would such a process be impractical, but once again it would leave us at the level of individual reading and thus hinder the formulation of general conclusions. Moreover, it would not obviate the need for interpretation and inference either because the critic would still have to move from explicit statements made by readers to a description of the processes that might have produced those assertions.

Mindful of the dangers of the composite-reader approach, Chapter 4 nonetheless advances an explanation of how the novels valued highly by the Smithton readers satisfy profoundly felt psychological needs. Although my interpretation of twenty "ideal" romances is based on a struc-

tural analysis of their shared plot, after the method worked out by Vladimir Propp, that plot structure was carefully articulated to accord with the narrative as it is apparently experienced by the Smithton women themselves.<sup>25</sup> In working out the proper functions and sequences, I included only those incidents whose appearance in any story would guarantee the story's recognition by Dot and her customers as an excellent or ideal example of the genre.

After this initial structural analysis, the bulk of Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of how repetitive encounters with such a narrative might satisfy those fundamental psychological needs in a woman that are the creation of patriarchal parenting arrangements. Drawing on the recent theories of Nancy Chodorow for a portrait of the female psyche, the chapter demonstrates that the romantic tale simultaneously recapitulates a woman's psychosexual development and vicariously satisfies some of the reader's needs created by such development and seldom met fully by traditional, patriarchal marriage.<sup>26</sup>

As Chapter 4 attempts to identify these basic desires that are the source of the Smithton readers' search for the ideal romance, Chapter 5 seeks to isolate particular fears that women also try to assuage in the process of romance reading. These fears figure only momentarily in the reading of a good romance because they are sketched out very quickly and then managed, recontained, or explained away by a plot that shows that the dangers were mere figments of the heroine's imagination. Bad romances seem to earn their dismissal by Dot and her customers precisely because they heighten key fears to a fever pitch, prolong them unnecessarily, and inadequately explain away the hero's actions that provoked the heroine's and reader's fears in the first place. By focusing on twenty books singled out by the Smithton readers as less than ideal, I have developed an account of the specific aspects of male behavior legitimated by patriarchy that are nonetheless feared by these women to such an extent that they are avoided in imaginative experience whenever possible. Once again, the interpretation given here of these romances, which range from the unreadable to the merely "good," is based on a narrative analysis of the stories as they are apparently experienced and understood by the women themselves.

In effect, then, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus upon the strategies employed by the Smithton women to provide themselves with a steady supply of books that not only will not frighten them but will actively assuage unstated fears and simultaneously provide them with the emotional sustenance they require. Taken together, the chapters provide a coherent account of how an actual group of readers manages to operate within the system of literary mass production *in its own interests* by discriminating among similar texts. Moreover, by describing how the women appropriate

the texts for their own purposes by constructing the activity of reading and the novels themselves in a compatible manner, the chapters suggest that the commercial mass-production process is not entirely successful at structuring individuals' cultural lives. Because reading is an active process that is at least partially controlled by the readers themselves, opportunities still exist within the mass-communication process for individuals to resist, alter, and reappropriate the materials designed elsewhere for their purchase.

In an attempt to discover whether there might be possible limitations to such a reclamation process, Chapter 6 turns to certain features of the romance's standard language and narrative discourse. By showing that these are simplified versions of strategies characteristic of the realistic novel, the chapter suggests that a reader's encounter with the resulting form will tend to reinforce her mistaken belief that all women are free to lead individual lives. Romances purport to be open-ended stories about different heroines who undergo different experiences. They manage such a suggestion by using the conventions of the realistic novel, which always pretends to be telling the as-yet-uncompleted story of a singular individual. Despite this realistic illusion, however, each romance is, in fact, a mythic account of how women *must* achieve fulfillment in patriarchal society. This is true precisely because the central events in each romance are structurally the same. By reading the romance as if it were a realistic novel about an individual's unique life, however, the reader can ignore the fact that each story prescribes the same fate for its heroine and can therefore unconsciously reassure herself that her adoption of the conventional role, like the heroine's, was the product of chance and choice, not of social coercion. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the possibility that although romance reading may enable women to resist their social role and to supplement its meager benefits, romances may still function as active agents in the maintenance of the ideological status quo by virtue of their hybrid status as realistic novels and mythic ritual.

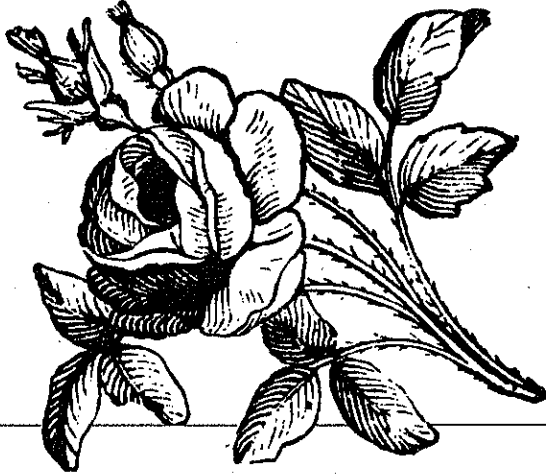
The entire study concludes by giving careful thought to the implications of its method and findings for the future investigation of mass culture and its place in twentieth-century life. Asserting that the study's focus on reading as process and event enables us to distinguish analytically between the inchoate desires fueling romance reading and the ideological forms within which those desires are embodied, the conclusion suggests that such an approach helps us to see that although ideology is extraordinarily pervasive and continually determines social life, it does not preclude the possibility of firm though limited resistance. That resistance, these romance readers tell us, can be carried on by people who appropriate otherwise ideologically conservative forms in order to better their



lives, which have been controlled and dictated by their place in the social structure. If oppositional impulses or feelings of discontent such as those prompting romance reading can ever be separated from the activity that manages them in favor of the social order, it might be possible to encourage them, to strengthen them, and to channel them in another way so that this very real disappointment might lead to substantial social change.

T H R E E

*The Act of Reading the Romance*  
*Escape and Instruction*



By the end of my first full day with Dorothy Evans and her customers, I had come to realize that although the Smithton women are not accustomed to thinking about what it is in the romance that gives them so much pleasure, they know perfectly well why they like to read. I understood this only when their remarkably consistent comments forced me to relinquish my inadvertent but continuing preoccupation with the text. Because the women always responded to my query about their reasons for reading with comments about the pleasures of the act itself rather than about their liking for the particulars of the romantic plot, I soon realized I would have to give up my obsession with textual features and narrative details if I wanted to understand their view of romance reading. Once I recognized this it became clear that romance reading was important to the Smithton women first because the simple event of picking up a book enabled them to deal with the particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities. Although I learned later that certain aspects of the romance's story do help to make this event especially meaningful, the early interviews were interesting because they focused so resolutely on the significance of the *act of romance reading* rather than on the meaning of the romance.

The extent of the connection between romance reading and my infor-

nants' understanding of their roles as wives and mothers was impressed upon me first by Dot herself during our first two-hour interview which took place before I had seen her customers' responses to the pilot questionnaire. In posing the question, "What do romances do better than other novels today?" I expected her to concern herself in her answer with the characteristics of the plot and the manner in which the story evolved. To my surprise, Dot took my query about "doing" as a transitive question about the *effects* of romances on the people who read them. She responded to my question with a long and puzzling answer that I found difficult to interpret at this early stage of our discussions. It seems wise to let Dot speak for herself here because her response introduced a number of themes that appeared again and again in my subsequent talks with other readers. My question prompted the following careful meditation:

It's an innocuous thing. If it had to be . . . pills or drinks, this is harmful. They're very aware of this. Most of the women are mothers. And they're aware of that kind of thing. And reading is something they would like to generate in their children also. Seeing the parents reading is . . . just something that I feel they think the children should see them doing. . . . I've got a woman with teenage boys here who says "you've got books like . . . you've just got oodles of da . . . da . . . da . . . [counting an imaginary stack of books]." She says, "Now when you ask Mother to buy you something, you don't stop and think how many things you have. So this is Mother's and it is my money." Very, almost defensive. But I think they get that from their fathers. I think they heard their fathers sometime or other saying, "Hey, you're spending an awful lot of money on books aren't you?" You know for a long time, my ladies hid' em. They would hide their books; literally hide their books. And they'd say, "Oh, if my husband [we have distinctive blue sacks], if my husband sees this blue sack coming in the house. . . ." And you know, I'd say, "Well really, you're a big girl. Do you really feel like you have to be very defensive?" A while ago, I would not have thought that way. I would have thought, "Oh, Dan is going to hit the ceiling." For a while Dan was not thrilled that I was reading a lot. Because I think men do feel threatened. They want their wife to be in the room with them. And I think my body is in the room but the rest of me is not (when I am reading).<sup>1</sup>

Only when Dot arrived at her last observation about reading and its ability to transport her out of her living room did I begin to understand that the real answer to my question, which she never mentioned and which was the link between reading, pills, and drinks, was actually the single word, "escape," a word that would later appear on so many of the

questionnaires. She subsequently explained that romance novels provide escape just as Darvon and alcohol do for other women. Whereas the latter are harmful to both women and their families, Dot believes romance reading is "an innocuous thing." As she commented to me in another interview, romance reading is a habit that is not very different from "an addiction."

Although some of the other Smithton women expressed uneasiness about the suitability of the addiction analogy, as did Dot in another interview, nearly all of the original sixteen who participated in lengthy conversations agreed that one of their principal goals in reading was their desire to do something *different* from their daily routine. That claim was borne out by their answers to the open-ended question about the functions of romance reading. At this point, it seems worth quoting a few of those fourteen replies that expressly volunteered the ideas of escape and release. The Smithton readers explained the power of the romance in the following way:

They are light reading—escape literature—I can put down and pick up effortlessly.

Everyone is always under so much pressure. They like books that let them escape.

Escapism.

I guess I feel there is enough "reality" in the world and reading is a means of escape for me.

Because it is an Escape [*sic*], and we can dream and pretend that it is our life.

I'm able to escape the harsh world for a few hours a day.

They always seem an escape and they usually turn out the way you wish life really was.

The response of the Smithton women is apparently not an unusual one. Indeed, the advertising campaigns of three of the houses that have conducted extensive market-research studies all emphasize the themes of relaxation and escape. Potential readers of Coventry Romances, for example, have been told in coupon ads that "month after month Coventry Romances offer you a beautiful new escape route into historical times when love and honor ruled the heart and mind."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Silhouette television advertisements featuring Ricardo Montalban asserted that "the beautiful ending makes you feel so good" and that romances "soothe away the tensions of the day." Montalban also touted the value of "escaping" into faraway places and exotic locales. Harlequin once mounted a travel sweep-

stakes campaign offering as prizes "escape vacations" to romantic places. In addition, they included within the books themselves an advertising page that described Harlequins as "the books that let you escape into the wonderful world of romance! Trips to exotic places . . . interesting places . . . meeting memorable people . . . the excitement of love. . . . These are integral parts of Harlequin Romances—the heartwarming novels read by women everywhere."<sup>3</sup> Fawcett, too, seems to have discovered the escape function of romance fiction, for Daisy Maryles has reported that the company found in in-depth interviewing that "romances were read for relaxation and to enable [women] to better cope with the routine aspects of life."<sup>4</sup>

Reading to escape the present is neither a new behavior nor one peculiar to women who read romances. In fact, as Richard Hoggart demonstrated in 1957, English working-class people have long "regarded art as escape, as something enjoyed but not assumed to have much connection with the matter of daily life."<sup>5</sup> Within this sort of aesthetic, he continues, art is conceived as "marginal, as 'fun,' as something 'for you to use.'" In further elaborating on this notion of fictional escape, D. W. Harding has made the related observation that the word is most often used in criticism as a term of disparagement to refer to an activity that the evaluator believes has no merit in and of itself. "If its intrinsic appeal is high," he remarks, "in relation to its compensatory appeal or the mere relief it promises, then the term escape is not generally used."<sup>6</sup> Harding argues, moreover, on the basis of studies conducted in the 1930s, that "the compensatory appeal predominates mainly in states of depression or irritation, whether they arise from work or other causes."<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that the explanations employed by Dot and her women to interpret their romance reading for themselves are thus representative in a general way of a form of behavior common in an industrialized society where work is clearly distinguished from and more highly valued than leisure despite the fact that individual labor is often routinized, regimented, and minimally challenging.<sup>8</sup> It is equally essential to add, however, that although the women will use the word "escape" to explain their reading behavior, if given another comparable choice that does not carry the connotations of disparagement, they will choose the more favorable sounding explanation. To understand why, it will be helpful to follow Dot's comments more closely.

In returning to her definition of the appeal of romance fiction—a definition that is a highly condensed version of a commonly experienced process of explanation, doubt, and defensive justification—it becomes clear that romance novels perform this compensatory function for women because they use them to diversify the pace and character of their habitual existence. Dot makes it clear, however, that the women are also troubled

about the propriety of indulging in such an obviously pleasurable activity. Their doubts are often cultivated into a full-grown feeling of guilt by husbands and children who object to this activity because it draws the women's attention away from the immediate family circle. As Dot later noted, although some women can explain to their families that a desire for a new toy or gadget is no different from a desire to read a new romantic novel, a far greater number of them have found it necessary to hide the evidence of their self-indulgence. In an effort to combat both the resentment of others and their own feelings of shame about their "hedonist" behavior, the women have worked out a complex rationalization for romance reading that not only asserts their equal right to pleasure but also legitimates the books by linking them with values more widely approved within American culture. Before turning to the pattern, however, I want to elaborate on the concept of escape itself and the reasons for its ability to produce such resentment and guilt in the first place.

Both the escape response and the relaxation response on the second questionnaire immediately raise other questions. Relaxation implies a reduction in the state of tension produced by prior conditions, whereas escape obviously suggests flight from one state of being to another more desirable one.<sup>9</sup> To understand the sense of the romance experience, then, as it is enjoyed by those who consider it a welcome change in their day-to-day existence, it becomes necessary to situate it within a larger temporal context and to specify precisely how the act of reading manages to create that feeling of change and differentiation so highly valued by these readers.

In attending to the women's comments about the worth of romance reading, I was particularly struck by the fact that they tended to use the word *escape* in two distinct ways. On the one hand, they used the term literally to describe the act of denying the present, which they believe they accomplish each time they begin to read a book and are drawn into its story. On the other hand, they used the word in a more figurative fashion to give substance to the somewhat vague but nonetheless intense sense of relief they experience by identifying with a heroine whose life does not resemble their own in certain crucial aspects. I think it important to reproduce this subtle distinction as accurately as possible because it indicates that romance reading releases women from their present pressing concerns in two different but related ways.

Dot, for example, went on to elaborate more fully in the conversation quoted above about why so many husbands seem to feel threatened by their wives' reading activities. After declaring with delight that when she reads her body is in the room but she herself is not, she said, "I think this is the case with the other women." She continued, "I think men cannot do that unless they themselves are readers. I don't think men are *ever* a part of

anything even if it's television." "They are never really out of their body either," she added. "I don't care if it's a football game; I think they are always consciously aware of where they are." Her triumphant conclusion, "but I think a woman in a book isn't," indicates that Dot is aware that reading not only demands a high level of attention but also draws the individual *into* the book because it requires her participation. Although she is not sure what it is about the book that prompts this absorption, she is quite sure that television viewing and film watching are different. In adding immediately that "for some reason, a lot of men feel threatened by this, very, very much threatened," Dot suggested that the men's resentment has little to do with the kinds of books their wives are reading and more to do with the simple fact of the activity itself and its capacity to absorb the participants' entire attention.

These tentative observations were later corroborated in the conversations I had with other readers. Ellen, for instance, a former airline stewardess, now married and taking care of her home, indicated that she also reads for "entertainment and escape." However, she added, her husband sometimes objects to her reading because he wants her to watch the same television show he has selected. She "hates" this, she said, because she does not like the kinds of programs on television today. She is delighted when he gets a business call in the evening because her husband's preoccupation with his caller permits her to go back to her book.

Penny, another housewife in her middle thirties, also indicated that her husband "resents it" if she reads too much. "He feels shut out," she explained, "but there is nothing on TV I enjoy." Like Ellen's husband, Penny's spouse also wants her to watch television with him. Susan, a woman in her fifties, also "read[s] to escape" and related with almost no bitterness that her husband will not permit her to continue reading when he is ready to go to sleep. She seems to regret rather than resent this only because it limits the amount of time she can spend in an activity she finds enjoyable. Indeed, she went on in our conversation to explain that she occasionally gives herself "a very special treat" when she is "tired of housework." "I take the whole day off," she said, "to read."

This theme of romance reading as a special gift a woman gives herself dominated most of the interviews. The Smithton women stressed the privacy of the act and the fact that it enables them to focus their attention on a single object that can provide pleasure for themselves alone. Interestingly enough, Robert Escarpit has noted in related fashion that reading is at once "social and asocial" because "it temporarily suppresses the individual's relations with his [*sic*] universe to construct new ones with the universe of the work."<sup>10</sup> Unlike television viewing, which is a very social activity undertaken in the presence of others and which permits simultaneous conversation and personal interaction, silent reading requires the

reader to block out the surrounding world and to give consideration to other people and to another time. It might be said, then, that the characters and events of romance fiction populate the woman's consciousness even as she withdraws from the familiar social scene of her daily ministrations.

I use the word ministrations deliberately here because the Smithton women explained to me that they are not trying to escape their husbands and children "per se" when they read. Rather, what reading takes them away from, they believe, is the psychologically demanding and emotionally draining task of attending to the physical and affective needs of their families, a task that is solely and peculiarly theirs. In other words, these women, who have been educated to believe that females are especially and naturally attuned to the emotional requirements of others and who are very proud of their abilities to communicate with and to serve the members of their families, value reading precisely because it is an intensely private act. Not only is the activity private, however, but it also enables them to suspend temporarily those familial relationships and to throw up a screen between themselves and the arena where they are required to do most of their relating to others.

It was Dot who first advised me about this phenomenon. Her lengthy commentary, transcribed below, enabled me to listen carefully to the other readers' discussions of escape and to hear the distinction nearly all of them made between escape from their families, which they believe they do *not* do, and escape from the heavy responsibilities and duties of the roles of wife and mother, which they admit they do out of emotional need and necessity. Dot explained their activity, for instance, by paraphrasing the thought process she believes goes on in her customers' minds. "Hey," they say, "this is what I want to do and I'm gonna do it. This is for me. I'm doin' for you all the time. Now leave me, just leave me alone. Let me have my time, my space. Let me do what I want to do. This isn't hurting you. I'm not poaching on you in any way." She then went on to elaborate about her own duties as a mother and wife:

As a mother, I have run 'em to the orthodontist. I have run 'em to the swimming pool. I have run 'em to baton twirling lessons. I have run up to school because they forgot their lunch. You know, I mean, really! And you do it. And it isn't that you begrudge it. That isn't it. Then my husband would walk in the door and he'd say, "Well, what did you do today?" You know, it was like, "Well, tell me how you spent the last eight hours, because I've been out working." And I finally got to the point where I would say, "Well, I read four books, and I did all the wash and got the meal on the table and the beds are all made, and the house is tidy." And I would get defensive like, "So

what do you call all this? Why should I have to tell you because I certainly don't ask you what you did for eight hours, step by step."— But their husbands do do that. We've compared notes. They hit the house and it's like "Well all right, I've been out earning a living. Now what have you been doin' with your time?" And you begin to be feeling, "Now really, why is he questioning me?"

Romance reading, it would seem, at least for Dot and many of her customers, is a strategy with a double purpose. As an activity, it so engages their attention that it enables them to deny their physical presence in an environment associated with responsibilities that are acutely felt and occasionally experienced as too onerous to bear. Reading, in this sense, connotes a free space where they feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own. At the same time, by carefully choosing stories that make them feel particularly happy, they escape figuratively into a fairy tale where a heroine's similar needs are adequately met. As a result, they vicariously attend to their own requirements as independent individuals who require emotional sustenance and solicitude.

Angie's account of her favorite reading time graphically represents the significance of romance reading as a tool to help insure a woman's sense of emotional well-being. "I like it," she says, "when my husband—he's an insurance salesman—goes out in the evening on house calls. Because then I have two hours just to totally relax." She continued, "I love to settle in a hot bath with a good book. That's really great." We might conclude, then, that reading a romance is a regressive experience for these women in the sense that for the duration of the time devoted to it they feel gratified and content. This feeling of pleasure seems to derive from their identification with a heroine whom they believe is deeply appreciated and tenderly cared for by another. Somewhat paradoxically, however, they also seem to value the sense of self-sufficiency they experience as a consequence of the knowledge that they are capable of making themselves feel good.

Nancy Chodorow's observations about the social structure of the American family in the twentieth century help to illuminate the context that creates both the feminine need for emotional support and validation and the varied strategies that have evolved to meet it. As Chodorow points out, most recent studies of the family agree that women traditionally reproduce people, as she says, "physically in their housework and child care, psychologically in their emotional support of husbands and their maternal relation to sons and daughters."<sup>11</sup> This state of affairs occurs, these studies maintain, because women alone are held responsible for home maintenance and early child care. Ann Oakley's 1971 study of forty London housewives, for instance, led her to the following conclusion: "In

the housekeeping role the servicing function is far more central than the productive or creative one. In the roles of wife and mother, also, the image of women as servicers of men's and children's needs is prominent: women 'service' the labour force by catering to the physical needs of men (workers) and by raising children (the next generation of workers) so that the men are free *from* child-socialization and free *to* work outside the home.<sup>12</sup> This social fact, documented also by Mirra Komarovsky, Helena Lopata, and others, is reinforced ideologically by the widespread belief that females are *naturally* nurturant and generous, more selfless than men, and, therefore, cheerfully self-abnegating. A good wife and mother, it is assumed, will have no difficulty meeting the challenge of providing all of the labor necessary to maintain a family's physical existence including the cleaning of its quarters, the acquisition and preparation of its food, and the purchase, repair, and upkeep of its clothes, even while she masterfully discerns and supplies individual members' psychological needs.<sup>13</sup> A woman's interests, this version of "the female mystique" maintains, are exactly congruent with those of her husband and children. In serving them, she also serves herself.<sup>14</sup>

As Chodorow notes, not only are the women expected to perform this extraordinarily demanding task, but they are also supposed to be capable of executing it without being formally "reproduced" and supported themselves. "What is . . . often hidden, in generalizations about the family as an emotional refuge," she cautions, "is that in the family as it is currently constituted no one supports and reconstitutes women affectively and emotionally—either women working in the home or women working in the paid labor force."<sup>15</sup> Although she admits, of course, that the accident of individual marriage occasionally provides a woman with an unusually nurturant and "domestic" husband, her principal argument is that as a social institution the contemporary family contains no role whose principal task is the reproduction and emotional support of the wife and mother. "There is a fundamental asymmetry in daily reproduction," Chodorow concludes, "men are socially and psychologically reproduced by women, but women are reproduced (or not) largely by themselves."<sup>16</sup>

That this lack of emotional nurturance combined with the high costs of lavishing constant attention on others is the primary motivation behind the desire to lose the self in a book was made especially clear to me in a group conversation that occurred late in my stay in Smithton. The discussion involved Dot, one of her customers, Ann, who is married and in her thirties, and Dot's unmarried, twenty-three-year-old daughter, Kit. In response to my question, "Can you tell me what you escape from?" Dot and Ann together explained that reading keeps them from being overwhelmed by expectations and limitations. It seems advisable to include their entire

conversation here, for it specifies rather precisely the source of those felt demands:

- Dot: All right, there are pressures. Meeting your bills, meeting whatever standards or requirements your husband has for you or whatever your children have for you.
- Ann: Or that you feel you should have. Like doing the housework just so.
- Dot: And they do come to you with problems. Maybe they don't want you to—let's see—maybe they don't want you to solve it, but they certainly want to unload on you. You know. Or they say, "Hey, I've got this problem."
- Ann: Those pressures build up.
- Dot: Yeah, it's pressures.
- Ann: You should be able to go to one of those good old—like the MGM musicals and just . . .
- Dot: True.
- Ann: Or one of those romantic stories and cry a little bit and relieve the pressure and—a legitimate excuse to cry and relieve some of the pressure build-up and not be laughed at.
- Dot: That's true.
- Ann: And you don't find that much anymore. I've had to go to books for it.
- Dot: This is better than psychiatry.
- Ann: Because I cry over books. I get wrapped up in them.
- Dot: I do too. I sob in books! Oh yes. I think that's escape. Now I'm not gonna say I've got to escape my husband by reading. No.
- Ann: No.
- Dot: Or that I'm gonna escape my kids by getting my nose in a book. It isn't any one of those things. It's just—it's pressures that evolve from being what you are.
- Kit: In this society.
- Dot: And people do pressure you. Inadvertently, maybe.
- Ann: Yes, it's being more and more restrictive. You can't do this and you can't do that.<sup>17</sup>

This conversation revealed that these women believe romance reading enables them to relieve tensions, to diffuse resentment, and to indulge in a fantasy that provides them with good feelings that seem to endure after they return to their roles as wives and mothers. Romance fiction, as they experience it, is, therefore, *compensatory literature*. It supplies them with an important emotional release that is proscribed in daily life because the social role with which they identify themselves leaves little room for guilt-

less, self-interested pursuit of individual pleasure. Indeed, the search for emotional gratification was the one theme common to all of the women's observations about the function of romance reading. Maureen, for instance, a young mother of two intellectually gifted children, volunteered, "I especially like to read when I'm depressed." When asked what usually caused her depression, she commented that it could be all kinds of things. Later she added that romances were comforting after her children had been especially demanding and she felt she needed time to herself.

In further discussing the lack of institutionalized emotional support suffered by contemporary American women, Chodorow has observed that in many preindustrial societies women formed their own social networks through which they supported and reconstituted one another.<sup>18</sup> Many of these networks found secondary institutional support in the local church while others simply operated as informal neighborhood societies. In either case, the networks provided individual women with the opportunity to abandon temporarily their stance as the family's self-sufficient emotional provider. They could then adopt a more passive role through which they received the attention, sympathy, and encouragement of other women. With the increasing suburbanization of women, however, and the concomitant secularization of the culture at large, these communities became exceedingly difficult to maintain. The principal effect was the even more resolute isolation of women within their domestic environment. Indeed, both Oakley in Great Britain and Lopata in the United States have discovered that one of the features housewives dislike most about their role is its isolation and resulting loneliness.<sup>19</sup>

I introduce Chodorow's observations here in order to suggest that through romance reading the Smithton women are providing themselves with another kind of female community capable of rendering the so desperately needed affective support. This community seems not to operate on an immediate local level although there are signs, both in Smithton and nationally, that romance readers are learning the pleasures of regular discussions of books with other women.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, during the early group discussions with Dot and her readers I was surprised to discover that very few of her customers knew each other. In fact, most of them had never been formally introduced although they recognized one another as customers of Dot. I soon learned that the women rarely, if ever, discussed romances with more than one or two individuals. Although many commented that they talked about the books with a sister, neighbor, or with their mothers, very few did so on a regular or extended basis. Indeed, the most striking feature of the interview sessions was the delight with which they discovered common experiences, preferences, and distastes. As one woman exclaimed in the middle of a discussion, "We were never stimu-

lated before into thinking why we like [the novels]. Your asking makes us think why we do this. I had no idea other people had the same ideas I do."

The romance community, then, is not an actual group functioning at the local level. Rather, it is a huge, ill-defined network composed of readers on the one hand and authors on the other. Although it performs some of the same functions carried out by older neighborhood groups, this female community is mediated by the distances of modern mass publishing. Despite the distance, the Smithton women feel personally connected to their favorite authors because they are convinced that these writers know how to make them happy. Many volunteered information about favorite authors even before they would discuss specific books or heroines. All expressed admiration for their favorite writers and indicated that they were especially curious about their private lives. Three-fourths of the group of sixteen had made special trips to autographing sessions to see and express their gratitude to the women who had given them so much pleasure. The authors reciprocate this feeling of gratitude and seem genuinely interested in pleasing their readers. As has been noted in Chapter 2, many are themselves romance readers and, as a consequence, they, too, often have definite opinions about the particular writers who know how to make the reading experience truly enjoyable.<sup>21</sup>

It seems highly probable that in repetitively reading and writing romances, these women are participating in a collectively elaborated female fantasy that unflinchingly ends at the precise moment when the heroine is gathered into the arms of the hero who declares his intention to protect her forever because of his desperate love and need for her. These women are telling themselves a story whose central vision is one of total surrender where all danger has been expunged, thus permitting the heroine to relinquish self-control. Passivity is at the heart of the romance experience in the sense that the final goal of each narrative is the creation of that perfect union where the ideal male, who is masculine and strong yet nurturant too, finally recognizes the intrinsic worth of the heroine. Thereafter, she is required to do nothing more than *exist* as the center of this paragon's attention. Romantic escape is, therefore, a temporary but literal denial of the demands women recognize as an integral part of their roles as nurturing wives and mothers. It is also a figurative journey to a utopian state of total receptiveness where the reader, as a result of her identification with the heroine, feels herself the *object* of someone else's attention and solicitude. Ultimately, the romance permits its reader the experience of feeling cared for and the sense of having been reconstituted affectively, even if both are lived only vicariously.

Dot's readers openly admit that parts of the romantic universe little resemble the world as they know it. When asked by the questionnaire how

closely the fictional characters resemble the people they meet in real life, twenty-two answered "they are not at all similar," eighteen checked "they are somewhat similar," and two asserted that "they are very similar." None of Dot's customers believed that romantic characters are "almost identical" to those they meet daily.<sup>22</sup> In a related set of responses, twenty-three revealed that they consider the events in romances to be "not at all similar" to those occurring in real life. An additional eighteen said that the two sets of events are "somewhat similar," while only one checked "very similar."

It is interesting to note, however, that when the questionnaire asked them to compare the heroine's reactions and feelings with their own, only thirteen saw no resemblance whatsoever, while twenty-two believed that the heroine's feelings "are somewhat like mine." Five women did not answer the question. The general shift from perceptions of no similarity to detection of some resemblance suggests that Dot's readers believe that the heroine is more realistically portrayed than other characters. At the very least, they recognize something of themselves in her feelings and responses. Thus while the lack of similarity between events in the fantasy realm and those in the real world seems to guarantee a reading experience that is "escapist," emotional identification with the central character also insures that the experience will be an affectively significant one for the reader.

These conclusions are supported by comments about the nature of escape reading culled from the interviews. Jill, a very young mother of two, who had also begun to write her own romance, commented, for example, that "we read books so we won't cry." When asked to elaborate, she responded only that romances portray the world as "I would like it to be, not as it really is." In discussing why she preferred historicals to contemporary romances, Susan explained that "the characters shouldn't be like now because then you couldn't read to escape." "I don't want to read about people who have all the problems of today's world," she added. Her sentiments were echoed by Joy who mentioned in her discussion of "bad romances" that while "perfection's not the main thing," she still hates to see an author "dwelling on handicaps or disfigurements." "I find that distasteful and depressing," she explained. This sort of desire to encounter only idealized images is carried over even into meetings with romance authors. Several told of their disappointment at meeting a favorite writer at an autograph session who was neither pretty nor attractively dressed. All agreed, however, that Kathleen Woodiwiss is the ideal romance author because she is pretty, petite, feminine, and always elegantly turned out.

When I pursued this unwillingness to read about ugliness, despair, or serious human problems with Dot, she indignantly responded, "Why should we read depressing stuff when we have so much responsibility?"

Ann made a similar remark, mentioning that she particularly dislikes books that attribute the hero's "nastiness" toward the heroine to a bad love affair that soured him on other women. When I asked her for her reasons, she said, "because *we've* been through it, we've been ditched, and it didn't sour us!" This comment led immediately to the further observation, "Optimistic! That's what I like in a book. An optimistic plot. I get sick of pessimism all the time."

Her distinction between optimistic and pessimistic stories recurred during several of the interviews, especially during discussions of the difference between romances and other books. At least four of the women mentioned Colleen McCullough's best-selling novel, *The Thorn Birds*, as a good example of a tale that technically qualified as a romance but that all disliked because it was too "depressing." When urged to specify what made the story pessimistic, none cited specific events in the plot or the death of the hero. Rather, they referred to the general tenor of the story and to the fact that the characters were poor. "Too much suffering," one reader concluded. In similarly discussing a writer whose books she never enjoys, Dot also mentioned the problem of the depressing romance and elaborated on her usual response to such a story. She described her typical argument with herself as follows:

"Well, Dorothy, you were absolutely, physically exhausted, mentally exhausted because everything was down—it was depressing." And I'd get through it and it was excellently written but everyone worked in the coal mines. They were poor as church mice. They couldn't make ends meet. Somebody was raped, an illegitimate kid. By the time I got through, I said, "What am I reading this for? This is dumb." So I quit.

Dot's sentiments were echoed by Ann when she volunteered the information that she dislikes historical romances set in Ireland, "because they always mention the potato famine" and "I tend to get depressed about that."

In a related discussion, Dot's daughter, Kit, observed that an unhappy ending is the most depressing thing that can happen in a romance. She believes, in fact, as does nearly everyone else, that an unhappy ending excludes a novel that is otherwise a romantic love story from the romance category. Kit is only one of the many who insist on reading the endings of the stories *before* they buy them to insure that they will not be saddened by emotionally investing in the tale of a heroine only to discover that events do not resolve themselves as they should. Although this latter kind of intolerance for ambiguity and unhappiness is particularly extreme, it is indicative of a tendency among Dot's customers to avoid any kind of reading matter that does not conform to their rigid requirements for



"optimism" and escapist stories. Romances are valuable to them in proportion to their lack of resemblance to the real world. They choose their romances carefully in an attempt to assure themselves of a reading experience that will make them feel happy and hold out the promise of utopian bliss, a state they willingly acknowledge to be rare in the real world but one, nevertheless, that they do not want to relinquish as a conceptual possibility.

In discussing the therapeutic function of true fairy stories and folk tales, Bruno Bettelheim has argued that they perform the fundamental service for children of creating and maintaining *hope*.<sup>23</sup> Because he believes folk tales take as their true subject the psychosexual traumas of early childhood and that they are psychologically "true" in the sense that they symbolically demonstrate how these conflicts can be resolved, Bettelheim maintains that they act as emotional primers for the children who imaginatively participate in them. Not only do they indicate specific psychological solutions to problems such as separation anxiety and the Oedipal conflict, but they also hold out the promise of future solution for the child who cannot see the way to negotiate the necessary journey at the present moment. Bettelheim believes that children are actually encouraged by their experience of identification with a character whose remarkably similar problems are happily resolved. "We know," he writes, "that the more deeply unhappy and despairing we are, the more we need to be able to engage in optimistic fantasies."<sup>24</sup> He continues that "while the fantasy is *unreal*, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future *are real*, and these good feelings are what we need to sustain us."

I want to argue similarly that by participating in a fantasy that they are willing to admit is unrealistic in some ways, the Smithton women are permitting themselves the luxury of self-indulgence while simultaneously providing themselves with the opportunity to experience the kind of care and attention they commonly give to others. Although this experience is vicarious, the pleasure it induces is nonetheless real. It seems to sustain them, at least temporarily, for they believe reading helps to make them happier people and endows them with renewed hope and greater energy to fulfill their duty to others. Later, it will be necessary to consider the question of whether romance fiction is actually deflecting or recontaining an indigenous impulse to express dissatisfaction with the traditional status quo in the family by persuading women to feel more content with their role. However, since that question can be addressed only after the entire reading experience has been assessed, a task that will be attempted in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, it is now time to return to the query posed earlier about why the act of romance reading is threatening to men. I also want to consider the subsequent justification process such male resentment sets

in motion before moving on to an analysis of the larger significance of this entire explanation-guilt-justification process.

To begin with, it is evident that the Smithton women believe that their husbands object to the simple fact that reading draws their wives' attention away from the immediate familial context and from themselves more specifically. They may also feel unsettled by their wives' evident ability to satisfy themselves emotionally, a situation that perhaps suggests a reduction in their spouses' dependency upon them. This is merely speculation, however, for I neither asked questions of their husbands nor did I probe very deeply into the issue of whether romance reading *actually* changes a woman's behavior in her marriage. It is important to note, nonetheless, that the women themselves vehemently maintain that their reading has transformed them in important ways.

I accidentally stumbled across this belief in the course of observing the relish with which they described their favorite heroines whom they invariably characterized as "extremely intelligent," "spunky," "independent," and "unique." It occurred to me to ask whether reading about such heroines changed the women's perception of themselves. When I finally posed the query of whether romance reading ever changes women, it was met with gales of disbelieving laughter whose force cannot be conveyed on paper. Dot, Ann, and Kit answered at once and the overlapping exclamations on the tape include "Yes," "Oh, yes," "You better believe it," "Ask the men," and "Of course," which was shouted with happy indignation. They immediately came up with the names of three women who had been dramatically changed and then collectively told the story of June Anderson and her husband, Sam, who believed, my informants told me, "that the gods were talking to him!" I think it best to let them give their version of the transformation here:

- Dot: She was such a sweet little thing. It's not that she isn't anymore.  
But she was under his thumb.
- Ann: He was the ruler of the roost, the king of the domain; his word was all-seeing, all-knowing, all-omnipotent!
- Dot: And now she knows all, sees all, hears all.
- Ann: Yes.
- Dot: She's just smart enough not to tell him all.
- Kit: Now, the same gods are talking to her!  
[They collapse in laughter.]
- Dot: And the thing is she was doing it *all*. She was makin' his life one slide, buttered well! And here he was, you know, thinkin', "boy my house is in tip-top shape."
- Ann: Yup.

Dot: And then she got ahold of books and it's been really a shame!  
[More laughter.]

They went on to tell the story of how June had her hair cut one day despite the fact that Sam insisted she keep it long. Of course, it is not possible to say for sure whether this act had anything to do with her romance reading. The important point is that both she and her sister readers believe that it did. Dot even concluded the story with the assertion that June had gone out and secured a job in order to pay for her books. She added that this is not uncommon because so many of her customers have to justify book purchases to husbands who resent the expenditure of "their" money on an activity that has no clear function or use, at least as far as they are concerned.

Dot contended in a later conversation that, strangely enough, it is the bad romances that most often start the women thinking. A bad romance, the reader should recall, is often characterized by a weak or gullible heroine. In reading some of those "namby-pamby books about the women who lets the man dominate them," Dot explained, the readers "are thinking 'they're nerds.' And they begin to reevaluate. 'Am I acting like that?'" They begin to say to themselves, she added, "Hey, wait a minute—my old man kinda tends to do this." And then, "because women are capable of learning from what they read," they begin "to express what they want and sometimes refuse to be ordered around any longer."

In attempting to corroborate Dot's assertion by questioning her customers about this issue, I found that most agree that romance reading does change a woman, although very few would go beyond that simple statement. I could not discern whether they could not articulate how they had been affected or whether they did not want to talk about it for fear of admitting something that might then lead to further change. They made it clear, however, that they believe their self-perception has been favorably transformed by their reading. They are convinced, in fact, that romance fiction demonstrates that "intelligence" and "independence" in a woman make her more attractive to a man. Although marriage is still the idealized goal in all of the novels they like best, that marriage is always characterized by the male partner's recognition and appreciation of the heroine's saucy assertion of her right to defy outmoded conventions and manners. This fiction encourages them to believe that marriage and motherhood do not necessarily lead to loss of independence or identity.

Such feelings of hope and encouragement, it must be pointed out, are never purchased cheaply. Dot and her readers understandably pay a substantial price in guilt and self-doubt as a result of their temporary refusal to adopt the self-abnegating stance that is so integral a part of the roles of wife, mother, and housewife which they otherwise embrace as acceptable

for themselves and other women. This guilt was conveyed most often in the earnestness with which the women insisted that they too have a right to do something for themselves always immediately after explaining that they read "to escape." Although this sort of evidence is difficult to pin down and certainly subject to varying interpretation, I found their extreme defensiveness about the amount of time and money spent on reading so compelling that I think it important not to ignore these only partially acknowledged feelings of culpability.

Guilt seems to arise over three specific aspects of romance reading. The Smithton readers are most troubled about the quantity of time they devote to their books. They are aware that this activity demands the attention that would otherwise be devoted to children, house, or husband, but they defend themselves with the assertion that they have a right to escape just as others do. Indeed, one of their most effective strategies for justification involves the equation of romance reading with other forms of escape, especially with participation in and attendance at sports events, which are activities enjoyed by most of their husbands. Dot commented with some irritation, for instance, that "women have been very tolerant of that in men. But, do you know, when a woman picks up a book, a man's not tolerant of it? Nine times out of ten he's not." Her customers confirm her assertion, but they also demonstrate, however, that they are not comfortable with their own unaccustomed defiance. They confess that they sometimes hide their books and usually acquiesce to their spouses' wishes if they specifically demand their complete attention. Romance reading, then, is an acceptable way of securing emotional sustenance not provided by others *only* if the activity can be accomplished without mounting a fundamental challenge to the previous balance of power in the marriage relationship. It is a method of garnering attention for the self that creates a minimum amount of dissonance between accepted role expectations and actual behavior precisely because the assertion of self-interest is temporary and expressed through leisure pursuits that are relatively less significant than other areas of concern.

A second difficulty seems to arise over the amount of money spent on books as many of the Smithton women report that they are often called to task by their husbands for their repetitive consumption. Their most common response is the astute observation that neither their husbands nor their children worry about duplicating tools, gadgets, toys, or clothes they already have when they express interest in acquiring new ones. The women wonder, then, why they should have to adhere to standards of thrift and parsimony with respect to books when other family members do not observe the same requirements. Despite this sense of fair play, however, many of the readers still seem ill at ease spending money that they did not earn on a pleasure that is at least questionable, if not down-

right objectionable, to their husbands. They are more comfortable with a picture of themselves as generous and giving mothers who would sooner spend money on other members of the family than on themselves. As Dot explained of her customers, "Not one of my women hankers after the beautiful clothes and jewels of the women in the Regencies. They're not like that." She believes that if it came down to choosing between something for themselves and something for their children, they would certainly spend their money on their children. I found nothing in my interviews with those customers to contradict her assertion. Indeed, the Smithton readers struck me as genuinely troubled by their simultaneous attempt to buy generously for their families and to admit their own need and right to spend on themselves. Every customer with whom I talked expressed some concern about whether she spent too much money on herself, and several even questioned me rhetorically about whether I agreed that they had a "right" to buy things that gave them pleasure.

This concern about expenditure is further exacerbated by a third worry concerning the subject matter of the books. Dot and her customers are aware that many critics label the books they love soft-core pornography. In fact, at the time of my first visit, Dot's success in the romance field had recently been the focus of a scornful feature in one of the local newspapers. Although the reporter had questioned her at length about why women read romances, he ignored her careful explanations in order to assert that housewives are getting their kicks in the afternoon from "pornographic" love stories. This article deeply offended Dot and her readers who were especially angered by the fact that the reporter was male. They insist that the books are not about sex but about romance and cite in conversation their preference for novels that lack explicit sexual description. Many of the women admit that they are especially embarrassed by the graphic representation of "cleavage and nudity" that publishers insist on attaching to the books. This has sometimes forced them to hide their books from their children or the public "so the public won't get the wrong idea." Dot's customers almost unanimously prefer covers that depict a tender caress between a fully clothed hero and heroine or one that includes small vignettes portraying key scenes in the novel.

However, if we also recall their answers to my question about the necessary features of ideal romances, it becomes clear that while the Smithton women are obviously interested in a story chronicling the development of a single romance, most are not offended by sexual description if the act occurs between two individuals whom the writer has established as already "in love." Remember, thirteen women did indicate that they like to see "lots of love scenes with some explicit sexual description." Still, the fact that so many of the women object to bed-hopping demonstrates that, in their minds at least, sex is unalterably linked with the idea of romantic

love. They believe the act is rightly indulged in only by those who have made a monogamous commitment to each other. As discussed in the previous chapter, "bed-hopping" is a term employed by Dot and her customers to describe promiscuous sexual relations between a heroine and several men. They vehemently object to this sort of narrative. Indeed, the women ardently asserted again and again in the interviews that it is the "one woman—one man" kind of book that they prefer.

Despite their evident ability to tolerate certain kinds of sexual description, I think the readers' assertion that such detail ought to be subordinated, in the words of one woman, "to tenderness and the expression of emotional love," should be accepted as given. The women are not being disingenuous when they maintain that "the story is the main thing," for indeed what they want to experience above all else is the hero's protective concern and tender regard for the heroine. It matters little whether that care and attention are detailed in general terms or presented as overtly sexual as long as they are extensively described. However, this focus on his attention to her is in itself erotic, for even the most euphemistic descriptions of the heroine's reception of his regard convey the sensual, corporal pleasure she feels in anticipating, encouraging, and finally accepting those attentions of a hero who is always depicted as magnetic, powerful, and physically pleasing. While explicit description of his bodily reaction is offensive to the Smithton readers, attention to the heroine's response to his appreciation of her physical beauty is not only desirable but absolutely central to the entire event. Although the readers are themselves reluctant to admit this on a conscious level, romance reading seems to be valued primarily because it provides an occasion for them to experience good feelings. Those feelings appear to be remarkably close to the erotic anticipation, excitement, and contentment prompted when any individual is the object of another's total attention. In effect, romance reading provides a vicarious experience of emotional nurturance *and* erotic anticipation and excitation.

Guilt arises, then, as a result of the readers' own uneasiness about indulging in such an obviously pleasurable experience as much as it does as the consequence of others' disapproval. This guilt is the understandable result of their socialization within a culture that continues to value work above leisure and play, both of which still seem to carry connotations of frivolousness for the Smithton women. Their guilt can also be traced to a culture that remains uneasy about the free expression of female sexuality even as it unabashedly sells everything, from jeans to typewriters, with the aid of sexual imagery. On the one hand, American women are told by mass-media symbolism that their very worth as individuals is closely tied to their sexual allure and physical beauty. On the other hand, they are educated by their families and churches to believe that their sexual being

may be activated only by and for one other individual. The double message effectively produces a conflicted response to sexual need and desire.

Because the implicit content of the cultural message linking female identity with sexual attractiveness stipulates that a woman's value is produced *only* when she is recognized by a man, women who accept this image of themselves must seek validation as sexually desirable partners. If, however, this validation is not regularly forthcoming in day-to-day existence, the search for it must be abandoned altogether or modified, either by accepting validation only when it is offered or by seeking it elsewhere. It seems evident that these obsessive romance readers have selected the latter course, searching for constant reassurance about their value through repetitive identification with a woman whose sexuality is only just being awakened and who discovers, as a consequence, that she is a truly valuable human being worthy of love and attention. Indeed, one of Dot's most articulate customers, who incidentally likes Civil War novels, confirmed this when she said, "I like the hero to be a gentlemanly Yankee soldier—a real lover-boy type who knows instantly what the heroine is like and is attracted to that." She believes that this instant recognition is a function of "love at first sight." "Isn't it weird," she asked, "how men *know* us—I mean—how they instantly know what we're like?" "Yes," she concluded, "I like a hero who can instantly pick out the woman as unique, special, as his *true* love!" Although she does not say so, it is clear that underlying her statement is the implicit assertion that what she finds enjoyable about Civil War romances is the pleasurable feeling *she* gets by identifying with a woman who is passionately loved, tenderly cared for, and carefully protected expressly because her intrinsic nature has been recognized by another.

In trying to satisfy culturally induced psychological needs and desires that can be met fully only through activities that are themselves illogically proscribed or limited, the Smithton readers have found it necessary to fill their needs vicariously. Yet even this ingenious solution to the cultural "catch 22" causes problems because in internalizing their culture's demand that female sexuality be realized only within the bonds of marriage, they accept a standard that brands their desire for an erotic and romantic literature as perverse and morally wrong. Of course, the women are neither, but the guilt remains. Fortunately for them, however, they have devised an explanation for why they read romantic novels based on values more acceptable to the culture at large and to men in particular. This explanation helps them to counteract the doubt they experience about the worth of romantic fiction. By claiming for it instructional value, they reassure themselves and their husbands that romance reading is not subversive of cultural standards or norms but an activity in conformity with them.

In embarking for Smithton, I was prepared to engage in detailed con-

versations about the connections between love and sex, the differences between romance and pornography, and the continued validity of traditional definitions of femininity. I was not, however, prepared to spend as much time as I did conversing about the encyclopedic nature of romance fiction. When I questioned Dot and her customers about why they like romances, I was surprised to find that immediately after extolling their benefits as an "escape," nearly every reader informed me that the novels teach them about faraway places and times and instruct them in the customs of other cultures. As Dot herself explained in our first formal interview, "These women [the authors] research the tar out of them. They go to great lengths. You don't feel like you've got a history lesson, but somewhere in there you have."

Throughout my stay, readers consistently referred to the "facts" and "truths" contained in the novels. Indeed, the tapes and transcripts of the interviews confirm that we spent more time discussing this aspect of romance reading than any other topic except its escape function and the nature of the romantic fantasy. Yet when these same women later filled out the extended questionnaire and rank ordered several sentences best explaining their reasons for reading romances, only nineteen checked the response "to learn about faraway places and times." Of those nineteen, only six selected this as their primary reason for reading. As I noted earlier, nineteen claimed that above all else they read romances to relax, eight answered "because reading is just for me—it is my time," and five said they read to escape their daily problems.

It seems necessary to explain this discrepancy between orally reported motives and those singled out as most significant under the guarantee of anonymity promised by the questionnaire form.<sup>25</sup> I think it likely that the "reading for instruction" explanation is a secondary justification for repetitive romance consumption that has been articulated by the women to convince skeptical husbands, friends, and interviewers that the novels are not merely frothy, purposeless entertainment but possess a certain intrinsic value that can be transferred to the reader. According to their theory, the value of the romance novel is a function of the information it is thought to *contain*. Because this information, which is a highly valued commodity in the advanced industrial society of which they are a part, can be imparted to these readers, their reading activity is transformed into a worthwhile pursuit precisely because its successful completion leaves them with something to show for their investment of time and money. When the reader can demonstrate to her husband or to an interviewer that an *exchange* has taken place, that she has acquired something in the process of reading, then her activity is defined retroactively as goal-directed work, as labor with a purpose, which is itself desirable in cultural terms.

In thus claiming that romance reading teaches them about the world,

the Smithton women associate themselves with the long-standing, middle-class belief that education is closely connected with success and status. To read a romance, their informal theory implies, is to act deliberately to better one's self and thus, indirectly, one's social position. I might add that it is also an implicit declaration of faith in the ideologies of progress and democracy. Knowledge is not only the prerogative of the rich who can afford expensive educations, but it can be purchased by anyone in the form of a paperback book.

Dot's cryptic comment from that first interview should now make sense. When she responded to my question about what romances "do better than other reading matter available today" with a few apparently disconnected sentences, she was providing me with a glimpse of a quite logical thought process common among romance readers that moves from honest explanation to self-doubt to a more acceptable form of justification. It will be worthwhile to look briefly at her comments once again: "It's an innocuous thing. If it had to be pills or drinks—this is harmful. They're very aware of this. Most of the women are mothers. And they're aware of that kind of thing. And reading is something they would like to generate in their children also." At first, Dot contends that romance reading is an innocuous form of escape. It performs the same function as pills or drink but, unlike them, it is not harmful. She abruptly shifts, however, from the themes of escape reading and "addiction" to the thought that the women also want their children to see them reading, evidently because the activity itself is considered valuable. In Dot's case, it is clear that she has indeed conveyed this idea about reading to her children. Kit commented later in a discussion about the differences between reading and other forms of escape, that she, too, reads for "escape and entertainment." However, her very next statement indicated that she is not content with giving this as her only reason for romance reading. She continued, "The TV doesn't really have that much to offer—nothing that's intellectually stimulating—I mean—at least you learn something when you're reading books." Romance reading is "better" than other forms of escape in Kit's mind because, in addition to the enjoyment the activity gives her, it also provides her with information she would otherwise miss.

Dot and Kit are not unique in their tendency to resort to this kind of logic to justify their expenditures of time, money, and energy on romances. All of the Smithton women cited the educational value of romances in discussion as other readers apparently have when questioned by researchers for Harlequin, Fawcett, and Silhouette. Romance editors are all very aware of the romance reader's penchant for geographical and historical accuracy despite the usual restriction of information about audiences to the houses' marketing departments. When she was an editor at Dell, Vivien Stephens showed me the extensive research library she had

compiled on the English Regency to help her check the accuracy of the manuscripts submitted to her for Dell's planned Candlelight series.<sup>26</sup> Her knowledge of reader preferences had come from letters written to authors as well as from the authors themselves who understand that instruction is one of the principal functions books can perform for their readers.

If it seems curious that the very same readers who willingly admit that romances are fairy tales or fantasies also insist that they contain accurate information about the real world, it should be noted that the contradictory assertions seem to result from a separation of plot and setting. When the Smithton women declare that romantic fiction is escapist because it isn't like real life, they are usually referring to their belief that reality is neither as just nor as happy as the romances would have it. Rewards do not always accrue to the good nor are events consistently resolved without ambiguity in the real world. A romance is a fantasy, they believe, because it portrays people who are happier and better than real individuals and because events occur as the women wish they would in day-to-day existence.

The fact that the story is fantastic, however, does not compromise the accuracy of the portrayal of the physical environment within which the idealized characters move. Even though the Smithton women know the stories are improbable, they also assume that the world that serves as the backdrop for those stories is exactly congruent with their own. Indeed, they believe so strongly in the autonomous reality of the fictional world that they are positively indignant if book covers inaccurately portray the heroine or the hero. A good cover, according to the Smithton readers, is one that implicitly confirms the validity of the imaginary universe by giving concrete form to that world *designated* by the book's language. As Ann patiently explained, a good cover is dependent on the artist's "having read the book and at least if you're going to draw the characters, have the right color hair." Favorite covers include several "factual" vignettes, again because these portrayals give credence to the separate, real existence of the fictive universe. That this belief in a parallel world is important to the women can also be seen in their commonly stated wish that more authors would write sequels to stories in order to follow the lives of particularly striking minor characters. The technique again continues the illusion that the romantic world is as real as the readers' world and that the characters' lives continue just as theirs do. As a consequence of this assumption about the congruence of the two worlds, anything the readers learn about the fictional universe is automatically coded as "fact" or "information" and mentally filed for later use as knowledge applicable to the world of day-to-day existence.

This faith in the reliability of the mimesis is the product of the widespread belief among readers that romance authors study a period and a

place before they write about it. Not only are they thought to pore over historical "documents" and conduct "extensive research," but their readers also believe that the authors travel to the places they write about in order to give more realism to their descriptions.<sup>27</sup> The following stretch of conversation between Ann, Joy, and Dot gives a good indication of the intensity of their need to believe that their books are "factually correct." It is interesting to note as well that in response to my immediately preceding question, "Why do you read?" Ann followed the now-familiar pattern of explanation and justification:

Ann: To be entertained; escapism, armchair traveling. One of the things I enjoy about the Harlequins is that they are so geographically correct—in their facts. I had a friend who traveled to Ireland every year. She's the one who got me to read them. She had hers classified—her collection [of Harlequins]—she'd rip the front cover off and classify them by place.

She'd travel to some of these places and she'd say, "I was there this time. It was just like so and so wrote. You turn that one corner and there's that well and that tree, and there's that . . ."

Dot: I'm sure that's true. I never questioned that for some reason.

Joy: I never *thought* of questioning it!

Dot: I wouldn't either, because I just assume they research like the devil. Every author does.

Ann: Remember the one about the eye hospital where you learn about the way they treat—the difference in nursing between the English and the American system?

Dot: How accurate they are in their descriptions . . .

Ann: Yes. You really learn something. The readers wrote in and asked for the recipes for some of these things—the way they described some of these fancy dishes.

Several of the other Smithton readers echoed Ann's interest in geography and her belief that romances are a good substitute for the traveling she would like to do but cannot afford. In a later conversation, for example, Joy discussed one of her favorite authors, Betty Neels, whose books she likes "because I like to go to Holland." She also explained that while she reads Regencies "for their humor and repartée," her mother reads them "for all the detail—furniture and costumes." Joy added, "She would love to see some of those carriages. She needs to know what sprig muslin looks like and things like that. You can't find those things now. She takes in as much detail [as she can]." Penny commented similarly, "I like descriptions of places and geography—you can feel like you're there then." Both Susan and Marie used the word "knowledge" in answering my question

about their reasons for reading. Susan added, "Oh yes, you know all the authors faithfully research their periods."

The readers believe that research is such an integral part of romance writing that those who have begun to write their own romances all very proudly detail the amount of background reading they have completed. Lynn, who is planning to write a romantic story set in the American West, explained that she has already "researched Indian ways" and that she directs her husband, who is a truck driver, to pay particular attention to scenery in the western states so that he can describe accurately the locales she wants to write about.

Nearly all of the women indicated that they derive considerable enjoyment from surprising their husbands, in Ann's words, "with the little bits of information I get from my books." This is especially true of readers who concentrate on the long "historicals." These women all claim to enjoy "history" although they do not agree on the amount of factual detail that should be included in a narrative. Some, like Laurie, can tolerate long passages of exposition about such things as bread baking in the antebellum South, while others insist that history is more enjoyable if it is condensed into a few short sentences. Laurie, the Civil War buff mentioned earlier, reported that "I won't read anything after 1900. Somehow, you *feel* more when you're reading about detail. I don't know, somehow modern books don't get me to thinking as much." Her favorite book, she explained, is *Destiny's Woman*. Although she has many reasons for her preference, she especially appreciated the skill with which the author weaves historical detail into the narrative. Laurie explained that the heroine is forced by circumstances to run a plantation on her own. "Because that was unusual then," she added, "it let [the author] get all the details in." She commented later that those "details keep it from being a completely stupid fictional story."

In explaining their husbands' reactions to their reading, Dot's customers volunteered the information that despite initial resistance, the men could usually be convinced of the activity's value when their wives demonstrated that they learned from their books. Such a demonstration is not accomplished by explaining how much one has learned about human character, but rather by recounting a concrete "fact" about historical cooking practices, customs, or methods of transportation, by explaining word derivations, or by elaborating on the geographical features of a foreign country. Apparently, the more obscure and out-of-the-ordinary the information, the better. Several women delightedly told me that they had even heard their husbands pass on the information to others. Romances, then, connote change and progress for the women who read them because they believe the books expand their horizons and add to their knowledge about

the world. They also provide these readers with an opportunity to "teach" skeptical family members and thus to assume temporarily a position of relative power.

My conversations with Dot's customers confirmed her claim in our first interview that although husbands usually object to their wives' reading at first, they generally change their minds if the women persist long enough. She has a theory, she tells her women, "that if you can hang in there for three years, [the fact that they are threatened] goes away as such." When she recounted her theory, she added, "it's true. It is weird. And before long, they get to the point where they're thinking, 'Oh well, you know my wife reads x amount of books a week.' And they're braggin about it." If they can shift perspectives, in other words, and rather than see romance reading as a pointless activity with no utilitarian purpose, consider the ability to read many books both an achievement in itself and a way to learn, they can then justify their wives' book expenses. Some of these men can even be persuaded that the form is interesting if their wives decide to try their hand at romance writing themselves. Dot observed, "Here we have some of these women who have decided, 'Well, I can write a book.' And now these very same husbands are so supportive that they are almost pushy. 'Well, get that book done. That's a good book. I've been reading it.' So you see, it can be a change if they just kind of push it in place." Romance reading can be justified to others, then, if the reader learns to stress the books' educational function, if she can demonstrate the extraordinary adeptness and speed with which she reads, or if she can turn the whole process around and write her own romance to be read and, of course, bought by others.

In maintaining that the "reading for instruction" argument helps to legitimate an activity that would otherwise be seen as self-indulgent and frivolous because it does not immediately appear to accomplish anything useful, I do not mean to imply that the Smithton women are being dishonest when they say they want to learn. Nor am I questioning whether they do, in fact, learn anything of value. I think it important to emphasize here that a genuine craving for knowledge of the world beyond the doors of their suburban homes is an important motivating factor in their decision to read rather than watch television, participate in craft activities, or involve themselves in physical recreation. They are cognizant that their lives have been limited by the need to stay close to home to care for children and to provide a supportive environment for their husbands. A common refrain in all of the conversations centered about the value of a book as a provider of "adult conversation" which they missed as a result of their confinement within their homes as the principal provider and companion for small children.

In summary, romances can be termed compensatory fiction because the

act of reading them fulfills certain basic psychological needs for women that have been induced by the culture and its social structures but that often remain unmet in day-to-day existence as the result of concomitant restrictions on female activity. From the Smithton readers' experiences, in particular, it can be concluded that romance reading compensates women in two distinct ways. Most important, it provides vicarious emotional nurturance by prompting identification between the reader and a fictional heroine whose identity as a woman is always confirmed by the romantic and sexual attentions of an ideal male. When she successfully imagines herself in the heroine's position, the typical romance reader can relax momentarily and permit herself to wallow in the rapture of being the center of a powerful and important individual's attention. This attention not only provides her with the sensations evoked by emotional nurturance and physical satisfaction, but, equally significantly, reinforces her sense of self because in offering his care and attention to the woman with whom she identifies, the hero implicitly regards that woman and, by implication, the reader, as worthy of his concern. This fictional character thus teaches both his narrative counterpart and the reader to recognize the value they doubted they possessed.

Romance fiction is compensatory in a second sense because it fills a woman's mental world with the varied details of simulated travel and permits her to converse imaginatively with adults from a broad spectrum of social space. Moreover, the world-creating and instructional functions of romances provide the woman who believes in the value of individual achievement with the opportunity to feel that education has not ceased for her nor has the capacity to succeed in culturally approved terms been erased by her acceptance of the less-valued domestic roles. Because romance reading is coded as an instructional activity even as it is acknowledged to be entertaining, a woman can indulge herself by engaging in an activity that makes her feel good and simultaneously congratulate herself for acting to improve her awareness of the world by learning through books. Romance reading compensates, then, for a certain kind of emotional deprivation just as it creates the illusion of movement or change achieved through informal acquisition of factual "knowledge."

In populating her imagination with the attractive and exotically employed individuals found in romances, the woman whose intercourse with the community has been restricted in favor of her family widens her range of acquaintances and vicariously enriches the social space she inhabits. Like an individual prevented from dreaming who then begins to hallucinate in waking life to compensate for the reduction in symbolic activity, a woman who has been restricted by her relative isolation within the home turns to romances for the wealth of objects, people, and places they enable her to construct *within* her own imagination. The fact that she is reading

and therefore learning functions for the romance reader as an assurance that she is not an example of that much-maligned cultural stereotype, the simpleminded housewife who can manage little more than to feed her children, iron a few shirts, and watch the afternoon soap operas. The Smithton women are all acutely aware that American culture does not value the role they perform and they indignantly protest that their employment as mothers and housewives does not mean that they are necessarily stupid. Their reading, finally, serves to confirm their image of themselves as intelligent individuals who are yet deserving of occasional pleasure and escape from responsibilities that are willingly accepted and dutifully performed.

In thus mediating between a desire to indulge the self emotionally through repetitive *consumption* and the contradictory need to exhibit the self as a hard-working achiever, the very act of romance reading seems to reconcile two opposing sets of values. Before elaborating on this further interpretation of the social factors contributing to the Smithton women's understanding of their own reading behavior, I would like to include one last conversation between Dot, Joy, and Kit. Not only does the exchange contain more references to the theme of escape and its connection to addiction, but it also provides a glimpse into the anger and indignation spawned by the culture's scorn for the fantasy that the women know they need. These comments developed out of a discussion about the publishers' belittlement of their own romances and the women who read them. The three were lamenting the publishers' inability to provide consistently the kinds of romances the women like to read.

Joy: I hate these nonreaders that say what we will and will not read.

Dot: But, you know, that is what I tell the—anyone that I come in contact with, the [publishers'] reps that I know. If they can go back and open their mouth, I say, "You know, you guys spend a heck of a lot of money on advertisement and all you'd have to do is come out and talk to the women." I said, "They're very voluble, they can converse. They read and they speak. They do all normal things. If you want—you know—a line of communication, it's here." They don't do it. Now I don't know whether they don't know anybody that can go out and handle the situation.

Joy: Or if they're afraid of the Indian uprising [said with derision]. We *are* west of the Alleghenies!

Dot: And I know that when this man [at the booksellers con-

vention] was so rather—made this statement, I took an immediate dislike to him. Kit was standing there and said, "You didn't like him, did you?" And I said, "You are right! . . ." He made the statement that—I said, "The women read for escapism." And he said, "Any reading is for escapism." And I said, "Well, I wouldn't call a textbook escapism." A mathematics textbook, I think, is probably what I said, something of that nature. He said, "Of course it is." And I said, "No, it isn't."

Kit: Well, then he made some rude comment about women's reading. I mean, he made a derogatory comment directly about woman's opium or something like that.

Dot: Oh yes, fix. Getting a fix—oh, when they get their romantic fix.

Interviewer: But you said to me that you think it's an addiction.

Dot: That's right. But I don't want *him* telling me it is. If I recognize that I need this, that's one thing. But for him to tell me in a disparaging manner . . .

Joy: Because there are well-written books and poorly written books in any group of any kind of reading and we can sift out what we think are the drivel.

Dot: Yes, we can tell the difference.

Joy: And we don't enjoy something that is poorly written either.

Kit: And a fix, you get the idea you'd go out and read just anything.

Joy: Yeah, anything in the romance section or the gothic section in the supermarket display.

Kit: Like you have no discretion.

Joy: And no mind—and no education.

Dot: Well, now, that's what most of them tend to think. The simpleminded housewife!

Joy: Hooked on her soap operas.

Kit: Yeah, they think that your intellectual level is nil and none.

Joy: I couldn't even tell you the names of the soap operas.

Dot: Well, it's actually almost as though he were speaking down to some two- or three-year-old child which—I resent that too—but the fact is, here is [the area representative] telling him that I'm selling books like there's no tomorrow—and he's standing there in his custom-made suit or whatever.



Joy: Botany 500.  
 Dot: Well, whatever it is he's standing there in—and it's like as though I'm probably paying for the suit on his back.

[Here the conversation trails off and a new topic is picked up.]

Although Dot's anger here is focused specifically on a publisher's dismissal of her favorite books, it is still representative of a response common to all of her readers. The Smithton women believe very strongly that romance reading is worthwhile because the stories provide pleasure while the activity of reading challenges them to learn new words and information about a world they find intriguing and all too distant. Their anger is directed at those who would implicitly deny them, through "disinterested" criticism, the right to a temporary escape and to a fantasy they desire. In an effort to circumvent disapproval grounded in the attitude that fantasy and play are somehow unnecessary, useless, and unbecoming to adults, the Smithton readers have learned to defend their activity by boasting of all that it teaches them. The justification is a strategic one because it associates romances with a set of values that have been an integral part of American middle-class culture at least since the early days of industrialization. In effect, they establish themselves as hard-working, achievement-oriented individuals by claiming that romances are "factual" and therefore filled with information that can be extracted and used by the industrious reader.

In so defending their repetitive reading, the Smithton women appeal to a set of values that continues to serve as a powerful motivating force in the lives of middle-class Americans despite the elaboration of a new set of values displayed in mass-media advertisements proclaiming that the route to happiness and success entails not work but consumption. What we see reflected in their uneasy reliance on the contradictory assertions that romance fiction is a harmless but effective escape from psychological burdens and, at the same time, utilitarian instruction about the real world, is a clash between two value systems. One system serves to sustain a consumer-oriented economy, while the other, developed by an economy designed to accumulate and to concentrate capital, tacitly labels consumption for pure pleasure both wasteful and dangerous. By demonstrating that romance reading is work for the reader, the women are able to exorcise any lingering doubts they might have about the legitimacy of a consumption process that always exhausts its object even as it only temporarily satisfies the need that prompted the decision to buy in the first place. This return to the ideology of hard work or productive labor to justify pleasurable leisure activity seems to betoken an incomplete assimilation of

the values of a consuming society whose very health depends on its members' continuous purchase of commodities.

It should not seem strange that romance readers' claims about the pleasures attendant upon completion of each book sound remarkably like the advertising claims made daily on television, in newspapers, and in glossy magazines that happiness, friendship, respect, and sexual pleasure can be had in the form of any number of mass-produced objects. Advertisements present the American population with an interminable parade of blissfully happy individuals whose extraordinary joy, excitement, satisfaction, beauty, and sense of power are linked by simple juxtaposition with the particular product being sold. Each individual addressed by an ad is told, in effect, that the emotional state represented in the picture by an always already transformed consumer can be purchased automatically, in tandem with the deodorant, designer jeans, gold-coin watch, or automobile that is the ostensible subject of the ad. Its concealed message, however, is the more significant one, for it legitimates through assertion the notion that commodity consumption is an adequate and effective way to negate the "pain" produced by the disappointments, imperfections, and small failures that are an inevitable part of human life. It is worth observing, however, that advertising's offer of happiness is nothing but a promise of vicarious experience. As a discursive form, it presents satisfaction, contentment, and pride, not as the result of an individual's actions or social intercourse with others, but as the natural consequence of the activity of consuming or displaying a particular product. Happiness is not an emotional condition one creates for oneself through action; in advertising, it is a thing that one can buy.<sup>28</sup>

Like the commodities constituted by advertising, romances also provide vicarious pleasure. Indeed, Harlequin, Fawcett, and Silhouette now publicly claim in their own advertising campaigns that certain "end emotional benefits" can be purchased along with the latest romance novel. These companies know well that when specific psychological needs, which they are not able to fully identify themselves, are inadequately addressed or left unfulfilled by a woman's daily round of activities and social contacts, she will turn to a romance and imagine what it feels like to have her needs met as are those of her alter ego, the heroine. Still, it must always be remembered that the good feelings this woman derives from reading romantic fiction are not experienced in the course of her habitual existence in the world of actual social relations, but in the separate, free realm of the imaginary. The happiness she permits herself is not only secondhand experience, but temporary as well. By resting satisfied with this form of vicarious pleasure, the romance reader may do nothing to transform her actual situation which itself gave rise to the need to seek out such pleasure in the

first place. Consumption of one temporarily satisfying romance will lead in that case to the need and desire for another. The vicarious pleasure offered by romantic fiction finally may be satisfying enough to forestall the need for more substantial change in the reader's life. At the same time, its very ephemerality may guarantee a perpetual desire to repeat the experience. Consumption, in short, might result only in future consumption. Whether it in fact does so is open to some question. Because this issue can only be adequately addressed after the entire romance-reading experience has been assessed, I will delay further consideration of it until the conclusion of this book.

In summary, however, it is worth noting again that when Dot and her customers insist that they have a right to escape and to indulge themselves just as everyone else does, they are justifying their book purchases with arguments that are basic to a consuming society. In effect, they are insisting that they be permitted the same leisure, extravagance, and opportunities for immediate gratification that they help their husbands and children to realize. However, when they subsequently argue that romances are also edifying and that reading is a kind of productive labor, they forsake that ideology of perpetual consumption for a more traditional value system that enshrines hard work, performance of duty, and thrift. Romances are valuable according to this system because they enable the reader to accumulate information, to add to her worth, and thus to better herself. In so justifying the act of reading the romance, the Smithton women affirm their adherence to traditional values and, at the same time, engage in a form of behavior that is itself subversive of those values.

interviews the women had expressed a distaste for romances that end abruptly with the declaration of love between the principal characters.

24. Faust, *Women, Sex, and Pornography*, p. 67.

25. Richard Hoggart is one of the few who disagrees with this argument. See his comments in *The Uses of Literacy*, pp. 171-75. Jensen has also acknowledged that many Harlequin authors "apparently share the backgrounds, attitudes, and fantasies of their women readers" ("Women and Romantic Fiction," pp. 118-19).

26. Quoted in Evans, "Dorothy's Diary," May 1980, p. 2.

27. Quoted in Evans, "Dorothy's Diary," Newsletter #4, 1980, p. 2. (This issue is not dated by month.)

28. Berman, "They Call Us Illegitimate," p. 38.

29. Whitney, "Writing the Gothic Novel," p. 10.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 11.

32. Faust, *Women, Sex, and Pornography*, p. 63.

33. Whitney, "Writing the Gothic Novel," p. 43.

34. Quoted by Glass, "Editor's Report," p. 33.

35. Douglas, "Soft-Porn Culture," p. 28 (italics added).

36. Geertz, "Deep Play," p. 443.

37. Douglas, "Soft-Porn Culture," p. 25.

38. On the connection between patriarchy and marriage, see Hartmann, "The Family as Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle," especially pp. 366-76.

39. None of the Smithton women commented on whether they had ever been hit, pushed around, or forced to have sexual relations against their will, although several did tell me that they know this goes on because it happens to their friends. In summarizing current studies on wife abuse, Rohrbaugh has commented in *Women: Psychology's Puzzle* that "many researchers in this field agree with Judge Stewart Oneglia's estimate that '50 percent of all marriages involve some degree of physical abuse of the woman'" (p. 350). Rohrbaugh also points out that "studies that define wife abuse as anything from an occasional hard slap to repeated, severe beatings suggest that there are 26 million to 30 million abused wives in the United States today" (p. 350). If these figures are accurate, it seems clear that a good many romance readers may very well need to be given a model "explanation" for this sort of behavior.

40. I would like to thank Star Helmer for giving me a copy of Gallen Books' "tipsheet" for contemporary romances.

41. The italics have been added here to indicate where Ann placed special emphasis and changed her intonation during her remarks. In each case, the emphasis conveyed both sarcasm and utter disbelief. Two of the most difficult tasks in using ethnographic material are those of interpreting meanings clearly implied by a speaker but not actually said and adequately conveying them in written prose.

42. See, especially, Modleski, "The Disappearing Act," pp. 444-48.

43. Again, the italics have been added here to indicate where special emphasis was conveyed through intonation. In each case, the emphasis was meant to underscore the distance between this heroine's behavior and that usually expected of women.

## CHAPTER 3

1. See chap. 2, n. 5, for the method of citing spoken quotations in this chapter and elsewhere in the text.

2. These coupon ads appeared sporadically in national newspapers throughout the spring and summer of 1980.

3. Neels, *Cruise to a Wedding*, p. 190.

4. Maryles, "Fawcett Launches Romance Imprint," p. 70.

5. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 196.

6. Harding, "The Notion of 'Escape,'" p. 24.

7. Ibid., p. 25.

8. For discussions of the growth of the reading public and the popular press, see Williams, *The Long Revolution*, pp. 156-213, and Altick, *The English Common Reader*, passim.

9. As Escarpit has observed in *The Sociology of Literature*, p. 91, "there are a thousand ways to escape and it is essential to know from what and towards what we are escaping."

10. Escarpit, *ibid.*, p. 88. Although Dot's observations are not couched in academic language, they are really no different from Escarpit's similar observation that "reading is the supreme solitary occupation." He continues that "the man [*sic*] who reads does not speak, does not act, cuts himself away from society, isolates himself from the world which surrounds him. . . . reading allows the senses no margin of liberty. It absorbs the entire conscious mind, making the reader powerless to act" (p. 88). The significance of this last effect of the act of reading to the Smithton women will be discussed later in this chapter. For a detailed discussion of the different demands made upon an individual by reading and radio listening, see Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*, pp. 170-79.

11. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 36.

12. Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework*, p. 179. See also Oakley, *Woman's Work*, pp. 60-155; McDonough and Harrison, "Patriarchy and Relations of Production," pp. 11-41; Kuhn, "Structures of Patriarchy and Capitalism," pp. 42-67; Sacks, "Engels Revisited," pp. 207-22; and Lopata, *Occupation Housewife*, passim.

13. In addition to Lopata, see Komarovskiy, *Blue-Collar Marriage*; Myrdal and Klein, *Women's Two Roles*; Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*; Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*; Steinmann, "A Study of the Concept of the Feminine Role."

14. With respect to this view of woman as a natural wife and mother, Dorothy Dinnerstein has observed in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* that women are treated as "natural resources to be mined, reaped, used up without concern for their future fate" (p. 101).

15. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 36.

16. Ibid.

17. It is worth remarking here that the feeling that housework ought to be done according to some abstract standard is apparently common to many women who work in the home. For a discussion of these standards, their origins in the generally unsupervised nature of housework, and the guilt they produce in the women who invariably feel they seldom "measure up," see Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework*, pp. 100-112.

52. When you do watch television, what do you watch *most* often? (Please select only one.)
- a. Masterpiece Theatre (PBS)
  - b. movies (either regular films or made-for-TV movies)
  - c. situation comedies (like *Three's Company*, *Barney Miller*, *M\*A\*S\*H*)
  - d. hour-long dramas
  - e. variety or specials
  - f. documentaries
  - g. game shows
  - h. other (please specify)
53. Could you briefly describe what makes romances better than other kinds of books available today?

## Notes



## INTRODUCTION

1. Quoted by Jensen, "Women and Romantic Fiction," pp. 302-3.
2. Modleski, "The Disappearing Act," p. 446.
3. Jensen, "Women and Romantic Fiction," p. 313.
4. Douglas, "Soft-Porn Culture," p. 28.
5. In addition to the articles by Douglas and Modleski, see also Snitow, "Mass Market Romance," pp. 141-61.
6. See, for instance, Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*.
7. See Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, and Wright, *Sixguns and Society*.
8. For an explanation of the ways in which New Criticism continues to influence literary theory and affect critical practice, see Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*. For material on the New Critics themselves, see Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry*, and Graff, *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma*.
9. For a critique of these premises in one form of literary scholarship that also claims to explain behavior, see Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," pp. 435-50, and Kelly, "Literature and the Historian," pp. 141-59.
10. For a survey of semiotic research in several fields, see the three volumes edited by Sebeok, *A Perfuson of Signs, Sight, Sound, and Sense*, and *The Tell-Tale Sign*. For a comprehensive treatment of general semiotic theory, see Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*. For comment on the implications of semiotic theory for literary study, see Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, and Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation*.

11. Geertz, "Thick Description," p. 5.

12. Ibid., p. 14.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p. 5.

15. When confronted with a cultural event, Geertz argues, in "Thick Description," that the symbolic anthropologist must abandon attempts to determine its ontological status and turn rather to the question of its import, "what it is . . . that in [its] occurrence and through [its] agency, is getting said" (p. 10).

16. I am thinking specifically here of the emic/etic description first proposed by Kenneth Pike in *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*. Drawing on a distinction made in linguistics between phonetics, or the study of all possible sounds used in the production of speech, and phonemics, the study of sound categories recognized and actually employed by a language group, Pike suggested that culture might similarly be investigated from two points of view. On the one hand, the ethnographer could seek to discover and describe those native categories of action and belief actually used by a people to order and give meaning to their behavior. On the other hand, that student might choose to view the culture from without on the basis of categories and distinctions he or she had created in order to facilitate comparisons between the culture and otherwise incommensurate systems. Despite the dependence of this latter form of analysis on the investigator's own methods for discriminating among kinds of cultural behaviors and meanings, it must be grounded, at least in Pike's view, in a thorough understanding of the way the culture is perceived from within by those who participate in it. For Pike's elaboration of the emic/etic distinction, see pp. 37-72. For further discussion of the distinction and the interpretive problems it creates for the anthropologist, see Goodenough, *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology*, pp. 98-130, and Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*.

17. For a similar argument that all interpretation is nothing more than a "rewriting operation" in which a given cultural object is rewritten allegorically in the terms of some other interpretive code, itself privileged by the individual conducting the operation, see Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," pp. 41-73.

18. On patriarchy, see Millett, *Sexual Politics*, pp. 23-58; Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," pp. 1-33, and "The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle," pp. 366-94; Fox-Genovese, "Property and Patriarchy," pp. 36-59; Kuhn, "Structures of Patriarchy and Capital," pp. 42-67; McDonough and Harrison, "Patriarchy and Relations of Production," pp. 11-41.

19. For a review of the recent history of reader-oriented criticism, see Tompkins, "The Reader in History," pp. 201-32, and the excellent annotated bibliography that follows it, pp. 233-72. In addition, see Suleiman and Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text*.

20. Reader-response criticism is a rapidly developing area of study in contemporary literary theory and, as such, has been practiced differently by critics working from within variant theoretical perspectives. Although it is therefore difficult to point to the work of one critic as representative of the rest, I believe Stanley Fish's contributions consistently challenge old notions about the text as a fixed object

and carry to its furthest possible conclusions the alternative proposition that a reader is responsible for what is made of the literary work. For a sample of Fish's writing that represents the chronological evolution of his thoughts about the reading process, see *Is There a Text in This Class?* In the last four essays of the book, Fish pushes his critical premises to their limits, arguing thereby that neither the text nor the reader are alone responsible for the meaning that is produced in the reading process. Rather, Fish maintains, that meaning is constructed from textual materials by a reader who operates not alone and subjectively but according to assumptions and strategies that he or she has adopted by virtue of prior participation in a specific interpretive community. It was Fish's work that first persuaded me that it was necessary to investigate what real readers *do* with texts when the goal of analysis is an explanatory statement about why people read certain kinds of books.

Although Fish has never, to my knowledge, explored the connection between his theory of reading and some of the assumptions of sociolinguistics, his theory does bear certain similarities to the notion of communicative competence elaborated by Hymes in *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*, especially pp. 3-67. For a theoretical statement about why literacy and reading ought to be investigated ethnographically, see Swzed, "The Ethnography of Literacy."

21. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 9. For a similar formulation about the nature of a historical fact as a function of an interpretation and theory, see Murphy, *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past*, pp. 101-33.

22. Dorothy Evans is a pseudonym I have designed to insure the privacy of my principal informant. Although I have also changed the name of the town where she works to Smithton and otherwise tried to disguise the identity of her customers, all facts about their backgrounds, education, and reading habits are accurate in the sense that I have transcribed the information precisely as it was given to me by them.

23. See Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* and *5 Readers Reading*.

24. Barthes, *S/Z*.

25. Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*.

26. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*.

## CHAPTER I

1. Douglas, "Soft-Porn Culture," pp. 25-29.

2. The distribution figure is that quoted by Harlequin itself in recent advertisements as well as in its 1979 annual report to its shareholders. A good example of Harlequin's advertising can be found in *Publishers Weekly*, 18 April 1980, pp. 26-27. The annual report is available from Harlequin Enterprises, Ltd., 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3Z5. All facts and figures about Harlequin romances refer to the corporation's practices in 1982 unless otherwise noted.

3. Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, 1:3. Tebbel's history of the American publishing industry is the single best source for details about the development of the business as a whole as well as about that of individual houses.

18. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 36. For studies of contemporary working-class versions of these networks, see Stack, *All Our Kin*; Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*; Lamphere, "Strategies, Cooperation, and Conflict among Women in Domestic Groups," pp. 97-112.

19. Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework*, pp. 52-54, 75, 88-92; Oakley, *Woman's Work*, pp. 101-2; Lopata, *Occupation Housewife*, pp. 36, 244-45.

20. A few months before I arrived in Smithton, several of Dot's customers expressed an interest in getting together with other romance readers. Accordingly, Dot arranged an informal gathering in her home at which five to ten women socialized and discussed romances. Although the women claimed they enjoyed themselves, they have not yet met again. See also Chapter 2, note 1.

21. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, there is ample evidence to indicate that writers' and readers' perceptions of romances are remarkably similar. This holds true not only for the subject of the story itself but also for conceptions of the romance's function. For comments very similar to Dot's, see Van Slyke, "Old-Fashioned' and 'Up-to-the-Minute,'" pp. 14-16.

22. It is important to point out here that certain behaviors of the Smithton readers indicate that they actually hold contradictory attitudes about the realism of the romance. Although they admit the stories are unreal, they also claim that they learn about history and geography from their reading. This contradiction and its significance will be explored later in this chapter and in Chapter 6.

23. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 121-23.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

25. The difficulty of eliciting honest answers from readers about their literary preferences and tastes is well known. As Escarpit has wryly observed, "The likelihood of lucid and sincere answers is extremely reduced as soon as someone's reading habits are examined. While the confession of one's sexual peculiarities may flatter a latent exhibitionist, the avowal of literary or anti-literary tastes . . . which lower one's position in society can only be painful" (*The Sociology of Literature*, p. 16). Indeed it was for this very reason that I decided to do some of my interviewing in groups. Because I knew beforehand that many women are afraid to admit their preference for romantic novels for fear of being scorned as illiterate or immoral, I suspected that the strength of numbers might make my informants less reluctant about discussing their obsession. The strategy seemed to work, for as the shyer women saw that I did not react negatively when others volunteered information, they too began to participate in the discussions. Group interviewing, of course, creates the possibility that one individual will influence the others, thus falsifying the results. I do not think this happened to any great extent because the answers to the questionnaires generally bear out what I discovered through the interviews.

26. Personal interview with Vivien Stephens, New York, 12 April 1979. Stephens is now an editor with Harlequin Books.

27. In fact, many romance authors do travel to the locales they intend to write about. This is especially true of the more successful writers. Most of the others manage to do at least rudimentary research in their local libraries. Indeed, it is not unusual to find expressions of gratitude to librarians included after the title page

of a romance. Phyllis Whitney, for example, included the following note in her novel, *Domino*: "My thanks to those who helped to make *Domino* possible. To Marlys Millhiser and Lucinda Baker, who know the West, and whose books I admire. To David Clemens of the Huntington Public Library, who found all that wonderful material about deringers for me. And especially to Sara Courant of the Patchogue Public Library who never fails me, no matter what peculiar roads of research I choose to follow" (unpaged).

28. On advertising, see Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, and Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*.

#### CHAPTER 4

1. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*.

2. A function according to Propp is "the act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (*ibid.*, p. 21).

3. Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, pp. 124-29.

4. For a full discussion of semiotic coding, see Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, especially pp. 37-38, 48-150. For a more specific discussion of the coding or framing of literary characters, see the introduction to Eco's *The Role of the Reader*, pp. 3-43.

5. Jensen, "Women and Romantic Fiction," p. 141. For additional comments on the romantic heroine's sexual rival, see Douglas, "Soft-Porn Culture," pp. 26-27; Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband," pp. 668-70, 683, 691; Mussell, "Beautiful and Damned," pp. 84-89.

6. The seven with early marriages are *The Flame and the Flower*, *Shanna, Made for Each Other*, *The Proud Breed*, *The Black Lyon*, *The Fulfillment*, and *Moonlight Variations*.

7. Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, passim.

8. I have come across no romance with a heroine described as ugly, homely, or simply plain. Harlequins do tend to have heroines who are not ravishing beauties, but, as Jensen notes, they are at least "plainly attractive" ("Women and Romantic Fiction," p. 142).

9. Ann Douglas emphasizes the violence in Harlequins, although she does not consider the implications of the fact that most of the stories conclude with the taming of the hero and with his transformation into a loving and attentive husband. She assumes, furthermore, that readers enjoy his early brutality rather than endure it precisely in order to be told later that such all-too-common behavior can be eradicated and transformed into something much more desirable. For further discussion of the role of male violence in the romance, see Chapter 5.

10. These heroines appear respectively in the following books: *The Flame and the Flower*, *Made for Each Other*, *Miss Hungerford's Handsome Hero*, *Ashes in the Wind*, and *Summer of the Dragon*.

11. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, pp. 169-70.

12. For an additional discussion of the continuing importance of her mother in a woman's relational life as an adult, see Flax, "The Conflict between Nurture and Autonomy," especially pp. 179-84.