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# Feminism and Romance Fiction

**Over the past 20 years, the rise in feminism has been parallel almost exactly by a mushroom growth in the popularity of romance fiction**

In 1979, the world's largest romance publishing house, Harlequin Enterprises, distributed 168,000,000 copies of their titles; books being issued in 98 countries worldwide. In 1990 Harlequin claimed a regular readership of 16 million women in North America alone. The extraordinary success of this and many other similar romance publishers seems unusual in a social climate where gendered stereotypes are apparently being broken down; how come, then, this increasing interest in romance fiction; the genre that surly most perpetuates the myths and misrepresentations of heterosexual partnering?

It may be assumed that women's changing attitudes and needs qualify for greater consumption of romance but equally the factors surrounding the recent changes in book production, distribution and marketing have greatly encouraged the growth of this genre. Their search for reasons for this phenomenon leads us to the questions: What pleasures do readers satisfy in their consumption of romance? What are publisher's motives and techniques in production and distribution? And where does all this fit into the dominant ideology offered by a capitalist patriarchy?

Examining publishing houses first, we find institutions that had originally seen themselves as manufacturers of unique products; intermediaries between an author's particular individual philosophy and a sympathetic reading audience. However, as technology advanced, awareness developed in contradiction to this principle attitude: that books of similar content could be sold again and again quite successfully to an increasingly larger audience. The novel as commodity soon became of great interest to the entrepreneur and publishers (many reluctantly) evolved to accept this view.

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As the 'cheap fiction' market began to be realised, the 'line' or 'series' novel emerged. This served to identify a *permanent* base audience, enabling better prediction of sales and increasing profit. The 'line' novel has undergone many changes but is still the principle behind the many sub-genres of romance fiction found today.

Technological advancement has the effect of increasing the efficiency of industries to which it serves and this is true for the printer publishers, who with the development of quicker machines, the invention of synthetic glue and so on, achieved early growth. In more recent years, the potential for greater distribution and monitoring of stock has been seized by the use of information technology.

One of the greatest influences on the market for romance fiction has to be the effect of the 'absorption' of publishing houses by the massive communications conglomerates; not only has this united in corporate matrimony the mass-market paperback with the hard cover companies, but has put even greater emphasis on 'profit and loss' statements that the publishers had previously themselves regarded. The multinationals took control of the relatively disorganised finances of the publishing houses and applied their established techniques of creating vast fortunes. The high prices of best-sellers' reprint rights could now be funded. More money is poured into advertising and market research. Also as reprint rights are high there is greater pressure to acquire original manuscripts from writers whose work adequately fits with the given formula, this being less expensive than locating a new audience for a unique work.

Within the direction of the conglomerates, highly efficient marketing strategies have been developed, taking advantage of the skills of such people as W. Heisey, who, employed by Harlequin in 1971 commented, "The qualities of the product itself are unimportant in designing sales campaigns." Thus in applying similar methods to selling literature as those established in selling soap powder, books are now bought regularly and repeatedly by an audience who identify with brand name alone. It seems ironic that in one advertising campaign free sample copies of romance titles were given away in boxes of laundry detergent! However, these techniques used to induce reader addiction are generally far more subtle.

Market research shows that consumers found buying romances from traditional book shops a little intimidating and this aided the emergence (via corporate power links) of a new style of book shop: brightly lit, brightly coloured outlets with much saturation of stock, heavy working of impulse buy sections, bargain bins and other devices to promote mass purchase typify the trend. Although cheap fiction has always enjoyed the distribution networks of newspapers and periodicals it is now possible to purchase a Mills & Boon from a newsagent, an out-of-town supermarket or even a garage, making romance fiction as accessible as possible to the targeted audience.

Harlequin and Silhouette claim that their reading audience consists mainly of middle class women between the ages of 25 and 45. This group would certainly have the available income for romance buying. A significant majority would find free time, presumably whilst children are at school, to indulge in the pleasures of reading. It cannot be drawn however at this stage that the reason for such extensive market research is a direct counter-attack on the further emancipation of women but rather for the exploitation of an already existing market. Over half the reading population *are* women; social duties and daily habits make women extremely accessible to publishers. Further, the enjoyment of the reading experience is such that vast numbers of women return repeatedly to that experience.

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Turning now to the pleasures of the romance novel, I would like to view first the typical plot formula and style. The story evolves around the meeting of a woman and a man; a period of courtship and finally (and ideally) a marriage. The plot, therefore, is filled with minor characters and a series of events that serve to bring the lovers closer together or to take them further apart.

The description of the hero and heroine vary little from these norms: The hero is older (35 to 55) has a professional status and is above all a very masculine man. He is described in terms of the object with many physical descriptions of him referring to his great strength, impressive size power etc. one or two minor flaws such as long eyelashes may hint at femininity. The heroine is also allowed a very minor imperfection; being slightly overweight is a common flaw (an undesirable character trait seems to serve the same purpose); It would appear that perfect people are just too difficult to identify with. The heroine is a professional also, maintaining her status as an 'individual' 'modern woman'.

The environment in which the plot unfolds may vary considerably from distant countries to the mundane workplace; office, hospitals etc. However, there's always a location or circumstance where emotional senses are heightened; the start of a new job, a plane crash on a desert island for example.

The style is woman-centered and usually written in third person narrative from the heroine's point of view - a notable exception being the descriptions of her beauty which are from the male standpoint thus allowing the heroine to be unaware of her sexuality and therefore 'pure'.

Other character stereotypes, the 'other woman' of loose morality; the 'villain' male, extremely masculine and immoral; the 'wimp', compassionate male - rejected by the heroine for lack of machismo. The family exist here not as an extended moral and emotional support but almost exclusively for financial involvement.

The heroine has negligible contact with any other characters apart from the hero and when not with him, is mentally preparing for the next meeting. When the two *do* interact (from the initial meeting through to almost the end of the book) the heroine is in a highly self-aware state using intense amounts of psychic energy to conceal unruly emotion and to present a calm, practical facade.

With the inevitable conclusion given, much time is spent filling out the novel with descriptions of locations, clothes, glamorised domestic work, gourmet food and consumer items in a flat style that could be taken from travel brochures or women's magazines. Clothes are worth noting; there is much emphasis on being able to find the 'right' clothes and there is usually an instance where, innocently, an 'inappropriate' item is worn that leads to self exposure in front of the hero.

The fantasy comes to its conclusion when - despite the heroine's continual dislike (and often hatred) of the hero throughout - despite the series of total non-communication and misunderstanding between hero and heroine - they decide to wed.

The conclusion belongs not to the realms of fantasy but to unreality and denial. As in the light of feminist critical analysis the whole novel is full of contradiction, however, it's pleasures are sufficient to attract millions of women readers; social realism *not* being an agent in the novel's popularity.

Romance fiction as the means to escapism is a significant element to readers. Anne Radway suggests, following work with regular readers that the act of reading becomes, in a way, a subversive act

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where the time belongs to the woman alone and where the excessive physical and emotional demands of husbands and children cannot impinge. The reader can, therefore, escape from a situation where their responsibilities are felt too great to bear and at the same time enjoy vicariously the fantasy of a heroine's similar responsibilities and needs being adequately met; but the obvious paradox created within the novel surely leaves one in an unsatisfied state. Continually the reader is reassured of and rewarded for the acceptance of the very narrow role of the traditional heterosexual female sexuality. That which is so easily controlled, that which objectifies itself, becomes subservient and so on. However, for many women readers of romance even this limited exploration of sexuality must be a gladly received and enjoyable experience. There are various degrees of explicitness within the sub-genres, but pornography is enjoyed whether graphically descriptive or pernicious double entendre and metaphor. The sexual role (for women) offered by the pornographic aspect of romance fiction is little removed from that supplied by the women of pin ups and penthouse magazine. The heroine is sexually charged in a state of almost constant arousal. She wishes to be desired and to satisfy men's needs. In romance fiction this is known only to the reader, who is empowered by this insight into the heroine's subconscious; a level of pleasure is received from this view.

A feeling of sophistication is given also to the reader concerning male sexuality; it is that of being emotionally superior to men. The hero's sexuality is expressed in terms of violence and brutality and we are given to believe that this is merely a mask for his real feelings of love! The attitude appears as an attempt to understand the cruelty of men.

Various psychological perspectives lend insight to reader addiction - the Freudian concept of reparation compulsion (a desire to resolve psychic conflict by repeating the disturbance in the symbolic form of fantasy) can be applied to partly explain the desire for repeated reading.

If romance fiction can be seen as a narcotic then the role of the supplier can be seen in the same metaphor. Transnational corporations are interested in gaining power and money. They control about 90% of the world's commodity trade; they're highly competitive patriarchal giants, profiteering from global exploitation of people, animals and resources. It is hardly surprising then, that a product like romance fiction has been so heavily marketed, if its effects are pacifying women's anger and desire to change the status quo. A product that lessens the power of its millions of female consumers and reinforces many of the traditional roles for women (which are found so unacceptable) can be seen as a subtle attempt to continue and strengthen patriarchal values.

It appears that as capitalist patriarchy is further broken down it reaches for ideological weapons in the form of romance.

In an optimistic view, certainly in North America, romance fiction is evolving from a commodity to be consumed into a movement of writers and readers communicating via monthly newsletters, internet forums, web publishing and conferences. Self-publishing is also on the increase, as is the phenomena of Femslash fiction. There is also evidence of a gradual shift in style to a more feminist orientation in new work. Although this movement is slight (compared with the vast number of readers) it is evidence enough of the human desire to create meaning, an encouraging refusal to accept the given roles, labels and arguable pleasures offered by consumerism.

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