WOMEN'S READING OF POPULAR ROMANTIC FICTION:

A CASE STUDY IN THE MASS MEDIA

A KEY TO THE IDEOLOGY OF WOMEN

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the phenomenon of the huge popularity
of formula romantic fiction with women readers. In particular it
aims to explore why, in face of movements towards increasing
equality of the sexes, such a seemingly conservative form of the
mass media is increasing its hold on its audience. It looks at
popular romantic fiction in two aspects. Firstly, romantic novels
are seen as part of the mass media. Since the essential of mass
culture is defined as the dissemination of cultural products by an
organised production organisation to an atomised mass audience,
formula fiction is something of an ideal type. It is suggested
that research into the mass media neglects the study of popular
fiction as a part of the field. Secondly, the study of romantic
fiction is seen as a useful key to the understanding of the
ideology of women. Because the concerns of romantic fiction lie
in those structures of society which particularly shape women's
lives, it is felt that research into this subject can be an
oblique and particularly effective way of exploring women's ideas
about their situation.

The research explores the ideas and attitudes of publishers,
authors, librarians and particularly the readers, together with
analysis of the contents of the books. Various methods of
investigation are used: open-ended questionnaires, interviews,
especially in-depth interviews with forty readers, also private
correspondence, publicity material and general meetings.

The research is revealing in demonstrating ambivalent
attitudes about the popularity of romantic fiction. It also shows

that, far from being gullible consumers of sentimental rubbish or the victims of patriarchal ideology, the women readers had very complex attitudes to their reading and this was intriguingly mirrored in the reality of their daily lives. The research presents empirical data from Britain to balance previous findings mostly drawn from North American studies. The research also challenges much previous research on the popularity of romantic fiction reading which draws on psychological and psychoanalytic theories and suggests that sociological explanations may have more immediate relevance.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis started out from a very simple observation of
what seemed to me a puzzling phenomenon. We are in an age when
there is some movement to equality between the sexes. Perhaps
this lags far behind an ideal of freedom for both women and men to
realise themselves as individuals, but nevertheless real strides
are being made. Yet at the same time, as I shall describe in
Chapter One, the market for popular romantic fiction is growing,
both in number of readers and the number of books published. When
the media are full of images of emancipated, independent women,
when women do go out to work, bring up children on their own, are
making inroads however tentative into male strongholds, they are
hurrying home to read about the tall, dark, handsome, arrogant and
overpowering hero who will 'take them away from all this'. I
wondered why.

I was aware that there is a taken-for-granted answer accepted
by many - those who do not read the books. They are 'silly
women' reading 'silly stories' - women who buy the naïve fiction
of romance which 'we' are too sophisticated to fall for. It can
appear, from a cursory reading of a few examples of romances, that
this is a very obvious case of passive and stupid consumers being
fed the most overt and outright propaganda. I felt that was too
pat and simple an explanation and set out to explore just how far
it gave a true picture.   .

I gained information, mainly by means of surveys and in-depth

interviews, from publishers, editors, agents, writers, librarians
and especially readers and, of course, from the books themselves.
I felt it was necessary to explore the ideas not just of those who
read the novels but also all those involved in the world of
romantic fiction - who are mostly women. How do all those
concerned in the production and consumption of the genre read
romantic fiction? If romantic fiction is an extreme example of
ideology being fed to women, I wondered where the producers and
'facilitators', as well as the readers, stand in relation to the
process. Books are an act of communication. Any act of
communication involves the senders of the message, the message
itself, together with those who enable the message to be
disseminated, and the receivers of the message. Therefore, it
seemed important that in order to understand any one strand of the
process, it was necessary to understand the others. They were all
so interlocked, each acting and reacting upon the other.

The thesis looks at the ambivalent attitudes of many of those
involved in the production and consumption of popular romantic
fiction, the contrast between feminist ideals and the publication,
reading or writing of books which espouse a more traditional
male/female relationship. Some of the groups, authors for
example, were social groups whose characteristics I found had been
little explored. Another group whose work proved to merit further
interest, because of a clear polarisation in their attitudes to
romantic fiction, discussed in Chapter Four, were the librarians.

One difficulty was that of pinning down a definition of the
genre. Just what sort of books constitute romantic fiction? It

is not easy to set the boundaries and I discuss this in Chapter
Two. Indeed many of the people I surveyed and interviewed
resisted the label. Nevertheless for all practical purposes,
publishers, writers and readers had a working definition. The
readers, in particular, had a very wide definition, quoting books
as disparate as Jane Eyre and Shirley Conran's Lace. I have
utilised Wittgenstein's observations in another field to suggest
that in spite of the difficulties of assigning books to the genre
nevertheless there is a 'complicated network of similarities'. In
practical terms publishers, libraries and shops had no difficulty
filling up their lists and shelves with books under the category
'romantic fiction'.

My main title is at two levels. At the literal meaning it
suggests simply that my main focus is on the readers of romantic
fiction. But I also wanted to exploit that richer meaning of the
word 'reading' - as the OED suggests, to 'interpret mentally,
declare interpretation'. I wanted to look at what women take from
the romantic novel, at how they interpret it, at how it fits into
their world view.

Unusually I have used two sub-titles.

The thesis sets out to explore romantic fiction in two
separate but inter-related ways.

One: by conceptualising popular formula fiction as a branch
of the mass media. Mass media studies have gradually come to be
equated with television. However, reading is a very important
activity, especially to women. The exploration of the 'minor'
forms of the mass media broadens out debates in media studies -

about audiences, effects, producing organisations, gatekeepers, etc. and completes the picture. By extending and challenging theories and concepts, such as 'uses and gratification' models or 'hypodermic' models normally applied to the visual, they are tested and extended. In fact I found that much research on television viewing could have surprising gaps when women were surveyed.

Romantic fiction is a particularly interesting branch of the mass media since it constitutes something of an 'ideal type'. According to Janowitz' definition, quoted and discussed in Chapter One, the essential characteristics of the mass media lie in the symbolic content being manufactured by specialised social groups and disseminated to large, heterogeneous and geographically dispersed audiences. While this dictum can be challenged in regard to much of the mass media it is largely true of romantic fiction. To utilise theories used in mass media studies in the reading of the genre should illuminate the field.

Two: at the same time I felt it likely that an exploration of the reading of romantic fiction could be 'a key to the ideology of women'. I felt that it was 'a' key. There are many ways to initiate an exploration of women's attitudes and beliefs. This I believed could be just one, though a particularly effective one. The word 'key' I utilised in the sense of a way to unlock a door, a way to open up on what women are really thinking and feeling about their situation. Three basic meanings for that most complex of concepts in the social sciences - 'ideology' - are often suggested, for example by the Penguin Dictionary of Sociology.   A

first meaning, which I have not adopted, is used mostly in
American political science to describe a tightly-knit set of
beliefs based around certain central values: e.g. communism,
fascism. The second meaning, usually utilised in Marxist
critiques, suggests a set of beliefs which are in the interest of
a dominant class and which exploit the subordinate class. (I
discuss in Chapter Eight the argument that the Marxist terms of
dominant and subordinate class can be directly translated into
dominant and subordinate sex.) The third meaning is that concept
of ideology, drawn upon mostly in the sociology of knowledge,
which denotes a wider sense of an overarching set of beliefs which
structures the actor's world, the world taken for granted. It was
the third of the meanings in which my initial interest lay. How
far would questions about reading romantic fiction illuminate the
ideology of women in the sense of their ordinary, everyday,
working set of ideas about the world in which they lived. The
central theme of the books is the forming of a heterosexual
relationship and this, I believe, is in practice the central theme
of all women's lives. Even if by choice or accident they do not
enter into such a relationship, or are yet to do so, or their
relationship is in the past, the structure of our society is so
based on this relationship that it dominates the lives of all
women. Because it is concerned with this central issue, the
discussion of the themes of romantic fiction was a natural way to
open up these subjects in women's day-to-day lives. This was not
merely a device to initiate a discussion. I suspected that the
stories which the women so much enjoyed would bear a very complex

relationship to their wider lives.

However, the books, as I shall demonstrate throughout the research, but particularly in Chapters Five and Nine, are carriers of an ideology which fits the second, more 'political' definition of ideology. While the third meaning embraces the idea that all beliefs and patterns of thinking are sociallly engendered, the second meaning suggests a pattern of thinking which is in the interests of one class and exploits the other. It is this patriarchial/heterosexist ideology, which interpellates woman in her caring, nurturing role, where fulfilment is to service others, as discussed in Chapter Nine, which is carried by the books. But hegemony is never complete and I explore the ways in which there is a conflicting survival plan beneath the manifest love story. So that even within the books themselves there is conflict and complexity.

How far is the narrower, 'political' ideology incorporated into the larger ideology? In investigating 'the ideology of women', I wanted to look at how far the overarching system of beliefs within which women live their lives is oppositional to, or negotiates a place with, or incorporates, the more political ideology.

In the thesis I analyse the replies by the readers to suggest some of the characteristics of that wider ideology, the world-taken-for-granted, of women. I also set out to explore its contradictory, ambiguous and shifting nature, and its relationship to the 'political' ideology of the manifest story of romantic fiction.

CHAPTER ONE

POPULAR ROMANTIC FICTION - AN ASPECT OF MASS CULTURE

> *Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, 'tis*
> *woman's whole existence.*
>
> Lord Byron

And so say all of us - men and women, psychologists and
sociologists, poets and playwrights, politicians, feminists (with
regret), advertisers, manufacturers. It is a truth accepted more
than most other truths that women's whole lives and personalities
are shaped in the most basic way by their personal relationships,
especially the dominating one of marriage or similar permanent
heterosexual relationship. The socialisation of girls and women in
their caring, nurturing role is well documented. (e.g. Bardwick and
Douvan, 1971, Oakley, 1972, Bernard, 1976). Gradually the domestic,
the caring, the emotional servicing of others becomes women's career
and domain while the world outside, acting upon it and changing it,
becomes that of men, so that even those men and women who, through
choice or circumstance, step outside that socialisation, do so in
opposition to it and within its terms. Nowhere is this rendering of
women's world more direct, more plainly stated, more simplified than
in the world of the popular romantic novel.

For many years all popular fiction - that vast output of
adventure, mystery, westerns, Gothic, science fiction, romance - was
neglected by researchers. From the literary point of view it was
all 'paraliterature', as Patrick Parrinder quotes Marc Angenot's

description, the significant other to English literature.
'Paraliterature occupies the space outside the literary enclosure,
as a forbidden, taboo and perhaps degraded product "against" which
the self of literature proper is forged.' (Parrinder, 1980: 46)
However, as Darko Suvin (1979: 1) points out, 'a discipline which
refused to take into account 90 per cent or more of what constitutes
its domain seems to me not only to have large zones of blindness but
also to run serious risks of distorted vision in the small zone it
focuses on (so-called high literature.)' Of recent years popular
literature has begun to claim more attention.

From the literary point of view, the reading that for so many
people constitutes their literary experience must have significance.
For too long, perhaps, the elite/mass dichotomy has reigned. As
Raymond Williams (1961: 288) says, there has been a long history of
suspicion of mass taste, 'The masses . . . formed the perpetual
threat to culture.' Burke's (1982: 183) contention that 'We are
afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of
reason; because we suspect that the stock in each man is small,' has
been a continuing thread in discussions of popular culture. The
importance of the popular has been overlooked - though it is a
truism to point to the fact that many of those authors who were very
much the popular fiction of their day have become the literature of
ours. Again, in the last few years, science fiction, for instance,
has moved between the worlds of high and low culture, 'literary'
writers utilising the genre, science fiction writers being accepted
as serious. It is not always easy to draw the demarcation lines!

However, it may be that it is much more profitable, as John

Cawelti (1976), for instance, suggests, to use different criteria for popular fiction and for 'literature' and to explore the idea that popular fiction is meant by its writers and used by its readers for very different purposes from 'high culture' writing. Cawelti suggests using the terms 'mimetic' and 'formula' fiction rather than 'high' and 'low'.

> In order to short-circuit such implicitly evaluative oppositions as low and high or popular and serious literature, I propose to proceed on the basis of a loose categorization of mimetic and formulaic literature . . . . The mimetic element in literature confronts us with the world as we know it, while the formulaic element reflects the construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our experience. (1976: 13)

Mimetic fiction tries to make the readers explore real life, to see it afresh, to explore themes and problems which are important to resolve in their lives, whereas formula fiction is deliberately standardised and has as its primary aim the needs of escape and relaxation. Perhaps we can apply the ideas of the Russian Formalists in trying to pin down the essentials of mimetic fiction. Viktor Shklovsky (1965: 12) argues that 'the technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception'. Mimetic fiction tries to distance us, to make us see afresh. Formula fiction, on the other hand, sets out to interest, intrigue, excite, but always within the boundaries of a plan which is known and accepted by writers and readers so that the excitement and interest is confined and made safe. In this way, its overwhelming effect is reassurance. All problems, all dangers, all fears, the great unknowns of birth, sex,

death, relationships, the dark recesses of the human personality are rendered safe. Heidegger speaks of that nameless anxiety which is a pervasive part of the human condition. Perhaps it is part of mimetic art to speak directly to that anxiety, the function of formulaic art to allay it. There is, surely, a place for both in our complex culture.

However, if the high/low dichotomy is taken, we can consider a continuum of 'high culture' to 'low culture' works. These range from what is deemed the very best that our intellectual and artistic life can produce to the very lowest (the least demanding, if one wishes to be polite, trashy rubbish, if one doesn't). Nestling snugly somewhere very near the bottom must be the genre of romantic fiction. Why, then, devote time and energy to its study at all?

Perhaps the most telling reason is the sheer size of the phenomenon. Mills & Boon, overwhelmingly the largest publishers of romantic fiction in Britain with 66 per cent of the market, claim that eight and a half million women in the United Kingdom read romantic fiction - a very large proportion of the adult female population. It is the only area of publishing which continues to grow. In 1983 Harlequin, Mills & Boon's Canadian associate, reported sales of 218 million throughout the world. While the boom which had brought Harlequin/Mills & Boon to the fore in publishing circles fell somewhat in the early eighties, Mills & Boon (1984) have reported in their publicity material, 'After two years of a recession that severely affected all publishers, Mills & Boon's sales rose by 10 per cent' and it would seem that business has stabilised again. There are many other publishing houses with

quite substantial sales such as Dell, Bantam, Futura, Sphere, and

indeed most publishers publish some romantic fiction. By any

standards, romance is big business.

For those who read romances, it is a very important part of

their lives. Janice Radway (1984) cites one reader who claimed to

be reading a hundred books a month. Women regularly write to Mills

& Boon to express their pleasure in the books. Peter Mann's two

surveys in collaboration with Mills & Boon are adorned with grateful

testimonials.

> I can't imagine what I would do without Mills &
> Boon books as they are my only means of
> relaxation. Keep up the good work. (1974: 11)
>
> They have everything I want in a happy 'get away
> from it all' book.' (1969: 7)
>
> I feel I could not find anything better than
> your books. I have always enjoyed them and I am
> sure I shall continue to enjoy them for years to
> come. (1974: 22)

Writers, in America anyway, seem to write for each other. Pat

Aufderhide (1985: 9) describes writers, 'Like homemakers returning a

casserole dish filled with a batch of biscuits, the women share

their appreciation of each other's understanding by writing new

romances.' One author started to write for Kathleeen Woodwiss,

author of 'The Flame and the Flower', one of the important novels in

the romance fiction boom of the 70's: 'I wanted to do it for her,

Kathleen, to give her a joyful reading experience like she'd given

me.' (Aufderhide, 1985: 9)

Romantic fiction reading is manifestly an important experience

for these women and, therefore, demands serious attention.

The world of romantic fiction, huge as it is, is a closed one,

ignored by critics, unknown except to the publishers, writers and readers. The contents of the books themselves are barely discussed. As Mann (1985: 96) says, 'The popularity of romantic fiction is quite outstanding. For a genre which is rarely reviewed, seldom discussed on radio or television programmes and given little serious attention by librarians its popularity with readers is quite staggering.' When it is discussed, the tone of appraisal has hardly changed since the thirties when Q. D. Leavis, ostensibly setting out to give attention to popular fiction and its importance, actually went on to describe it in very condescending terms, quoting 'a crop of writers without talent and readers without discrimination', (1932: 160), 'representing both for author and reader a favourite form of self-indulgence',(1932: 237), 'compensating for the poverty of their [the readers'] emotional lives.' (1932: 58)

Until recently very little research work had been done on romantic fiction. Indeed the whole area of popular fiction had attracted little attention. Interest has started to grow in genres like crime, science fiction, westerns, mysteries and adventure. However, attention to the largest genre, in economic terms, in numbers of titles, in readers and in the importance of the genre to those readers, has lagged behind. Why was this? I think it has to be that it is the field of popular fiction which is the domain of women. It is the one form of fiction which is written by women for women. Its discourse is that of the woman's 'world-taken-for-granted' to use Alfred Schutz' phrase. Any woman, whether she enjoys this form of entertainment or not, is at home in the world of the romantic novel. And in our society, if a particular area of

social life becomes monopolised by women, it is, thereby, of a lower status. In the job market, for instance, it is not only that women occupy the lower status and lower paid jobs but that the converse also happens - any occupation that mainly recruits women comes to be seen as of lower status than those jobs mainly occupied by men. Educationally, subjects mainly enjoyed by girls come to be seen as 'soft'. Leisure pursuits like Bingo are looked down upon.

However, 'women make up 51.4% of the population.' (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1985: 1) It is manifestly absurd that social scientists still seem to see women as a deviant sub-culture. The very fact that there is a discipline of 'Women's Studies', when the idea of a discipline of 'Men's Studies' is ridiculous, says something about the way both literary studies and the social sciences take it for granted that indeed the proper study of mankind is man. As John Bowen, (1985: 42) has said, 'It is male speech and writing that denies its male-ness in its constant claims to be speaking universally, impersonally, for "humanity".' The concerns of women, even with the influence of feminist ideas, are still not given the attention they deserve automatically as the concerns of half the human race.

Romantic fiction is a case study of women's interests, representing everything that dominates the lives of women, which at the same time is seen as everything which *should* dominate the lives of women. In spite of all this, however, its importance is ignored. As Lisa Appignanesi (1985: 143) of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (herself a romantic novelist under the name of Jessica Ayre) has said, romantic fiction is a 'cultural area which has for too

long been the subject of ridicule.'

Romantic fiction is an important part of the mass media. Gradually, mass media studies have come to be synonymous with the study of broadcasting, especially nowadays of television. Yet the printed word still remains of crucial importance in our society. We are an unusually literate people. For example, our use of daily newspapers is still one of the highest in the world. Janowitz' (1968: 41) famous definition of the mass media suggested that they comprise the 'institutions and techniques by which specialized social groups disseminate symbolic content to large, heterogeneous and geographically dispersed audiences.' The essential of mass communication is seen as communication from an organised few to an audience of atomised individuals. As some commentators have pointed out, this is probably not quite an accurate picture. Denis McQuail, (1977: 86) talking of the dissemination of news in a crisis, says, 'The circumstance of solitary, unmediated, reception and response is unusual and short-lived.' Television programmes, newspaper articles, films, are discussed and shared; they are often experienced as part of a family or peer group. More than most, however, the audience for romantic fiction *is* atomised and individual and the producers organised in a mass production line unusual in the media. Romantic fiction is very near to an 'ideal type' in mass communication. It may be, therefore, that a study of romantic fiction, its producers and its readers, is particularly valuable as a case study in the mass media.

More important, however, I believe that a study of romantic fiction can be a useful key to the ideology of women. Surely the

most marked change in our society at the moment is the gradually

changing position of women. The social sciences grew out of the

enormous upheavals of the French Revolution and the Industrial

Revolution. Men (and I mean men) looked about them and observed the

fundamental changes taking place in their societies. Ever since,

shifting events, political changes, the world wars, economic changes

such as the growth in young people's buying power, the growth in

black consciousness, have been marked and studied. But,

significantly, (the social sciences have been dominated by men) the

changes affecting women have not come in for a great deal of

research. The accent has always been on how changes in women's

lives affect the family. As Michael Haralambos (1980: 404) has

said, 'no sociologist wants to study something he considers

insignificant. Given the prevailing definition of women in Western

society and the fact that most sociologists are men, there have been

few serious studies of women.' Much feminist writing has been

polemical, understandably an attempt to call for changes in the

disadvantaged position of women. Gradually more women's studies

courses are being started. In English Literature departments there

are a number of courses on women's writing and literature, Law

Departments are turning to the study of the particular position of

women in regard to the law, social scientists are looking at the

position of women as individuals in society and not just their

relationships to men and children. Particularly in Continuing

Education, women themselves are demanding studies relevant to their

own lives. On the whole, however, women still seem to be seen as a

minority deviant group. Freud's question is still being asked with

a touch of impatience and condescension - 'what *do* women really want?'

I believe the entertainment people choose in their leisure can often provide real insights into their feelings and attitudes. If women are relatively powerless and occupy positions in society which are not of their making, then perhaps it is in their leisure, where they are free to choose, that there are clues to their situation. This oblique approach to women's values, attitudes, hopes and pleasure may be more productive because it is one of the few areas where women are not serving others but pleasing themselves.

Research in this field is recent. As Tania Modleski has said serious or detailed studies of contemporary mass culture for women are rare and her own book, <u>Loving with a Vengeance</u> is a pioneering work. The book is divided into three parts, studies of Harlequin romances, Gothic novels and soap operas. As she says, 'I see my work in part as an early contribution to a psychology of the interaction between feminine readers and texts. Analyzing Harlequins, Gothics, and soap operas seems a good way to begin.' (1982: 31) Modleski brings all the skills of a literary critic to her study. She gives a very close textual analysis and brings psychoanalytic theories to bear on the extracts. She draws on John Berger's concept of women as 'the seen.' She challenges Susan Brownmiller's concept of the romance reader as willing rape victim and Germaine Greer's picture of women creating their hero, freely 'cherishing the chains of their bondage.' (Modleski, 1982: 38) She suggests that reading these stories is a way of allaying women's very real fears of ill-treatment by men by showing this can be

turned to the heroine's ultimate advantage/happiness. She extends the argument by suggesting that, more than this, the novels show a desire for revenge because 'the woman is bringing the man to his knees and that all the while he is being so hateful, he is internally grovelling, grovelling, grovelling.' (1982: 45)

Margaret Jensen's Love's Sweet Return (1984) concentrates on 'The Harlequin Story'. A Canadian researcher, she focuses especially on one of the biggest and most successful Canadian-based companies, interviewing many of the corporate officials, reading two hundred Harlequin books, letters from Harlequin readers and interviewing twenty-four romance readers. She analyses the growth of the company, detailing how Harlequin began importing romances from Mills & Boon. 'By 1964, Harlequin's romances were selling so well that it decided to switch to an exclusively Mills & Boon romantic offering and in 1971 Harlequin solidified the bond by purchasing the British company.'

When she considers the texts she comes to the conclusion that, while the heroines lag far behind feminist insights, they are becoming more liberated and more independent, a view shared by Lesley Rabine, 'Harlequin may owe its dramatic growth in popularity to the fact that the romances now respond to specific needs of working women.' (Rabine, 1985: 249)

Jensen concludes from her reading of readers' letters and her interviews that 'Women value Harlequins for their formulaic structure, which allows them to read under difficult conditions and which provides them with easy education and entertainment.' (1984: 158) In contrast to other researchers who see romance reading as a

displacement activity or compensatory activity or even as a pathological way of dealing with the deep-seated troubles of real life, Jensen sees romance followers as casual readers who view romance as a momentary escape. She believes that their reading has little effect and betrays little about the readers' situation. She suggests that 'women have no real opportunity to emulate the heroines of Harlequin novels even if they want to,' (1984: 158) and therefore their reading must have little effect. But, surely, if women do want to, then this would suggest a dissatisfaction with their real lives which, at the very least, makes for a great many unhappy women and more profoundly means that the structure of our society does not suit half its members. Jensen points out that in her research readers claimed that they were on the whole well aware of the differences between the romances and the circumstances of their own lives. Nevertheless, this is the escapist fiction they continue to purchase and read in such great quantities. The message that readers find so attractive lies in a story of marriage to a dominant, sexually and economically successful man.

Many researchers are arguing that romantic fiction is beginning to incorporate a counter-discourse of liberation - Modleski suggesting that it is revenge fantasy, Rabine (1985: 249) that it is also now beginning to incorporate fulfilment for women in work as well as in love. 'Focusing on the juncture between their sexual, emotional needs on the one hand and their needs concerning work relations on the other, it [romantic fiction] involves both their deepest, most private, most intimate feelings, and at the same time their very broad relations to the process of social history.'

Jensen suggests that women who read romances are fantasising about freedom (surely, this does not equate with her idea that reading these novels is merely momentary light entertainment!)

It is interesting that in men's escapist fiction, the message is that intelligent, daring action will achieve the wanted results; in women's fiction the heroine, even today's much vaunted more independent heroine, is rewarded for passivity often in marked contrast to her rival who is the scheming, active female. The heroine is the heroine because she does little, is not beautiful. She is *lovable* - her qualities are defined by her relationship with others. 'Jolie plutôt que belle, plus fade en tout cas que la rivale, c'est une fille "ordinaire" (dont on découvrira la véritable beauté par les yeux du héros et dans ses bras),' [Pretty rather than beautiful, in any case more insignificant than her rival, she is an 'ordinary' girl, (whose real beauty will be revealed through the eyes and in the arms of the hero).] as the study by the Literary Studies department of the University of Quebec (Bettinotti, 1986: 30) decided. Their very detailed study of the structure of Harlequin books in <u>La corrida de l'amour</u> was prompted by the fact that, in spite of the size of the literary phenomenon, there was not a work devoted solely to the contents of the romantic novels produced by one of Canada's largest companies.

With a detectable hint of irony they analyse the structure of 177 titles (and draw upon a further 650 titles) in a very enjoyable way. They cite the necessary cast - the heroine, aged sixteen to thirty-one (with 34 per cent between twenty-two and twenty-four), the hero, ten to fifteen years older. This, of course, allows the

hero to be extremely experienced and extremely rich. There is the

rival to the hero, younger, less sophisticated, often very

understanding but without the charisma, and the rival to the

heroine, worldly wise and sophisticated. Allowing much of the story

to be explained, we have the friend and confidante of the heroine.

Demonstrating the heroine's ability to be mother as well as wife we

have the children, often the hero's from his first marriage. The

Quebec group give statistics for all the characteristics given to

the characters. They have further chapters on the essential

ingredients of the formula: the third person telling, the adoption

of the heroine's viewpoint, the detailed descriptions of exotic

foreign locations, the even more detailed descriptions of clothes,

houses, appearances, to root the fantasy in the most palpable of

reality. In spite of the fact that - because of the fact that? -

as Mills & Boon say, their stories do reflect 'modern attitudes and

behaviour', marriage is always the 'happy end'. 'Pour le moment, le

mariage reste là, un peu défraîchi et battu en brèche comme

institution, mais pouvant toujours servir de *happy end* à un roman

d'amour, dans l'horizon d'attente d'une lectrice qui l'accepte

encore, faute de mieux . . .' (Bettinotti, 1986: 102) [For the

moment marriage remains there, a little faded and defeated as an

institution, but always able to serve as the 'happy end' to a

romantic novel, in the expectations of a reader, who still believes

in it, for lack of anything better . . .]

Janice Radway's 1984 study, Reading the Romance is of

particular interest. She also, as an American researcher, gives a

short history of Harlequin publishing and talks of the structure of

the novels. However, the main thrust of her book is the in-depth interviews plus questionnaire with which she studied the customers and a sales clerk, Dot, in a book store in 'Smithton', 'a midwestern community . . . surrounded by corn and hay fields.' (Radway, 1984: 46) Radway discovered that Dorothy Evans had gradually built up a reputation as an expert on romance reading and her customers had come to depend on her judgment, so much so that she now publishes a regular news letter much used by her suppliers and her customers.

Radway draws heavily on Nancy Chodorow's theories that the female child has difficulty attaining a separate identity. All infants identify with the mother and their life's work is to establish their own selves. Chodorow suggests that the early symbiotic union between mother and daughter is especially intense because each experiences the other, because they are of the same sex, as an extension to the self, whereas the son realises his difference from his mother and in order to create his separate self has actually to make a definite effort to separate and align himself with his father. It is because the son has to make such a difficult transition from his mother to his masculine world that in the end he achieves a more definite identity than the daughter, for whom the task of establishing a separate self is more ambiguous, in that it entails becoming different but the same. Chodorow argues that girls achieve an incomplete oedipal resolution because, while their genital and erotic desires transfer to the father, they remain emotionally involved with the mother and indeed are always searching for this nurturing that was gained from the mother.

Chodorow also theorises that since the male development depends

on becoming all that is not the mother, he establishes his identity by becoming non-nurturant. Sociologically it is apparent that our society deliberately trains its males to be non-nurturant and that women are trained to do the emotional servicing in the family.

Radway therefore comes to the conclusion that her romance readers yearn for the care and nurturing given to them by their mothers and not readily available in their marriages and own families. The appeal of the romance where the initially hostile, sometimes even sadistic attitude of the hero to the heroine, is eventually revealed to be only a cover for a deep, caring love, is obvious.

A particular advantage of Radway's approach is her insistence on the reader's experience. All writing is an act of communication. There are always three parts to this act - the makers, the writing itself and the receivers of the message. Too often the writings are examined in detail, often the writer is studied, but until the work has been read, it is actually nothing. Until very recently it has always been assumed that when researchers or critics discuss a communication, especially a literary communication, all the recipients are receiving the same message. It may well be a dangerous assumption and certainly one that invites investigation. It seems an absolute truism to maintain that human beings are active, thinking, constructing beings. As Herbert Blumer (1976: 17) has written, 'the social action of the actor is *constructed* by him; it is not a mere release of activity brought about by the play of initiating factors on his organization,' But it is surprising to realise how little this point of view figures in research and

writing upon the social activities of human beings. As Radway

points out, a view of the reader of popular fiction as 'controlled

. . . by the ideological content of the form because it justifies,

if it does not actually create, their values and beliefs' is

troubling 'because its conception of ideology and domination seems

to preclude the possibility of any kind of social change or

resistance.' (1984: 6) Her disquiet mirrors the continuing

dichotomy between an approach which recognises the coercive nature

of what Durkheim called 'social facts' and an approach which

stresses the creative, active role of human beings. As Alvin

Gouldner (1971: 15) says,

> The modern concepts of society and of culture
> arose in a social world that, following the
> French Revolution, men could believe they
> themselves had made . . . Yet, at the same time
> men could also see that this was a world out of
> control, not amenable to men's designs. It was
> therefore a grotesque, contradictory world: a
> world made by men but, despite this, not *their*
> *world*.

It is interesting to see the very marked differences in

research into romantic fiction between those commentators who see an

almost pathetic band of duped women tranquillised as in an Orwellian

world by the dream handed out to them by their masters and those who

see liberated, working women amusing themselves for a passing moment

with entertainment which has little effect upon them.

Most of the work on romantic fiction has been done in North

America. A notable exception was the research done by Mann in

collaboration with Mills & Boon in 1968 and in 1973. In 1968 a

questionnaire was sent out to 9,300 people on the Mills & Boon

Romances mailing list with their summer catalogue - a mailing list

composed of the names of readers who write and ask for the Mills &
Boon catalogue. Nearly 3,000 people answered the questionnaire. In
1973 'an analysis was made of 2,000 replies,' (Mann, 1974: 4) -
presumably much the same number were on the mailing list as before
though this is not stated. This gives a great deal of interesting
statistical data, often refuting many of the clichés about romance
readers. Romantic novels are read by women of all ages, not just
young girls or old spinsters, half being between 25 and 44; two
thirds of the readers are married; 58 per cent are working or in
full-time education. In the 1968 survey Mann points out that '12
per cent of Romance readers reading the <u>Daily Telegraph</u> reflects the
definite group of quite liberated and educated Romance readers.'
(1968:8). The Quebec researchers make the same point when they
mention that an appeal to their students produced many Harlequins
for their collection and added proof to Harlequin's claim that 24
per cent of their readers had been to university. However, though
Mann's figures are a very useful large scale data base for any
investigation into romance reading, they were produced for, on
behalf of, and in collaboration with, Mills & Boon and are,
therefore, naturally, slanted towards the sort of information useful
to them as publishers, such as whether readers buy or borrow, how
easily they are able to obtain books from the library, whether they
buy hardbacks or paperbacks, how easily they are able to recognise
the Mills & Boon covers. This is not necessarily the most useful
information for anyone interested in finding out who reads romantic
fiction, why they are drawn to this genre, what effects, if any, it
has on them, how important to them is their reading.

One of the common factors in the work that has been done is a sense of how little is known of this phenomenon, a sense that research is just beginning to explore something that could be very revealing, whose implications might reach far beyond the study of a popular pastime. As Andrea Press (1986: 148) has said, 'We need more studies of mass culture that examine its use within the context of our everyday life . . . . [U]ntil we can study mass-culturally inspired fantasies within the context of our more general fantasies, ideologies, and material lives, we can only speculate as to the impact mass culture has on our ideas, imagination, and political reality.'

It is important that the reading of romance fiction in this country should be studied. After all we started it! Our culture is not always the same as that of North America.

Again, it is essential to consider the readers and what they say themselves about their enterprise. Elizabeth Rosser and Rom Harré (1976: 172) have talked of their approach of 'ethnogenics' which 'centres on taking the accounts given by the participants in the action seriously as contributions to social and psychological understanding of those actions and how they are generated.'

It is important to know what is being researched. For instance, Radway's research subjects actually read historical romances and did not care for Harlequins (as researched by Jensen). The Smithton readers were younger than the overall audience for romance in North America and the historicals 'typically include more explicit sex than the Harlequins and also tend to portray more independent and defiant heroines.' (Radway, 1984: 56) They are

usually much longer, saga-type books. Press (1986: 148) expresses

some concern, about the small scale of the investigations. Jensen

drew on direct information from twenty-four readers. It may be

important, therefore, to explore the attitudes and characteristics

of a larger sample of readers in order to produce generalisations

that can be supported by evidence and also to conduct interviews as

to what women in this country make of reading romantic fiction.

It seems essential to add to the literary critic's close

reading of the text and to psychoanalytic theories, actual empirical

data. It is not enough to speculate that women read to compensate

for maternal deprivation or as part of rape fantasies or revenge

fantasies. It is necessary, as in any science, to see if these

theories really are operating. Difficult as it may be, perhaps

impossible, the theories have to be considered and then we have to

ask - is this really so? It would be very convenient if,

controlling for all other social factors, of course, one could have

groups differing only in their enjoyment of romantic fiction and it

should be possible over a period of time to perceive the effects of

romantic fiction. Could they be exposed to a high dose of romantic

fiction and effects such as greater dissatisfaction with their

marriages be measured? Perhaps not too easy to arrange! However,

having as much demographic data on a group as possible would

approximate to the controlling for extraneous factors and in-depth

interviews to explore as far as possible the importance of reading

romantic fiction and the attitudes and aspirations of readers would

reveal the variable.

Commentators on the reading of romantic fiction tend to analyse

the phenomenon at a psychological, individual, level. Why do women as individuals find satisfaction in these books? It is argued that in a patriarchal society, individual women are dissatisfied and assuage their dissatisfactions in the pages of romances. However, the reading of romantic fiction is an aspect of mass culture and is also illustrative of the ideology of women. Within the study of mass culture there are theories which need to be explored in relation to romantic fiction and its women readers. Can we utilise Marxism and see women as an economic class, a subordinate class - and 'the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.' (Marx, 1968: 50) Shulamith Firestone (1970: 232) sees the sexual class system as pre-dating and more basic than economic class. 'Women were the slave class that maintained the species in order to free the other half for the business of the world.' Can women be analysed in terms of minority group theory or as a sub-culture or even a deviant culture?

Romantic fiction is a social phenomenon, part of the workings of social institutions and ideologies, not just an individual compensatory device. In these terms is romantic fiction a counter-discourse of opposition or the dominant ideology made particularly manifest? Is it the 'one-dimensional man' of Marcuse and the Frankfurt school where the dominant ideology has overcome all opposition so as to lead to 'the triumph of society over the contradictions which it contains' (Marcuse, 1968: 89), when 'this universe of discourse closes itself against any other discourse which is not on its own terms'? Is romantic fiction part of Althusser's ideological state apparatus, conspiring to keep women

outside the real world, supporting and servicing the relationships of production, so much victims of false consciousness that in their one-dimensional world they see no alternatives? As Althusser (1971: 123) says, the 'ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production.' The most important agent of this reproduction is the ideological state apparatus of which the 'cultural ISA, (Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.)' (1971: 137) is an important part and this involves 'Not only the reproduction of its "skills" but also the reproduction of its subjection to the ruling ideology or the 'practice' of that ideology . . . it is in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labour power.'(1971: 127) Gramsci's theories of hegemony suggest that for most of us, most of the time, the ruling ideologies present themselves as 'common sense.'

I don't think it is necessary to be a very militant feminist to see that the interests of our present-day society are served very well by the ideology that women's greatest fulfilment comes from a happy marriage - whether that society is seen as capitalist or patriarchal - or both. From both points of view, women's work in maintaining and serving the domestic and emotional needs of both workers and future workers - or men, future men and future carers for men, is essential.

Very often there is seen a contradiction between 'grand theory' approaches to the study of society and culture and practical research, a long running battle between theory and empiricism, which mirrors that between those who see society making people and those

who see people making society. However, I think there has to be an
attempt at using both approaches. After all, each individual's
biography is a synthesis of the making of the self by the individual
as s/he acts upon, and is acted upon by, society. So that while it
is essential to study the individual woman as she reaches for her
library books as being motivated by her own particular background,
nevertheless she is at the same time part of a wider society which
shapes and moulds her life chances.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite
passive, recording not thinking.
Christopher Isherwood.

Perhaps this is the ideal for the social researcher but I would
suggest that it is just not possible to record a social situation in
this way. Always the 'psychological set' of the researcher selects
and influences the methods used, the topics investigated and the
theory that informs the research. I feel very strongly that the
method that is used goes a long way in influencing the finished
research. The method to a large extent is very often the message.

A factor which underlies the importance of looking at the
reading of romantic fiction is the rise of feminist studies. It is
at last being realised that the study of the other half of the human
race is worthwhile, that social research which purports to be about
all humanity and resolutely ignores the majority-minority is so
androcentric that it should be difficult to take seriously.

To take an example from media research, there have been many
studies about the extent of television watching, its significance in
people's lives and efforts made to measure its effects. In my own
research I found that, quite significantly, my sample of women were
often not watching television at all when researchers might have

thought they were. Obviously, by definition, my sample were readers. However investigation has shown that women generally read much more than men. As Mann (1985: 95) says, 'In the Euromonitor surveys, which originated in the 1960's, women have always proved to be greater readers than men.' They are the main users of libraries, read more books, are greater consumers of magazines and newspapers than men. So it would seem quite likely that my sample represented many women especially as, as is detailed in Chapter Six, they were broadly representative of the female population as a whole in socio-economic characteristics, age, etc. It is true that they were all sitting in front of the television and would have been recorded by any survey as watching television. They could talk knowledgeably about programmes, but many respondents to the survey said they were not keen on television and many of the interviewees, when we discussed television at greater length, explained how they were not actually watching: they were reading a book - or six! They often felt they should be within the family circle but did not want to watch and achieved this by reading while the rest of the family viewed. In the section on the results of the interviews I set out further my respondents' use of television. But on meeting this type of account so often, I did begin to wonder whether much television research is actually research into the use of television by men and children - certainly when the family are all at home. (David Morley, 1986, has begun to address this question of the gendered use of television.)

Again, a survey on the uses of leisure in Liverpool (Roberts, 1978: 97) came to the conclusion that 'women have substantially less

leisure time than men, and this is one reason why men are the more active in virtually all types of out-of-home recreation.' This is undeniably true. Many studies of women and men and their work in the home suggest that women spend more time on household chores and child care even when also doing a full-time job. But the fact that the survey covered 'each respondent's uses of five evening and weekend occasions during the week prior to each interview . . .' (1978: 94) may have had something to do with their findings. Women are 'on duty' when their families are at home. If they have family responsibilities their chance of out-of-home leisure is better during the day. Council swimming pools have mothers and toddlers during the day. Lunchtime aerobic classes are full. Older women prefer keep fit and yoga classes during the day rather than going out at night. I think women do participate less outside the home. But the wrong questions are often asked by researchers. This shows up in many research projects where class theories structure the researchers' psychological set but gender, which is often a more powerful determinant of behaviour, is ignored. In fact, the Liverpool study itself puts forward a spirited condemnation of the too-easy use of class domination theories in explaining the use of leisure and suggests that a pluralist approach is more plausible. Kenneth Roberts does indeed draw attention to the importance of gender in leisure but it is in the very construction of so many social enquiries that gender is forgotten. To understand humanity, the majority half has to be considered!

A focus on the reading of romantic fiction then can redress the usual imbalance by stressing the particular ideas, feelings and

attitudes of *women* and reveal something about their place in the world.

Firstly, women's main sphere of action is still considered to be the home, the family, the world of emotional relationships, of affect rather than instrumentalism. Women's successful fulfilment is seen first and foremost in terms of achieving successful relationships, chiefly in a marriage or lasting heterosexual relationship and the bearing and rearing of children in a stable environment. Achievement in a job, career, personal ambitions in various fields of creativity, sport, adventure etc. are very much relegated to a peripheral field by society. This is seen in many ways. One of the most obvious is the presumption that women are always there in the home to care. There is a continual lack of child care facilities, there is a policy to cut off institutional care for the old, the mentally ill and the handicapped and return them to the community i.e. the overwhelmingly female carers in the home. It is seen in more frivolous ways by the picturing of women in the newspapers always parenthesised as mother, wife, girlfriend; in terms of age stereotypes, young and glamorous, elderly and frail; in terms of personal attributes, beautiful, vivacious, homely, etc. (It does not seem to be possible to be elderly, glamorous and vivacious!)

Romantic fiction portrays this sphere of women's lives in the most direct and simple way. It offers the fairy story as each woman reader is invited to identify with a beautiful heroine who meets, falls in love with and eventually (how 'eventually' perhaps depending on how many pages the publisher requires) stands on the

threshold of marriage with a strong, successful man. This is not to

belittle the literary worth of books built on this foundation. Some

of the most moving stories of our culture have developed this theme.

It is interesting that so many literary critics see <u>Jane Eyre</u> as the

archetypal romance. So did the publishers I spoke to, and many of

my readers mentioned that <u>Jane Eyre</u> was one of their favourite

books, and felt that the more run-of-the-mill paperbacks written

today were nevertheless in this tradition. Even where the theme was

given the dark twists of a <u>Wuthering Heights</u>, the myth was

recognised. It seems, therefore, that the romantic novel is the

ideal type of what women's lives are supposed to be about - it sets

out what is considered the essential theme of a woman's life.

The way in which the books tell and re-tell the myth, the way

in which it is decorated, made more complex or reduced to its

simplest form, seems important to investigate because it displays

the theme which society propounds, hidden and concealed in daily

life, in an awesome simplicity: 'Marriage/heterosexual relationship

is essential for women.' And around that 'fact' the social life of

women revolves.

Secondly, I felt that the study of romantic fiction, because it

is so concerned with the central themes of women's lives, would give

an opportunity to approach these subjects obliquely. Often the

media talk about the effects of the great changes that have occurred

in women's lives since the Sixties. They discuss feminism and post-

feminism. They say how women are reacting to equal opportunities

legislation. They devote great chunks of time or newsprint to how

women are healthier and happier with careers - or without. It is

thought that they are turning away from marriage - or not; turning
away from having children - or not. But too often women themselves
are not asked and if they are, the questions can be very leading.
Most of us, when asked the direct question, are for equality, for
equal rights, believe we are equal with our partners, children or
parents. But it is in the attitudes and behaviour of daily life
that the opposite can be the case. I found that the subject of
romantic fiction was a very good way of opening up topics of love,
marriage, family, job, new attitudes to working women, without being
threatening or confrontational. It became a key to unlock the door
to many ideas and beliefs that perhaps women might have been
hesitant in talking about otherwise.

One of the most important bases to my research, therefore, was
that I wanted to ask the women themselves about their reading.
Rosser and Harré (1976: 172) point out that in order to understand
social actions 'two converging forms of investigation are required.'
One has to be looking 'at a social interaction from the outside, so
to speak, taking an observer's point of view and imposing an
observer's concepts.' On the other hand, a part of the approach has
to be 'on taking the accounts given by the participants in the
action seriously as contributions to social and psychological
understanding of those actions and how they are generated.'

While looking at the individual actions of women and how these
actions were set into their situations within their primary social
groupings, I nevertheless felt it also important to see how these
findings relate to the larger grand theories with which social
commentators have tried to explain society. Very often there has

been something of a split between researchers looking at society

from the point of view of the active making of that society and

culture and those seeing society as something more structured, more

constraining to the individual. Raymond Williams (1961: 322) sees

an active making of cultural life. 'The idea of a common culture

brings together, in a particular form of social relationship, at

once the idea of natural growth and that of its tending.' An

Althusserian view concentrates on the shaping nature of culture.

> The individual in question behaves in such and
> such a way, adopts such and such a practical
> attitude, and, what is more, participates in
> certain regular practices which are those of the
> ideological apparatus on which 'depend' the
> ideas which he has in all consciousness freely
> chosen as subject . . . . I shall point out
> that these practices are governed by the rituals
> in which these practices are inscribed, within
> the material existence of an ideological
> apparatus . . . his [the individual's] ideas are
> his material actions inserted into material
> practices governed by material rituals which are
> themselves defined by the material ideological
> apparatus from which derive the ideas of that
> subject. (Althusser, 1971: 157, 158)

It seems to me that this difference is particularly relevant to

the reading of romantic fiction. I think it is fair to say that the

popular view of those who do not read romantic fiction is of a

captive audience of unintelligent, ill-educated women being brain-

washed by trashy novels. As Mann (1974: 5) says of his survey of

Mills & Boon readers, most journalists 'had the strangest

stereotypes of romance readers and if the books were ever mentioned

on the mass media, it was usually in gently sneering terms.' When

the subject of my research was mentioned I found non-readers of

romantic fiction were quite vitriolic about the stupidity of

readers, their sneering was surprisingly 'ungentle'!

With growing interest in the subject, there seems to be some attempt to suggest that the readers of romantic fiction are almost oppositional in their approach to the ideology of romance, that new attitudes and themes are being introduced to the point of being subversive of the status quo. When Rabine (1985) discusses the success of Harlequin books, she suggests that Harlequin responds to new needs of women 'as a result of recent profound changes in both their domestic and paid labor situations. . . . These romance narratives show us that an individual woman's need to be recognized in her own sense of self and the need to change a more global social structure are interdependent.' (1985: 250) She discusses how modern women need to cope with the drive to fulfil themselves, to have interesting and rewarding work and also to be good mothers and wives. This is not easy! And she suggests that, 'Supermarket romances, alone among mass market literature, focus on the conflictive relations among these segments.' (1985: 252) So that the opposition between views of the active subject and the more structuralist view of oppressive ideologies is very relevant for this study.

Again there can be a similar and often interwoven opposition between those researchers who concentrate on empirical work and the grand theorists - a split which Robert Merton (1968: 139) satirises when he suggests the theorist's position, 'We do not know whether what we say is true but it is at least significant' and the empiricist's, 'This is demonstrably so, but we cannot indicate its significance.' Again I wanted to utilise both approaches. I think

it is essential to ask women themselves about what they think about their reading. But the findings need to be set in the context of larger theories in order to see the part that this activity plays in social life.

I did not want to approach the material with already formed hypotheses. There are investigations where the correctness or otherwise of a hypothesis has to be investigated. But I feel that if at all possible the field of enquiry should be explored and then the propositions and concepts formulated. In this way there is much more chance that interesting avenues are not ignored, that the researcher's own pre-conceptions do not channel the enquiry. I feel particularly sympathetic to the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Enquiry in the social sciences can range along a continuum from large-scale, number-orientated, quantitative surveys where the information gathered scores highly on replicability, testability and on the large numbers of people able to be sampled, through methods like interviews where a smaller number of people can be seen but where the information acquired becomes richer and deeper and more qualitative, to methods like participant observation or the use of diaries where the information is very rich and detailed but where it is not quantitative at all and is not easy to test or replicate.

It seemed to me that the information I was looking for was at the 'rich' end of the continuum and that, therefore, the methods I should use should be at this qualitative end. Obviously participant observation in a reading group would not give much insight! So the richest, most qualitative method I could use would be the in-depth

interview which I would leave as unstructured as possible, only
having a broad list of topics to be covered. Because of the
restrictions of time and resources I could only interview relatively
few women. If I confined myself to these in-depth interviews I
might indeed turn up many interesting facts and many insights into
those women's attitudes, ideas and behaviour, but the study would
suffer from the disadvantages of most qualitative research. I could
not relate the behaviour and attitudes I found to the wider
population. I could only know that these women had these attitudes.
The aim of all social science investigation, to discover the
patterns in everyday life, would be lacking. I therefore decided to
utilise a survey also in order to get a background of a larger
number of respondents and a larger volume of information, though
necessarily more superficial. I would then have my background of
social pattern against which I could set the richer foreground of
the in-depth interviews.

Although my main focus was on the *readers* of romance, I felt it
was essential to complete the picture by looking at the makers of
the myth, the publishers and the organisational set-up of the
industry and also the writers without whom there would be no
product. Unfortunately, because of this concentration on the
readers, I was not able to sample as large a number of publishers
and writers as I did of readers. I found that the experience and
contribution of the writers to the world of romantic fiction had not
previously been very well detailed. In general there has been
little written on the sociology of authors and my own investigations
proved extremely interesting and rewarding. (I think there is scope

for much more research in this area.)

I gained information from the publishers in a number of different ways. In some cases they sent me long and detailed letters and/or provided me with printed information of various kinds. Some I interviewed and one, at his own suggestion, filled in a questionnaire for me. In all, I drew on information from seven different publishers of romantic fiction.

The authors I treated in a similar way to the readers, sending out questionnaires to sixteen writers. These I contacted through the Association of Romantic Novelists. As a researcher, I became an Associate Member of the Association. The Association runs meetings at which writers, publishers, agents etc. speak (not only those involved with romantic fiction but other forms of popular fiction also), organises social functions and particularly organises the award of the Boots' Romantic Novel of the Year. Through the pages of its magazine, news about writers and items about the social functions, plus news of the many workshops and writers' weekends are published. I wrote a short article for the magazine explaining the subject of my research and asking for any writer willing to give information by letter, questionnaire or interview to contact me. In the event, sixteen did so. Unfortunately, again because of lack of time, I had to use a questionnaire rather than interviews to elicit their views. I also attended a day with the Northern Association where I met many authors who were prepared to talk to me. I did make time to conduct interviews with what I felt was a representative quartet of writers. Apart from those contacted through the magazine article and those met personally, I wrote to

Barbara Cartland and Catherine Cookson as they had both figured very prominently in the list of favourite and of most-read authors in my survey of readers.

The questionnaires for both publishers and authors were very open inviting the respondent to write as freely as space allowed and indeed many took extra sheets to send me their more detailed ideas. Obviously those who replied to my article were self-selected. However, they did not seem very different in characteristics of age, marital status, number of children, etc. from those whom I had gathered from other sources.

It was necessary, I felt, to gain a much more objectively chosen sample of readers to answer my questionnaire. Gaining a large sample is obviously easiest with a nationwide postal sample as Mann had done with his surveys in collaboration with Mills & Boon in 1969 and 1974· However, by definition, his survey details adherents of one type of romance and customers of one publisher, albeit the largest publisher of romance in Britain.

Jensen's study (1984) of Harlequin books drew on interviews with a sample of twenty-four women. She contacted these in several ways: through the manager of a bookstore in Hamilton, (Ontario), by approaching women customers in the same store personally, through friends and colleagues and a further eight through a snowballing technique where these readers recommended others. I wanted to get a much wider sample of readers and a more heterogeneous one.

Radway (1984) had concentrated on a sample of readers in her book Reading the Romance. I particularly liked her determination to take seriously the accounts of the women themselves and feel that it

is of interest to contrast the reactions of American and Canadian

readers with those of British women.

She had contacted the readers on whom she bases her book

through a bookstore employee named Dot Evans. As Radway (1984: 12)

describes, Dot Evans '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.' Radway conducted two

discussion sessions with sixteen of Dot's customers and individual

interviews with five of these. These sixteen and twenty-five more

replied to the pilot survey and the main questionnaire was returned

by forty-two respondents, probably mostly the same as the pilot.

Radway talked at length to Dot and to Dot's friend, Maureen.

Radway's account of these women's 'reading of the romance' is

sensitive and does much to redress the balance of literary critics

who see the reader as manipulated woman. However, as Andrea L.

Press (1986: 148) has said,

> Even more disturbing is the limited nature of
> Radway's sample. The Smithton women seem to
> read many more romances than the 'average'
> romance reader. Has their devotion to the genre
> skewed their point of view? Would Radway have
> received qualitatively different answers to her
> questions from women who read less devotedly?
> In addition, Dot's role both as an influence
> among this particular group of women and as
> perhaps too primary an informant should have
> been discussed in more depth. How pervasive has
> Dot's influence been among the women Radway
> interviews? Are there any significant
> differences of opinion among the women of the
> group, which might reassure us that Dot's
> influence is at least somewhat limited.

I would add also that most of the research was done in group

interviews. The strong influence of the group has been extensively

researched, (in e.g., Asch, 1956, Sherif, 1936, Jacobs and Campbell, 1961, Helson, Blake and Mouton, 1958). Would Radway's respondents have given the same answers had they been talking one to one?

However, it may be that Press's disquiet about the Smithton women's high number of romances read is perhaps misplaced. I did not find anyone to compare with Radway's reader who claimed to read a hundred books a month, and indeed Radway herself seemed to feel that this was rather out of the ordinary, but her more median figures I found quite comparable to my own readers. Romance readers read a great deal.

I, therefore, aimed for a sample of readers who would have in common, as far as I knew at the outset, only that they were women and that they were readers of romantic fiction. I felt, too, that in Britain I had the ideal, and obvious, setting in which to encounter readers - the public libraries. I decided, therefore, to conduct my survey primarily through the libraries. Since in later interviews with the librarians and with readers, it seemed that borrowers tend also to be buyers of books, the libraries turned out to be a good place to meet a cross-section of the reading public.

It was essential to use libraries set in areas of varying social class, areas of prosperity and poverty, new estates and established centres. I decided that the Metropolitan Borough of Wirral would be an ideal district in which to run the survey. It forms part of the Merseyside conurbation and is therefore well populated. More than other divisions of the conurbation it offers a particularly attracive site for social investigation. It is geographically very well defined. As a peninsula three of its

boundaries are very obvious, the Mersey to the east, the Irish Sea
to the north and the River Dee on its western side. The southern
boundary is a fairly arbitrary line drawn across the southern end of
the peninsula from south of Heswall on the Dee coast across to
Eastham on the Mersey.

The Metropolitan Borough of Wirral came into existence in 1974,
at the time of local government re-organisation, as one of the
constituent boroughs of the new Metropolitan County of Merseyside
under the Local Government Act of 1972. It occupies an area of
about 60 square miles and has a population of approximately 350,000.
It was formed from the existing county boroughs of Birkenhead and
Wallasey along the banks of the Mersey, the municipal borough of
Bebington running along most of the south of the peninsula and the
urban districts of Hoylake and Wirral on the Dee side. The
redefining of the Wirral as part of Merseyside, in spite of the fact
that Liverpool has always provided big city services and been a
centre for employment for Wirral people, was not welcomed by all its
residents. Indeed a long battle was waged before re-organisation
between those who saw the Wirral as part of the Liverpool hinterland
and those who felt it was very much of a separate entity. The
battle still re-surfaces in the local press at intervals. The
Wirral Hundred had always been part of the County of Cheshire and
the Mersey is something of a psychological as well as a physical
barrier. Wirral people are still described, by themselves and by
Liverpudlians, as from 'over the water' and Chester is considered by
many, especially those living along the Dee coast, as the county
centre. The Wirral, therefore, has a distinct character of its own

and is well marked both geographically and psychologically as a
self-contained region.

Birkenhead, facing Liverpool across the Mersey, is the Wirral's
largest town. It is well-known as a traditional shipbuilding town
which has been mainly dependent on the great shipyard of Cammel
Laird. Equally well known is the fact that throughout the world
shipbuilding is in decline and the rate of unemployment in
Birkenhead is among the highest in the country - well over twenty
per cent in some areas. Since the last war many of the people have
been moved to the outskirts of the town into large housing estates.
Within the boundaries of the town there are still the huge mansions
of the wealthy shipping and cotton merchants of the last century,
often now turned into flats. Many of these are situated round the
180-acre park designed by Joseph Paxton. This was the first
municipal park in the world and provided a model for Central Park in
New York.

Further along the Mersey and adjoining Birkenhead is Wallasey,
an area mainly of very traditional working class terraced houses in
streets running down to the river. Part of the old borough of
Wallasey, at the 'corner' of the peninsula is New Brighton, once a
busy seaside resort and now extremely run down, the subject of
innumerable redevelopment plans which so far, have never quite
materialised. There are still large houses and new developments of
high-rise flats built to take advantage of the views across the
Mersey and out to the Irish Sea.

On the other side of the peninsula by contrast is some of the
most expensive housing in Britain outside of London and its commuter

belt. Here are 'Wirral's leafy lanes' as the 'Liverpool Daily Post'
insists on calling them, with private schools and riding stables,
sailing clubs and restaurants. Inland are many little villages
which have grown into commuter dormitories, plus isolated trading
estates and the giant housing estates which figure largely in police
reports and have managed to gain a reputation as centres for drug
use, in spite of the fact that they also house a majority of law-
abiding working class people.

After talking to the Borough Librarian for the Metropolitan
Borough, I was given permission to put out my survey through the
public libraries. There are twenty-six libraries within the borough
and I decided to circulate questionnaires in thirteen. Three of
these were used for a pilot survey: the main central library at
Birkenhead, (a traditional working class area), the central library
at Bebington, (a more middle class district) and a branch library in
a very disadvantaged area within the Birkenhead boundary. I was
prepared to change the wording of the questions if I was not able to
gain the information I wanted but in the event I found I did not
change the questions except for adding a couple of words of
explanation in a few of them. I have, therefore, treated the
answers together with the main survey except where indicated. The
main survey was then put out in the remaining ten libraries. They
were chosen to cover the area as comprehensively as possible,
choosing libraries roughly equidistant from each other, avoiding
neighbouring areas. The Borough Librarian supported me in choosing
whichever libraries I wished except that he had great reservations
about the dangers I might encounter on one of the estates. This did

have a very high profile in the media as a centre for drug

addiction. It was an area of high unemployment and much vandalism.

The Borough Librarian told me that there had been trouble at the

library, drunkenness, verbal abuse of the assistants and

intimidation. It was the policy always to have a man as the Branch

Librarian and the Borough Librarian felt that he would not like his

wife to go there. All this, of course, made the area sociologically

irresistible and it duly appears in the survey.

An unforeseen bonus of putting the survey through the libraries

was that I had to visit the librarians-in-charge at the various

libraries selected, in order to explain the project and ask for

their help. The librarians were all very helpful and interested in

any survey about readers. So I utilised the necessity of seeing them

to interview them also to get their views on romantic fiction and

their own borrowers. I report these views in Chapter Three. I did

realise that the interest and suppport of the librarians would be a

varying factor and might influence the difficult matter of the take-

up of the questionnaire. Postal questionnaires are the most remote

way of contacting respondents but at least the researcher does make

a direct contact between himself/herself and the respondent. I had

put myself at an even greater disadvantage, as I was acting at one

remove, through the librarians. However, I felt the advantages of

contacting readers in this objective way, avoiding just one starting

point such as a particular publishing house, bookshop or bookshop

employee, which might colour the whole investigation, made it

worthwhile.

The main survey was done by putting questionnaires into the

remaining ten libraries over two weeks in October, 1987. This period coincided with the schools' half-term ensuring that older school girls would be free and possibly more mothers might visit the library with younger children. The summer holidays were long gone and I hoped the weather would not be too inclement, which might deter older people. The librarians were asked to give questionnaires to those readers returning or borrowing romantic fiction who were prepared to take them.

The definition of 'romantic fiction' I deliberately left to the librarians who, interestingly, considered it unproblematic. Romantic fiction consisted of those books shelved under romantic fiction or sent by the publishers or the library wholesalers as romantic fiction. There were occasional divergences of opinion as can be readily understood. Indeed Catherine Cookson (1988), one of the most widely-read authors and the author put at the top of the list of their most favourite authors of romantic fiction by my readers, wrote to me, 'You see, I do not consider myself to be a romantic writer in the sense in which the word is used today. It is only since Granada Television filmed The Mallens that this word was applied to my writing; and the paperback firm, solely for the purpose of appealing to the public, continued it from there.'

Perhaps, Wittgenstein's (1953: 31) consideration of the concept of 'games' is relevant. 'Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. . . . For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.' [Italics in original] So, perhaps with romantic fiction; there is indeed 'a

complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing'
(Wittgenstein, 1953: 31) and people can disagree whether one or the
other particular work fits their definition. Nevertheless, for all
the disagreements, there is a genre of romantic fiction.

The survey questions were deliberately very open, so that the
results were more like a short interview, but written rather than
spoken. I felt that the information I was trying to acquire could
not come in small boxes marked with a tick or a cross. The answers
to closed questionnaires are, of course, far easier to process and
this is often given as a reason for not using more open question-
naires. However, I think the rigidity and constriction of questions
that allow only of a negative or affirmative answer, even with all
the psychological testing that can go into the construction of these
questionnaires, can often belie the researchers' faith in number
crunching. Obviously my survey was relatively small-scale but I
think open-ended surveys could be used more often, especially with
the widespread use of computers to assist with analysis. The
returned surveys often took on the nature of a dialogue between the
researcher and the respondent and many of the replies seemed to be
positively enjoying a joke with the questions, or sometimes venting
a bitterness that was quite disturbing.

When looked at carefully the answers, even to very open
questions and consisting of very open replies, were making a limited
series of different points. These could be separated out and listed
under common ideas or clusters of ideas. In doing this, however,
there was the danger that my analysis of these central ideas within
the answers might be particularly subjective. The obvious answer to

this would have been to have a panel of people, duly randomised for age, sex, class, etc. who would also select out of the answers to the survey those central ideas that seemed apparent, and then perhaps a second panel to check them and indeed the conduct of a large scale study on these lines would, I think, have a high degree of replicability and testability. Within the limits of a doctoral thesis, it was not possible to give this amount of time to this one part of the research. We, therefore, made up a panel of myself and my two supervisors, one from the English Department of the University of Liverpool and one from the Communications Studies Department and worked through a sample of thirty of the surveys, collating and comparing those central ideas which we felt emerged in the answers. The separate points that were being made seemed quite distinct and apparent and where there was any blurring I have set this out in Chapter Six, on the results of the surveys.

During the research several women, working at Liverpool University or other personal contacts, volunteered to complete the questionnaire. At first, I did not use these because I wished to otain all respondents through the more objective route of the libraries. Later, I decided to use them as a control - just in case there was something about library users which would bias the survey. However, I found that there was little difference in these survey answers so again I have discussed these ten questionnaires in the results, along with the rest of the information.

The main survey and the variations in the pilot survey are set out in Appendix 1.

The readers posted their questionnaires to me on completion or

returned them to the library as they pleased. At the bottom of the survey form, after assuring the respondent of anonymity, I, nevertheless, asked if any of them were willing to be interviewed personally, in which case would they provide their name and address for me to contact them.

Fifty-two women volunteered. Because of the constrictions of the research I could not interview them all. On the other hand I felt that these interviews were the main focus of my research and I wanted to interview enough women to be able to suggest generalisable conclusions. I wanted to have sufficient material to look for those social patterns. Those interviewed were merely selected by telephoning or writing to each respondent in turn, in no particular order, to arrange interviews. By a process of 'natural wastage' the number came to the sort of figure I had hoped for, a suitable forty. Some had moved away, or repeated phone calls found no one at home, or repeated letters went unanswered. One had thought better of her offer and no longer wished to do the interview. This was an interesting phenomenon. Quite a number of the women were obviously nervous and half regretting their offer. I took great pains to allay their fears and indeed some of the most reluctant later said how much they had enjoyed the interview and were among the longest interviews I did, several only ending because they or I had another appointment.

Many women researchers have mentioned the difficulties of being a woman and doing research, the difficulties raised by gender, of both interviewers and interviewed. (e.g. Hamner and Leonard, Finch, Graham, James, Scott, Platt and Roberts in <u>Social Researching</u>

(1984) and all the contributors to <u>Doing Feminist Research</u> (1981).
It is not often mentioned that women can be very apprehensive at
being interviewed especially alone in their own homes. One woman
specifically said that she had hesitated before inviting me, in
spite of - because of? - the fact that I had the weight of both the
University of Liverpool and of the Leisure Services Department of
Wirral Borough Council guaranteeing my probity. However, 'that nice
lady at the library said you weren't frightening at all!' It wasn't
just the elderly who were nervous. I could detect quite a strong
feeling of nervousness when I first went in to many of the
interviews. Since I am 'not frightening at all', the interviews
went very well, but this apprehension may be quite a recurring
factor in many interviews with women.

The question arises, if women are nervous of being interviewed,
then why do they do it? My interviewees were heavily self-selected.
They had every opportunity not to be interviewed. In the first
place, they could have filled in the survey and not given their name
and address. At my initial contact, usually by telephone, I was
very careful to remind them of who I was and of the form they had
filled in, sometimes several months before, and ask if they were
still available for interview, giving them an opportunity to change
their minds. There was only the one respondent who did so. Those
who were nervous but nevertheless continued with the interview
seemed to be impelled by a feeling that they ought to, that they had
information on the subject and having been asked about it, had a
duty to continue with the procedure. Although obviously this meant
that I had a larger pool of interviewees, I did feel concerned.

Though the situation with my interviewees was a much less coercive one, I felt the resemblance with Stanley Milgram's famous obedience experiments (Milgram, 1965). Milgram set up experiments at Yale University in 1965 where subjects, believing themselves to be in a learning experiment, were led to give what they thought were stronger and stronger electric shock treatments to actors posing as learners, to the point where the subjects believed they were administering dangerous and painful levels. Milgram concluded that the subjects behaved in this frighteningly cruel way because they were being obedient to what they saw as the convincing authority of the experimenters. The experiments raised a great deal of controversy, both in regard to their findings and also in regard to the ethics of setting up the experiment and conducting it in this way at all. My own experience of finding this nervousness, coupled with a feeling of obligation to authority, though it was only present in a very few of the interviews and the interview situation, I believe and was told by the interviewees, was both enjoyable and therapeutic for the women, raises again the delicacy and responsibility of the researcher's position.

The interviews were very open-ended in every way. If asked at the initial telephone call I would suggest that they would last as long as the respondents could spare for me but that previous interviews had often been about an hour. In fact, the interviews varied enormously in time and some lasted two or three hours. The shortest was about forty minutes. I suggested the interview was in order to expand a little on the answers given in the questionnaire. My main aim was to lead the interviewee to talk freely about the

books she read and especially about her thoughts about her own life. I had a schedule of topics which I hoped would figure in the discussion. This is set out in Appendix 2. I wanted the discussion to be as free as possible so if a respondent wanted to expand on a topic I allowed the conversation to flow that way. Very often she would cover the topics in which I was interested in her own way and in her own order. The fact that I had come to talk about romantic novels was enough to keep the conversation centred on the themes that arise in those novels - about the reason for her enjoyment of the novels, about how far she could identify with the heroine, about how important job or career was in her life, about the importance of marriage in a woman's life, about how these two could be balanced, about whether she felt there was growing equality between men and women, within the family and in the more public sphere, about the heroes, about men, about dominance and aggression, about the old question, 'What do women really want?'

I also asked about their use of other mass media, of television, of newspapers and magazines, about their involvement in public life, about their interest in education. If there had been any particularly significant answer to the survey I enquired further into this or if there was anything that I had not quite understood. The women seemed to talk very freely and frankly. As Janet Finch (1984: 72), for instance, has reported, 'initially I was startled by the readiness with which women talked to me.' I too found this and I think it can be ascribed to a number of factors. I did not find that it was mainly because women were lonely or isolated as Finch did. I think it was a more positive thing. As is well documented,

(e.g. Maccoby, 1966) women are articulate. By definition, my

respondents, being readers, had high verbal abilities. Women are

socialised into being the carers for others' emotional needs,

trained to discuss emotional problems with children and partners,

the wider family and friends. These skills they can apply to their

own feelings and ideas. I think it is true that they are not often

asked to discuss their own feelings and ideas within the family. As

Radway says of her sample of readers, they 'have been educated to

believe that females are especially and naturally attuned to the

emotional requirements of others and . . . are very proud of their

abilities to communicate with and to serve the members of their

families.' (1984: 92) I think, therefore, that women welcome the

chance to discuss their ideas with an outsider. As many of the

women I met said, it is a pleasure to exercise their skills at

discussing ideas. As most students, lecturers and researchers know

there is an excitement in discussing ideas which many women are

denied in their daily lives, partly because within the family they

have to be listeners rather than talkers. However, as I shall show

in Chapter Seven and Chapter Ten, my respondents were not permanent

emotional carers without emotional support themselves as Radway

suggests such women are.

All the interviews except one took place in the woman's home.

The exception was a secretary, whom I interviewed in her place of

work. I took very much a belt and braces approach to obtaining a

record of each interview! I asked permission to record the

interviews and though many of the women were not at all sure they

really liked the idea, most agreed. One seventeen-year-old school

student said she really did not want to be recorded and would feel

inhibited. Partly in order to make the interviewees feel more

comfortable with the cassette recorder, I also took notes. I do

write shorthand but also used longhand if I felt the interviewee was

beginning to wonder what I was writing. I found that by taking

written notes in front of the interviewees, they seemed to relax,

(perhaps because we are all used to telling people information about

ourselves which has to be written down), and concentrated on my

notebook rather than the cassette recorder which was recording more

fully. I also found it was very useful to have written notes, where

perhaps an interviewee had become so relaxed that she had turned

away from the recorder or, as on one occasion, when a three-year-old

had given the machine a kick which I later discovered had stopped

the recording. Or when the recorder had to compete with 'Brookside'

and a roomful of children.

As soon as I had left the place of the interview, I took time

out to write a description of the interviewee and her home and any

particular impressions about her so that I had a really detailed set

of field notes of our meeting. Very often a non-verbal signal she

had used carried far more weight and was essential for an

interpretation of the words which had been recorded. At the very

first interview, one interviewee had been discussing how she felt

about love scenes in the romances she read - mostly the various

imprints of Mills & Boon - especially the more explicitly erotic

scenes and explaining that she usually sat reading while her mother

and father and brother were also in the room watching television. I

recorded her words that,

> Usually I sit here and I can feel myself going
> redder and redder because my brother's sitting
> there and my mum's sitting there. [Here she
> gestured to show the arrangement for their
> evening viewing]. I think, O God, I shouldn't
> be reading this. It's so embarrassing. You can
> handle it on television. When you're reading a
> book you think are they looking at me. You feel
> as they know what you're reading. It's so
> funny.

While she was telling me all this she acted out the body language

she used when she was reading, how she turned her whole body away

from her family, the downcast eyes, the embarrassment, and the

amusement at her own embarrassment. The words are vivid but the

acting out of the little scene was an interesting, and perhaps

surprising, comment on the sexual sophistication of one modern young

woman. I think it is perhaps a shame if the convenience of the

cassette recorder ousts the detailed field notes of social research

of previous times.

All names of readers have been changed to protect their

anonymity.

Last but not least among the objects of enquiry in this field

of the reading of romantic fiction were the books. I read

approximately four hundred books trying to incorporate as many of

those my readers were reading as possible. I read about two hundred

of the lighter, shorter novels - the Mills & Boon type as they were

so often called, much to the chagrin of publishers such as Robert

Hale, who publish many of the shorter romances utilised by the

libraries. I tried to read some of the current output of each of

the publishers I used and something of each of the authors who

contributed to the research so that when I read their survey answers

I was aware of the type of romantic fiction they were writing.

The data I had at my disposal, therefore, when I came to try to understand more of this area of romantic fiction were material from seven publishers, interviews with fourteen librarians, questionnaires from sixteen authors with in-depth interviews from a further four and notes from personal contacts at a one-day meeting, questionnaires from 137 readers and in-depth interviews with forty of them; added to which were many personal letters plus informative material from authors and publishers - and the books themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

FACILITATORS OF THE FAIRY TALE

> *Publish and be damned.*
> > *(Attr. Duke of Wellington)*

But not by the Stock Exchange. Perhaps the publishing of

romantic fiction is not held in high esteem by literary critics, but

it is a huge industry with a turnover of millions of pounds

employing thousands of people across the world.

Many of the publishers who make healthy profits from romantic

fiction are part of giant multi-national corporations. Mills &

Boon, the market leaders, for instance, were in 1971, as Jensen

(1980) puts it, 'purchased' by Harlequin. Mills & Boon, in their

publicity material put matters in a rather more equal light. 'Ties

with Harlequin remained close as they continue to re-print titles

from this series and in 1972 the two companies *merged.*' Again,

according to Mills & Boon's publicity handout: 'In 1981 this

association came under the wing of the Canadian based Torstar

Group.' 'Under the wing' translates in Jensen's report into 'a

controlling interest in Harlequin was bought by Torstar Ltd,. a

Toronto-based newspaper and magazine publisher.' (Jensen, 1984: 49).

In whatever terms the merger is seen:

> Together they form a media complex that is
> included in any study of dominant Canadian
> companies because of its size and scope. It
> ranks 131 of the top 500 industrials ranked by
> sales, 119 ranked by assets and 180 ranked by
> net income . . . . Although Canadian based,
> it is an international organization with both
> subsidiaries and joint ownership ventures in

numerous countries. (1984: 49)

While in this country as soon as romantic fiction is mentioned the name of Mills & Boon is immediately thought of, there are many others in the market. As Deborah Philips (1985: 16) points out 'Mills & Boon is but one of perhaps a dozen companies in what their company profile describes as "the competitive and fast-growing world of romantic fiction."'

In the last few years the mergers and take-overs in the publishing world have become, as Jonathan Raban (1988: 15) wrote, the stuff of a 'Dallas' script. 'At the top of the bull market last year (1987), publishing firms were changing hands for up to 12 times their annual turnovers (three-times turnover used to be the rule of thumb for pricing a house.)' Very few of the publishing houses have been immune from this wave of take-over and merger.

> It's a newly efficient mass-production
> manufacturing industry with high growth
> potential and good monopoly positioning. It's
> reliably based on factors like demographics.
> Its unit costs are low. It's well placed to
> come through recession, compared with a lot of
> high yield high-tech industries that could
> well go through the floor. (Raban, 1988: 15)

Worpole (1984:2) confirms this when he says, 'Publishing in Britain has already attained an annual turnover of more than one billion pounds a year. The largest percentage rise by category within this increasing figure has been that for 'literature' . . . . Of all the books people read, two-thirds are fiction.'

In this world of capitalistic enterprise at its fiercest, romance is a very sure return. As Rosemary Cheetham (1987), Publishing Director of the Century Hutchinson Limited fiction

division, said in a talk to the Romantic Novelists' Association,
'The first point to make is that the women's market is the only
truly buoyant one in hardcover fiction.'

As market leader, Mills & Boon sales exceed twenty-five million
copies per year in its United Kingdom and export markets while the
Harlequin Group Worldwide total over two hundred and twenty
millions. The books have been translated into more than twenty-
three languages throughout the world. In the United Kingdom every
romance title has a print-run of over fifty thousand with, when I
interviewed a spokeswoman in February 1987, about thirty titles per
month being issued.

It is very difficult to pin down just how largely romantic
fiction figures in the lists of other publishing houses since many
of them specifically resist the claim that they publish romantic
fiction as such. As an editor at Hodder & Stoughton wrote to me,

> Hodder and Stoughton does not classify any
> books as just 'romantic fiction' - though many
> of the books we publish have a romantic
> element they are also stories about families,
> historical novels, fantasies or whatever, and
> we tend to sell them under those categories
> rather than, so to speak, category romances.

One wonders why not sell under romance, stories which are also
historical, fantasies, etc. rather than sell under fantasy or
historical, stories which are romantic. Could it be that down-
market image of romance yet again?

An editor at Transworld, which includes Bantam, Black Swan,
Corgi, set out in her information the two very distinct categories:

> Romance category which is the short, very much
> formula structured book, mostly published by
> Mills and Boon, and the Romantic novel which
> covers nearly everything else from <u>Gone with</u>

the Wind to Thorn Birds. This second category
is currently the bestselling genre in the book
trade with authors like Judith Krantz, Jackie
Collins, Danielle Steel, Catherine Cookson,
etc. etc.

The editor pointed out that, 'we at Corgi have more or less ceased

to publish the Romance category as it is very difficult to compete

with Mills and Boon in this market.'

It was interesting that she made the point that 'we are looking

first and foremost for books with big selling potential, i.e. they

have to be gripping page turners and we usually like to take on

authors who are fairly prolific.' As Paul Hirsch (1981: 189) has

said, distributors in the media 'differ little from other types of

retailers, - who as the size of the market served grows, also insist

on increasing conformity by their suppliers to standard genres and

already-familiar categories.' For some publishers the figures are

confidential as with Robert Hale. They publish category romances of

the same type as Mills & Boon but in hard covers and mostly for

library consumption. Surprisingly, in view of the fact that romance

publishing is booming, the number of their hard cover romances sold

is going down while they feel the number of readers is holding.

This probably reflects the cuts that have been made in local

authority spending and the fact that librarians, certainly in the

area I was surveying, had stronger and stronger limits placed on

their buying and were having to retain copies of books that they

might have discarded previously as too worn.

This overwhelming importance of the romantic fiction market is

not new. Depending on whether the commentator is drawing on a

background of literary criticism or social history, the emphasis is placed on the growing popularity of the novel as a literary form, from the success of <u>Pamela</u> and <u>Clarissa</u>, through the Brontës and Jane Austen, or on the rise of the new middle class, and, particularly in the 19th century the increasing leisure of the women of that class. As Germaine Greer (1970: 210) says, 'but the real source of the marrying-and-living-happily-myth is that art form invented to while away the vacant hours of idle wives, the love-novel. Richardson's <u>Pamela</u> is the source of all, but it had various founts to draw upon for its own being.'

The popularity of the romantic novel has much to do with the increase in novel reading in general in the nineteenth century. (see, for example, Showalter, 1977) The rise of the bourgeois or middle class, the increase in industrialisation so that the home and the workplace were increasingly separated, the middle-class convention of women being confined to the home, the leisure of the middle-class woman becoming a status symbol for the Victorian capitalist, all gave rise to unprecedented amounts of leisure with an unprecedented paucity of acceptable means of utilising it. Confined to the home and marriage, the home and marriage was the only world to be of interest.

The position of women in a particularly patriarchal age, without legal or commercial status as individuals, merely as appendages to men, made the romantic novel the most attractive form where women could explore their actual world and their ideal world. Since women were not educated in the same way as men, they could educate themselves only through reading. Since they were not

educated they could rarely write in the more elite forms of culture, of poetry with its classical allusions, of the essay form which usually drew on a wide spectrum of elite education. Because so many novels were written by women and read by them also it came to be a despised form, as is usual with women's sphere activities, though with spirited defence by its practitioners. As Jane Austen carefully puts into the mouth of Henry Tilney,(thus giving the sentiment the weight of male approval) rather than one of her female characters, 'the person, be it gentleman or lady who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.' (Northanger Abbey, 1923: 106)

Since writers draw on their own experience, in an age when most women of the middle class, who were those who had the time to write, led a life of limited experience in a family with a strong man with great power over the family at its head, this tended to be reflected in their writing. In a society where the only prospect of even limited independence from the family of origin was marriage, the resolution of a novel based on personal relationships often set within a family seemed inevitably to be that of a happy marriage - or perhaps a happy proposal since this was probably safer. As Eva Figes says, (1982: 7)

> . . . the selection of a marriage partner who was both suitable and lovable was bound to become a dominant theme in fiction, and one to which women writers and readers addressed themselves. After all for a woman it was the single most important choice of a lifetime, very often the only moment of choice and much more depended on her decision, for good or ill, than could ever be the case for a man.

The popularity of the romantic novel was established.

The history of Mills & Boon demonstrates the way in which the publishers of today build on that popularity. The company was formed in 1908 and at first published general fiction; authors included P.G. Wodehouse and Jack London, also Hugh Walpole. Mills & Boon mention that Georgette Heyer was first 'launched as a romantic fiction author by Mills and Boon.' During the Thirties there was a surge of interest in romantic fiction reading which Mills & Boon ascribe to the Depression. Indeed the high levels of unemployment today, giving enforced leisure to the working class have a sad parallel with the 19th century leisure for the middle-class woman. (Could the rise in unemployment have contributed to the boom in romance in the Seventies?) Commercial libraries grew very rapidly in the Thirties and led Mills & Boon to concentrate on hardback romances. These libraries declined in the 1950's and a parallel demand for paperback books grew. At this time Harlequin, then a small paperback publisher in Canada, started to buy the rights to some of the Doctor/Nurse titles to be produced under their own imprint. In 1960 this venture had proved so successful that the Canadian Doctor/Nurse paperbacks were republished by Mills & Boon as their own paperback launch. Gradually more and more series were established in paperback. In 1972 Harlequin and Mills & Boon merged. In 1981 Torstar took over, with Alan and John Boon, sons of the founder, senior directors in the Group. And as Jensen (1984: 32) says, 'Most Harlequins still originate in England under Mills & Boon's supervision.'

The attractiveness of romantic publishing economically can be

seen by the fierce and almost internecine struggles which took place in the romantic fiction market in the Seventies in the United States. Authors and staff were poached by the rival publishers in what had been for many years almost a monopoly market. Take-overs and court battles were rife. While other parts of the publishing business were languishing, romance sales continued to boom.

While it seems that there is always a market for romantic novels, Mills & Boon and Harlequin were the first publishers to bring to the marketing of books the same techniques of advertising and mass marketing that could be applied to soap or cereals or any other mass-produced product. Indeed it is no coincidence that one of the management team who laid the foundation for Harlequin's growth was W. Laurence Heisey who came from Proctor and Gamble, the American detergent giant. One of the first moves was extensive research into the consumer and the product. A brand name loyalty was built up for a standard product so that readers did not look for a book by a particular author but a Harlequin or a Mills & Boon, confident of getting a satisfactory product equal to the one they bought last week, just as they expected the jar of instant coffee to be much the same as the one they bought before. The company's success inspired many imitators. Other publishing houses increased their output of romance. As Jensen (1984) notes, court battles accompanied the war between Harlequin and Simon & Schuster's Pocket Books Division over unfair competition as the companies put out rival products looking suspiciously similar. Valued employees were poached from one firm to the other. U.S. anti-trust laws were invoked against Harlequin in one of its take-over attempts.

'Harlequin has been in court since 1979 defending itself against charges and pressing charges of its own against other corporations, attempting to expand its influence on new, potentially prosperous fiction markets while preserving its dominance in the romance market.' (Jensen, 1984: 58)   As Jenson writes, 'In 1980 Harlequin had only one major rival - Silhouette Romances - three years later, eight major publishers fought to sell 140 romance titles a month.' (Jensen, 1984: 57)   For a time the fortunes of Harlequin and of Mills & Boon seemed to decline from the high point of the late seventies.   However they then levelled out and the market for Mills & Boon particularly seems to be stabilising and growing steadily again.

It is difficult to disentangle the part played by romantic fiction, especially in view of the very broad definitions used by my readers and the very narrow definitions used by publishers, from the production of their other fiction in the more mainstream publishers. The recent plethora of take-overs between publishing houses does suggest a very buoyant market for publishing.   To judge by the comments of publishing houses on the importance of their romantic fiction markets, the publication of romantic fiction must be playing a considerable part in this success.   Grafton, for example, one of the publishing houses whose editor I interviewed, publish Barbara Taylor Bradford's novels.   Penguin publish Shirley Conran.   Pan publish Jackie Collins

'Here are the romances you long for . . .', to quote Mills and Boon's advertisements.   It is perhaps a moot question just how much of the longing is 'natural' to women and how much is very

deliberately and skilfully manufactured by the publishers. As Cooley (1956: 5) points out we are social beings and the 'notion of a separate and independent ego is an illusion.' So even the idea that women naturally are inclined to an interest in romance is socially engendered. Much of the increase in reading romance in the 19th century was a product of a particular set of economic and social conditions for women of a certain class and the boom noted by Mills & Boon in the Depression was a further product of specific social conditions. The idea of romance and love within marriage has not always been the norm, the courtly love of the middle ages hardly fits in with this or the love between men so esteemed by the Greeks. The romantic nature of women is functional in a society which depends on the unpaid work of women in performing domestic labour for their men as workers and their children as future workers while increasingly preparing themselves also for work. It also bolsters the supportive emotional work of women in caring for the psychological well-being of others. In a more particular way it underlies the selling of many commodity goods. The huge sales of romantic fiction are not wholly consumer-led by any means but are built up by shrewd publicity, advertising and promotion.

Mills & Boon particularly conduct much market research to establish what their customers want. Mann's survey was part of their continuing research and indeed the publicity manager in an interview regretted that they had not commissioned further, similar surveys more recently and said she thought it would be a good move to do so. An editor at Robert Hale wrote that they regretted their lack of feedback from readers. As they deal with library suppliers

they are extremely cut off from reader response and he felt, 'as

hardcover romances are only bought by libraries, and librarians

these days are largely immune to readers' wishes, it would be

helpful if someone could survey library readers to see what they

really want. Hardcover publishers have no real way of finding out

not being privy to Public Lending Right borrowing figures.'

The more general publishers seem to rely on the 'gut feeling'

of editors who proceed by instinct. As one editor said in

interview, 'It's pure experience.' When I asked if she worried

about choosing the books she said,

> Yes, lots of times. It's other people's
> money. On a whim and a gamble - you do get a
> feeling for what sells. But you can make
> mistakes - I also talk to the reps. who sell
> the books. They know what's doing quite well
> at the moment. But also you're buying books
> that are going to be published in eighteen
> months' time so you've got to be supposedly
> eighteen months ahead.

This sense that editors are trying to repeat past successes is

echoed by Rosemary Cheetham (1987),

> All I am sure of is that we mustn't chase the
> latest apparently hot category in the hope
> that we shall make a quick killing; we must
> stick to what we are good at . . . . We are
> interested in long-term authors who we can
> keep in print for year after year in the
> libraries and sell on a regular basis to a
> mass market paperback house.

Again there is the sense that they want a reliable product so that

consumers can count on that product being much the same as the last

time they bought it. She also echoed the Century spokeswoman when

she said, 'we are not interested in category romance. We have never

really understood how to publish it, nor been prepared to set aside

the kind of money necessary for promotion.'

There has been a long history of research into work and work organisations which has shown how unspoken standards to which everyone conforms grow up. There are no rules - but everyone knows the ethos, the practices of the organisation. Barry Turner (1973: 3) has described this: 'The distinctive nature of the set of meanings is maintained by ensuring that newcomers to the groups undergo a process of learning or socialization. This process links the individual to the values of the group, and generates common motives, common reaction patterns and common perceptual habits . . . . .' This process was very marked in publishing companies' information. Everyone 'knew' the sort of book that was suitable for their list without being able to explain it. And editors do choose - and successfully on the whole - the books which sell in their thousands. What are the criteria which start to indicate a suitable book for the list?

There is this distinction made by the publishers themselves between the offerings of Mills & Boon/Robert Hale and other publishers. Variously described as 'category romance' or 'soft' romances, these are relatively short books, about 187 to 190 pages, approximately, of course, which concentrate, as Mills & Boon (1987) suggest 'on the development of a romantic relationship and of course it must have a happy ending!' They are also 'between 50 - 55,000 words in length, and should be written in the third person, from the heroine's point of view.' At Robert Hale the tip-sheet advises not less than 40,000 words and not more than 55,000. The book,

> should have a strong plot (but should not be
> romantic suspense) which is escapist reading

(i.e. entertainment and not sordid) with a
happy ending. The hero and heroine must be
sympathetic characters but not "goody-goodies"
even if they are misunderstood initially.
Above all the reader must very quickly be
attracted to the story and the characters and
must feel compelled to read on. (Robert Hale,
'tip-sheet'.)

The aspiring writer is advised to avoid identical twins, plots
relying too heavily on misunderstandings or coincidence, phoney
engagements, and arranged marriages etc. etc. (W. Shakespeare take
note.) A surprising ban is on 'plots which involve animals or
children playing anything more than a very minor part.' Mills &
Boon have brought out a cassette further to assist writers with the
delightful title, 'And then he kissed her . . . '

It is interesting that so insatiable is the market and the need
for constant supplies of material that Mills & Boon regularly appeal
for manuscripts. Alan and John Boon appeared on a chat show on
television and said how much they needed new scripts. The following
day they received two thousand telephone enquiries. As the Mills &
Boon representative said in our interview, 'we have a core of about
a hundred and fifty authors but we need more.' Mills & Boon
publish several different imprints such as the Best Sellers,
Temptation, Doctor/Nurse, etc. as well as the Romance series itself,
each designed to appeal to a slightly different readership. The
Temptation category, for example - more explicitly sexual - are
expected to appeal to younger women. According to Mills & Boon this
readership wants 'a more sensual series, a more modern one.' Their
representative added, 'In some ways we're victims of our own
reputation. Mills & Boon is so well known that everyone assumes

it's by little old ladies and for little old ladies . . . they're reasonably explicit (even the Romances).'

Nevertheless, even for Mills & Boon, in the end what makes a Mills & Boon book? 'I suppose every editor has that instinct . . . . No, I can't explain it. I suppose it comes from years of reading them,' and though it is hardly a very scientific principle the judgement is 'whether it warms the cockles of your heart.'

For the more general publisher, the principles of selection are even more difficult to put into words since they do not even have the guidelines, only the knowledge from experience of what is a good book from the point of view of their publishing house. And indeed, as Rosemary Cheetham (1987) says,

> Bestsellers are of course what we all wait and
> hope for . . . . But as I said at the
> beginning, they are not the be-all and end-all
> of publishing fiction. The steady sellers,
> the dozen other novelists all building
> steadily from 4,000 to 6,000 with book club
> orders ranging from 1500 to 4,000 copies and
> respectable paperback sales.

The Grafton editor pointed out that the book had to be a marketable package. For her a particular book was often chosen because it filled a gap on the list. They had enough historicals that month so they needed a few contemporary novels to fill the breach. Speaking about a particularly successful paperback she 'saw it as being very packageable. You could both put a good cover on it - it was a good read and a good title. It all came together. A marketable commodity. You market paperbacks like . . .', she hesitated and I suggested, having just spoken to Mills & Boon and with their Proctor and Gamble connection in mind, ' . . . soap powder?' 'In a way.'

The distinction between the Category Romance and Romantic Fiction was explained at Grafton as a distinction between 'soft' and 'strong' romances. The 'soft' romance concentrated on a couple and their developing 'courtship'. The 'strong' romance focused on a strong woman and her story which would involve romantic attachment or attachments. Apparently the difference between these two was very easy to spot on the shelves. The 'soft' romance had the picture of a couple, usually intertwined on the front. The 'strong' romance would feature usually the face of a woman in close-up with, very small, somewhere in the background, possibly around her left shoulder, the figure of a man. The symbolism is crude but apparently very effective. The strong romance is usually the story of a woman who struggles to make good, often in business, by her own endeavours, but involving various romantic interests. A Woman of Substance (1981) by Barbara Taylor Bradford seems to be the archetype to which editors and publishers referrred. Her strength is often seen as a factor making for difficulties in dealing with the men in her life and the lesson was often drawn that success might cost the love of the right man.

Many of the publishers pointed out the great efforts that are made to keep up with what are seen as the changes in society. Mills & Boon suggested that the arrogance of previous heroes is disappearing. 'I am happy to report that that sort of arrogance is going out of the books. Real men do eat quiche. And in our books they're becoming more human. Likewise, by the same token she is no longer so meek. She fights back a lot more.' Rosemary Cheetham (1987) suggested that there have been 'two very interesting

developments . . . . The women's movement, at first slightly

scorned and resisted in this country . . . and the mushrooming of

the Booker Prize - the discovery that literary novelists could be

bestsellers too, provided the books weren't too dour and difficult.'

It was not surprising that many representatives from the

publishers mentioned the importance of the cover in selling.

Though one librarian I interviewed felt that romances were

distinguished by the fact that the covers were 'always very Sixties'

- very old fashioned. At Grafton, the editor said that

particularly in paperbacks, 'the cover is enormously important. The

sale depends on the cover.' Mills & Boon mounted an exhibition of

their paperback covers from the past fifty years at the Barbican

centre in London to mark their seventy-fifth anniversary in 1984.

As they said about the exhibition,

> Cover illustrations have always reflected the
> changes in fashions and social attitudes to
> romance, contained within the pages of the
> books. It is the illustration which first
> attracts the reader, an invitation to enter a
> world of romance. The cover illustration must
> therefore speak volumes. Some things, of
> course, never change. A romance still means
> the meeting of a man and a woman: their
> falling in love, the misunderstandings, the
> eventual solutions, and the type of ending
> enjoyed by millions - a happy one. A romantic
> cover still features a couple.' Mills & Boon,
> 1987)

The representative at Robert Hale felt that the cover was vital in

the sale of paperbacks.

Every effort is made to utilise publicity. The advertising

budget is heavy. The publishers, especially of the soft romance,

are aware that when they are asked to appear on television or on

radio to talk about the romantic novel it is ofen considered in a
disparaging or comical light, but they nevertheless welcome the
opportunity. As the Mills & Boon representative I talked to said,
'We get about three thousand press mentions a year - they're always
knocking. The secret is to do it first. All I'm interested in is
letting people know of the huge variety of books that we do and that
they have moved with the times and that they are not stuffy novels
of yesteryear and they're fun.' All publicity is very much good
publicity.

While publishers of the romantic novel may be aware that it has
a down-market image this does not mean to say that they are content
to have it so. Very strenuous efforts are being made to upgrade
that image. Harold Wilensky (1970: 483) has pointed out how, 'Many
occupations engage in heroic struggles for professional
identification.' Those engaged in the production of romance novels
are heavily involved in 'the professionalization of everyone.'
(Wilensky, 1970: 483) As was mentioned in Chapter Two there is a
Romantic Novelists' Association dedicated to 'using all the means in
its power to raise the prestige of Romantic Authorship' and
publishers play a very prominent part in the Association. Diane
Pearson, as well as being the President of the Association, is also
an editor at Corgi. Alan Boon, of Mills & Boon, Rosemary Cheetham
of Century Hutchinson, John Hale of Robert Hale, Judy Piatkus of
Piatkus Books, Michael Legat previously of Corgi and Cassell, are
all Vice-Presidents. One of the most important status-raising
events is the award of the prize for the Romantic Novel of the Year
- now sponsored by Boots. With support also from publishers

including Century Hutchinson, Collins, Corgi, Hodder & Stoughton, Michael Joseph and Piatkus Books, the prize is now worth £5,000. In 1987 the short list included, Just You Wait and See by Stan Barstow and the Association's magazine, (Romantic Novelists' Association, 1987) commented in a couple of issues rather tartly on the fact that much publicity was given to Stan Barstow's novel, more or less ignoring the eventual winner, Marie Joseph's, A Better World than This. The fact that another short-listed book in the same year, The Lushai Girl by Roberta Forrest, turned out to be written by a bearded gentleman with a charming wife also engendered (perhaps the word is particularly significant here) some interest in the media. It is rare for romantic fiction to be written by men though there are some, almost always writing under female pen names, but the difficulty of raising interest in some very good writers for the award who have that handicap which tends to render them invisible to the media - of being women - must be disheartening.

The romantic novel is, therefore, a very sophisticated commodity, marketed with great flair. The publishers are aware that they are selling a dream, a fantasy, a myth. All the publishers put great stress on the fact that, although some may issue guidelines, it is the authors who manufacture the product and that they are actually left free to create the story in any way they wish. In spite of the fact that the formula is evident on reading even a few romantic novels, the characteristics of high culture are claimed - the original artist labouring alone and bringing freshness and sincerity to this unique creation. When I talked to the authors it was evident that the formula sets the boundaries and that the

authors are aware of these and the market for which they are writing but that within these bounds most do feel that they are writing completely freely. However, even taking the strictness of the rules of the genre, I was surprised to find that on top of all this there was a great deal of editorial input even into these already circumscribed limits. For instance, Rosemary Cheetham described how she 'thought up the bones of a story . . . and proposed it to my author who was more than willing to have a go.' Agents too can have a great input. Discussing Sally Beauman's much hyped novel <u>Destiny</u>, Sebastian Faulks (1987: 53) reports her agent as saying, 'We decided to go for a longer book, up to 150,000 words, which is what the American market needs. This of course meant that part of it had to be set over there.' One of the authors whom I interviewed talked of the very substantial input from her editor and feels that she owes much of her success to this.

Here I found the first signs of the ambivalence that surrounds the success of the romantic fiction market today. The romantic novel suggests that for women true fulfilment comes from finding and 'landing' a successful, attractive, worldly man. The message is very simple and is clearly spelled out. On the other hand the movement towards feminism, to equal rights for women and indeed the movement for a general equality for all regardless of race, sex, age or any other deviation from the white Anglo-Saxon male template of the 'normal' human being, puts forward the ideal of a much more rounded notion of fulfilment. The ideal world for a woman is seen to hold good relationships with partners, children, friends, the wider family network; also rewarding work, interests in hobbies,

entertainment, travel, etc. While in an imperfect world these may
not be realised, it is in all these aspects of life that happiness
for any individual is seen to lie. Those who worked in producing
the mass of romantic fiction (and eighty per cent of editors in the
publishing world are women) work in interesting, high powered jobs,
paid salaries sufficient to achieve a great deal of financial
independence. They were living out a feminist ideal and they were
quite conscious of the fact that the books were putting forward a
picture that carried a message to which they themselves did not
subscribe. All the women I interviewed, editors, authors, readers,
stressed the fact that the books were merely escapism and had little
real effect on the readers. Nevertheless they stressed the huge
market, the repetitive buying and the importance of the books to the
readers.

Nowadays, the heroine may start off with a very interesting
career, deep sea diver, electronics engineer, but the career tends
to disappear into the background very early on in the action. Most
jobs seem to allow the heroine to take off to some glamorous
location without even a trip to the Personnel Department to fill in
the holiday rota. I asked a Public Relations Manager in the
business why this was so.

> There's no - I'm neither going to defend it
> nor attack it. It seems to be the way the
> authors think romance happens. Now a lot of
> feminists complain bitterly about that. Why
> does she always give up her career? Why does
> she? Why does this have to happen? I don't
> know. I don't know. It's not necessarily
> something I approve of.

She also brought up a point that quite a few of the writers and
editors mentioned.

> What a lot of feminists don't seem to realise
> is that all Mills & Boon authors are living
> the feminist dream. They are professional,
> working, high earners, extremely independent
> in a very demanding profession - just ordinary
> housewives who are stuck at home with kids and
> thought now what can I do that doesn't take me
> out of the house. Voilà! And they're now
> professional authors. Now to me that's
> liberation.

It may be that Marxist theories relating to the 'agents of

capitalism' have some relevance here. To oversimplify hugely -

those who have capital buy the labour of those who do not and from

their work extract the surplus value in order to further accumulate

capital. From this condition, much of the ills and strains

experienced in present-day capitalist societies stem. The worker is

alienated from the product of his or her labour. He or she comes to

live an inauthentic existence. It is an obvious fact though that

the capitalist society of today is not quite the same as that of the

years that first followed the industrial revolution and the great

manufacturing industries which formed the British economy from which

Marx and Englels constructed so many of their theories. Many

commentators, Braverman (1974), Baran and Sweezy (1966), Mason

(1961) have pointed to the rise of the agents of capitalism, those

who do not possess capital themselves and who are selling their own

labour but who are also acting for capitalism - managers, foremen,

personnel workers. There is also a class such as social workers,

psychologists, counsellors, who ameliorate the harsh effects of

capitalism, reconciling the alienated worker to the society in which

he or she lives or perhaps presenting a harsh environment in a more

golden light - to paraphrase Marx on religion, finding the spirit of

a spiritless world, the heart of a heartless society. Baritz
(1970:325) has described these as 'the servants of power.'

Surely the analogy holds with the producers of romantic fiction
for women. Are they the agents of patriarchy as well as of
capitalism? I found that they suffered from a quite marked degree
of awareness of the ambiguity of their position. The contrast
between the consciousness-raising of feminist ideas and the ideology
of romance purveyed in the books, their own position as living the
feminist ideal and selling the myth which underpins the continuation
of women's essential service in the reproduction of labour power
seemed exceptionally overt. Rabine (1985) and others have
sugggested that certain features of romantic fiction could be taken
to be oppositional to the marriage myth. Many of these were
suggested by my interviewees - the increasing 'feistiness' of the
heroine, the more rounded characters of some heroes, the more
important job for the heroine. But on the whole editors seemed to
feel an ambivalence about their work.

The relationship between publisher and retail outlet is not
always direct. As many of the publishers were at pains to point
out, their sales can be very indirect. While Mills & Boon do sell
to wholesalers and retailers many of the publishing houses sell
almost entirely to the library suppliers, as for instance do Robert
Hale. The three main library suppliers, John Menzies, Askews and
Holt Jackson operate from the North Midlands keeping huge warehouses
and machine rooms. Here they buy loose pages of novels from the
publishers and then proceed to sew them into special, tough library
bindings suitable for the hard wear of library borrowing. The

library supplier buys from the publisher on the basis of an information sheet which gives the price, publication date, format, category, number of pages and a brief outline of the plot. It is on this alone that he buys. Rosemary Cheetham suggested in a talk to the Booklovers' conference in 1984 that the library supplier 'knows to the last copy how much your latest novel sold, and has a positively elephantine memory when it comes to track record. He is wholly immune to false hype and impossible to bamboozle.'

Another very important outlet is the book club, the two main ones being Book Club Associates, much of their fiction being devoted to the big name authors, and the Leisure Circle which maintains a door-to-door sales force selling mainly to housewives and specialising in the soft or category romance.

Again, the large wholesalers such as Bookwise, Menzies, W. H. Smith, wield great power in the book world. In a speech to a meeting of the Romantic Novelists' Association on 25 November, 1987, a representative of Chatto and Windus speaking of the job of an editor pointed out that 'Ultimately, it is the library buyer and the bookseller who make decisions for her [the editor].' The importance of the sales representatives was emphasised by the spokeswoman from Grafton books, ' I talk to the reps. who sell the books. They know what's doing quite well at the moment - yes, well, they are in the front line. Unless you go out into the street. You can't really. You'd be foolish, I think. . . . . But the wholesalers are the people who know exactly.' As she pointed out, wholesalers take something like,

> 60 per cent of our business - and every month
> they show the titles that they will be selling

and then they get rated and if they get a bad
rating then that will affect the sales of the
book which means that they won't do so well.
Ultimately means that we won't choose so many
of that kind of book.

It is in this way that wholesalers also influence which books get

chosen.

Agents can form what Carole Blake (1988: 14) of the Blake

Friedmann Agency described to members of the Romantic Novelists'

Association as 'an important part of the healthy triangle between

author, agent and publisher. She stressed the importance of the

advice she gave to her writers. 'A good agent gives feed-back to

authors of publishers' requirements. And an agent is on the

writer's side.'

Perhaps the most important of the gatekeepers between the

romantic novel and a vast number of readers is the librarian. All

the publishers had stressed the importance of the libaries as an

outlet.

Obviously the libraries I used for the survey varied in size

and in how busy they were. Even the very smallest library occupying

the space of a couple of shops in a shopping block on one of the

estates reported lending to 250 to 300 people per day and the

average borrower throughout the area seemed to take about three to

four books. Well over a thousand borrowers per day in the larger

libraries were reported. The proportion of lending which consisted

of romantic fiction was always very high. Though no figures were

kept of the different kinds of fiction lent out, between 30 to 50

per cent of fiction borrowing was estimated to be of romantic

fiction. An important point for my research was that many of the librarians commented that from their conversations with borrowers, they felt that book borrowers are the same people as book buyers. The buyers and the borrowers are not separate groups.

The librarians set the particular atmosphere and individuality of each library. The ßranch Librarian-in-charge buys the books, arranges displays and exhibitions, sells off old stock, puts on particular services, for instance, story telling for children or competitions etc. Each Branch Librarian has absolute freedom within the financial limits set for her of choosing which books to put on the shelf. The soft or catalogue romances she buys 'by the yard', merely ordering the requisite number from the library suppliers. The other romantic novels she chooses herself from the shelves of a central depot. Many of the librarians stressed how much price dictated their choices. Mrs. Black (all names have been changed) pointed out, as did other librarians, that she had decided to cut back on the hardback catalogue romances since for the same price she could buy three or four paperback. While these did not last so long, borrowers who particularly enjoyed the soft romances demanded a great number of them and it was only by buying paperbacks that she could supply this demand.

This may be why Robert Hale, the hardbook publishers of catalogue romances were finding their returns down.

An aspect of the stocking of the libraries that I had not anticipated was the reliance on donations. Four of the librarians mentioned that they received donations of books and Mr. Sanders, at one of the central libraries was particularly pleased that he had

recently received gifts of Mills & Boon novels.

A number of the librarians commented on the fact that, as Harriet Lister said, 'people often begin to make excuses for reading romantic fiction.' Many borrowers reported that they had difficulty in sleeping and that reading romantic fiction put them in a contented, happy, frame of mind which helped them to fall asleep. Out of the thirteen librarians I interviewed, seven spoke of this reason. Many people found it literally light reading! As they regularly borrowed eight to ten books at a time, they found them convenient to carry home. On the other hand <u>War and Peace</u> would have probably been an equal weight considering the numbers borrowed. Many of the librarians commented on the fact that borrowers not only regularly took out so many books but that regular twice a week visits were quite usual.

The librarians took up a theme put forward by Rosemary Cheetham on how women enjoyed the sex in the novels. Over the last ten years or so romance fiction has become very explicit. The sex scenes have become an integral part of the developing romance. The writers no longer stop at the bedroom door - except Barbara Cartland, of course. Several librarians were amused by old ladies enjoying 'sexy' books. Miss Cribbins told the story of one old lady in her eighties who had brought back a 'raunchy' book and told the librarian about it. Concerned in case the book had offended the borrower, Miss Cribbins asked about this, but the old lady replied that on the contrary she had enjoyed it as 'it's the only way she's going to get it at her age'!

Harriet Lister pointed out that there are few complaints about

frank treatment of sex but that the complaints are more about 'bad language.'

All the librarians complained about the amount of defacing of the books. There is a great deal of writing on the books, comments about the plot, evaluations of the enjoyment of the books, corrections of grammar and spelling - not always right! Particularly prevalent is the habit of marking the books in some way to show that they have been read. This may be because the titles of romances, especially the category romances are not always indicative of the plot and could often be quite interchangeable. (Passionate Rebel, More Than Tomorrow, The Price is Love, The Place to Be, and Sweet Deceiver, are five off the top of a stack beside me.) While this is obviously distressing to librarians and ratepayers alike, from a sociological point of view I think it suggests something of the intensity of the relationship that is built up between the reader and the text. There is a strong taboo on writing on books not your own for regular readers and I do not think these readers would see themselves as vandals, defacers of public property, yet they regularly do so. I would suggest that when reading, as I shall show from their replies to questionnaires and in the interviews, they enter into such an intense, private world that the public aspect of borrowing books is lost.

The majority of the librarians did seem to share an assumption that romances come at the bottom of a hierarchy of 'good' writing. It is accepted that many books are not high culture and their purpose is to entertain and divert for a few hours and this is accepted - beneath these come the romances. Starting from this

basic assumption, the attitude of the librarians to the huge

poplarity of romantic fiction seemed to split into two very distinct

categories. Some librarians had a 'Reithian' attitude to romance.

In earlier days of the BBC, broadcasters felt that their mission was

to educate and inform as well as to entertain, that it was their

duty to lead their listeners and viewers to an appreciation of all

that was best in our culture. Similarly some of the librarians felt

that it was their duty to lead their readers to good literature. On

the other hand the 'libertarian' attitude suggested that borrowers

had a right to read what they wished and it was the duty of the

library to provide, a view exemplified by Mr. Thorne, 'It would be

patronising to try to influence readers,' and Miss Cribbins, 'We

don't have the right to suggest other books - adults must have come

to the conclusion of what they want.' Sometimes the librarians

would start by saying that they believed the borrowers should read

anything they wished but then went on to say that if they noticed

people borrowing many romances they would try, as Carmel Keen did,

to suggest other books borrowers might enjoy. Mrs. Grasswell felt

that the first priority was to buy what the community wanted - but

then went on to say that she refused to buy any more Barbara

Cartland because she's written about four hundred books and Mrs.

Grasswell refused to put any more royalties into the Cartland purse.

Mrs. Grasswell also felt that the libraries had to maintain a stock

of more literary books because 'this is what libraries were for.'

This attitude was particularly marked when it came to the

teenage romances. There are a few specifically teenage imprints,

usually with an American High School background, as Miss Cribbins

remarked, that 'awful American High School Culture.' The imprints

have such titles as 'Sweet Dreams,' 'Sweet Valley High.' Many of

the librarians were particularly prepared to try to wean teenagers

from too high a diet of these books. One librarian 'was glad her

daughter pooh-poohed them.' A significant remark by Harriet Lister

was that she 'didn't mind' adults (reading romantic fiction) but she

tried to wean teenagers from 'Sweet Valley High.' She worried that

'teenagers read "Sweet Valley High", then Mills & Boon and end up

with this as their idea of how things are.' It was interesting to

note that the plots of these, although simplistic and with a limited

vocabulary, took problems and difficulties that teenagers do

encounter and suggested solutions. Many made the point quite

overtly that it is important for young girls to develop their

characters, to aspire to careers, to have good relationships with

family and friends as well as to have boy friends. Perhaps they are

rather heavily self-improving but their emphasis on Freud's recipe

for a successful, mature adulthood - to work and to love - with an

understanding that both work and love cover many strands of human

experience, is more lacking in the adult novels.

It is significant that the librarians did not, on the whole,

read romance themselves. One librarian, Barbara Ryan, was working

through her stock by reading one novel by all the popular authors

herself. She 'enjoyed a good read' and seemed to favour the strong

romances or the romance with a bias to the saga. Mr. Sanders had

read a couple to see what they were like. Very few other librarians

had even read any of them. Miss Cribbins declared that she hadn't

read any romantic fiction herself, 'Never even read Catherine

Cookson.' Mrs. Black didn't like them and felt they were far

fetched. She cited the Doctor/Nurse romances particularly for this

criticism. Mrs. Grasswell disliked 'Sweet Dreams' for their

sameness, "They're all the same, boy meets girl and happy ending

with no hitches.' But actually teenage romances don't always have

conventional happy endings, often the resolution is that the heroine

gains understanding or acceptance or the resolve to do better next

time in some difficult situation.

Many said they had started trying to read romantic fiction but

had found that the stories were too repetitive - one librarian

suggested that there were only about three basic stories. This is a

criticism with which many of the producers of romances as well as

readers would agree - but for the readers this is not a

disadvantage!

For all those who help to make mass market romantic fiction

available then, there are very mixed motives and feelings about

their product. For many at the owning end of publishing, the

product is a very profitable one and the category romance producers

exploit the escapist and addictive nature of romances to turn a very

handsome business profit, while stressing that a romantic novel is

merely a pastime which provides a pleasurable couple of hours. For

many further down the chain of production especially for the women

editors and for the librarians there seems to be an uneasiness and

ambivalence. Happy, innocent, brief diversion or reinforcing of

dysfunctional myths for women?

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MAKERS OF THE MYTH

'a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should
have no chance of success while the public taste
is occupied with their trash.'
                              Nathaniel Hawthorne

The question arises then, are the writers merely the channels

for these airy nothings, supplying the local habitation and the

name? If romantic fiction is ideology as many feminists claim -

(here I use the word 'ideology' in its vaguely Marxist sense, to

imply a false consciousness about the world taken-for-granted) - are

the writers inside or outside the ideology?

It seems to me surprising that there is such a dearth of

research into writers. There has always been interest in the

author. The New Criticism, by insisting on the autonomy of the

text, made it seem something of a *faux pas* to be interested in the

person of the author, his or her position in history, in culture,

yet, as the media are well aware, people are interested in people

and whatever was preached in the universities, readers were

interested in the public persona of, say, a D.H. Lawrence while the

very private persona of an Emily Dickinson has teased the audience.

However this interest has been very much in the writer as unique

individual. This way of approaching writers may develop from the

very nature of literature, from its emphasis on the individual, the

unique experience. It may also explain why so many literary critics

utilise psychoanalysis and psychology, equally studies which focus

on the individual. Writers have rarely been treated as a social group.

Writers are, nevertheless, a social category. By the very fact that they share an occupation they share common interests, a common class position (since class for most statistical purposes is defined as occupation) and similar life chances.

There are a number of occupational classification schemes used. These sometimes differ in the number of different categories - often reflecting the interests of the researchers who use them. However, they are broadly in agreement. They are often based on the Registrar General's classification used in the Census and other official fact-gathering exercises. (Details of scheme used are given in Appendix 3)

Social scientists are often criticised for their constant stress on class as indicated by occupation and indeed there can be many anomalies, especially in the placing of the social class of women. Nevertheless the interest can be vindicated by one simple fact. Class turns out so often to be an effective indicator of much of the behaviour of individuals. From longevity to perinatal mortality, to educational success, to seemingly unrelated behaviour such as early toilet training or incidence of breast feeding or taste in food, class tells.

As well as writers forming some sort of grouping because of their occupation, those in my sample were surprisingly cohesive as an empirical group. The image of a writer is usually that of an individual isolated in his/her day-to-day work, highly individualistic, eschewing the company of others both as a practical

necessity in order to get the work done and also by inclination -
nurturing the muse! It may be that my writers were a self-selected
group and not representative. These were the authors who had
volunteered in almost all cases to help me with information so it
could be that they were the outgoing, extrovert members of the
species. However, I do not think that volunteering to supply
written information would necessarily suggest gregariousness. In
fact, in many cases both their normal writing and their written
contact with me were the preferred contacts of shy people.
Nevertheless, they did often act as a group. Many of them belonged
not only to the Romantic Novelists' Association but also to such
groups as the Society of Authors and the Writers' Guild and other
groups which fitted in with related interests. Several stressed the
important role that local Writers' Circles and Writers' Clubs played
in their lives. They were faithful attenders at meetings, lectures,
weekend courses and social occasions run by all these organisations.
I was aware, too, that many of the writers were part of smaller,
informal networks which had arisen from their common interests.

Most of the writers I met were part of strong friendship groups
and had formed lasting and very supportive affective relationships.
As illustration, I would mention that the four authors I interviewed
all lived within the larger Merseyside area as I wished their
background to be similar to my readers. They were aware of each
others' work, were sometimes members of the same associations and
two turned out, unknown to me originally, to be friends. (I might
add that the temptation to interview those authors, of whom there
were a few, who occupied apartments in Spain, or even the Channel

Islands, was very strong. I shall continue to maintain that it was

the rigours of my research parameters, not those of the research

grant which dictated Merseyside rather than the Costa del Sol.)

I certainly found from my research that the writers who

supplied me with written information and the writers whom I observed

personally at interviews and at meetings had a strong feeling of

group identity.

I drew on direct information from twenty authors, though I

talked informally to more at various meetings. The form of the

questionnaire used is supplied in Appendix 4. The list of the

authors who answered my questionnaire is supplied in Appendix 5.

Where I have quoted individual authors I have used the name under

which they write as this is their name which is already in the

public domain and I have preserved the anonymity of those who prefer

to write under a pen name. Not surprisingly, the surveys were

answered very fully and with great liveliness and intelligence. I

purposely left plenty of space in the questionnaires as I presumed

authors might want to spread themselves, unfettered by the

limitations of dotted lines. I was rewarded by many replies which

verged on essays, some heartfelt and serious, many very funny

indeed.

Because of the limitations of time I was only able to interview

four authors in depth. I chose these to be representative in their

work of something of the broad spectrum of romantic fiction.

The first I interviewed was Maynah Lewis. I might add that

she has since died and I would like to record my thanks to her and

my sadness at the death of a very talented woman. Though classed as

a romantic writer, she told me that she thought her books fitted
more into a general novel category.   As she said, her heroines
varied from the young to the very old and five of her novels were
written from the man's point of view.   Nevertheless her publishers
and the public classified her as a romantic novelist.   She was a
member of the Romantic Novelists' Association and had won the major
prize for the best romantic novel of the year on two occasions.
While, as she told me, she preferred to leave her characters' lives
at an upbeat moment of their story, her first prizewinner, Barren
Harvest (1981), for instance, while indeed being the story of a
romantic relationship and marriage and with a happy ending
nevertheless had a sombre feel to it and reminded me of Mary Webb's
Precious Bane (1928) in its atmosphere.

The second author was Sheila Walsh, who had been the President
of the Romantic Novelists' Association in the year before I
interviewed her.   Her first novel had won the Netta Muskett award
for a first novel and in 1984 she won the RNA best novel award.   Her
novels were historical, Regency novels, in the Georgette Heyer style
with all the ingredients of this branch of the genre - very young,
spirited heroine whose naïveté lands her in all sorts of
misunderstandings; much older, sophisticated man about society; a
generous sprinkling of authentic detail of the time, of the language
used and the fashions of the day; historical events and figures and
a particular drawing on French history, language and events.
Soufflés of books.

My third author was Julia Fitzgerald.   Her books were long,
historical blockbusters.   They were set in very exotic locations and

had equally exotic plots and titles, <u>The Jewelled Serpent</u> (1984),

<u>Taboo</u> (1985), <u>Venus Rising</u> (1982), <u>The Princess and the Pagan</u>

(1982), <u>Firebird</u> (1983). A typical plot was of an eighteenth-

century young girl from Cornwall, who, by a series of tortuous

adventures, ends as a slave girl in the harem of a desert sheik.

However, when disbelief in the preposterous plots had been

suspended, the writing was vivid and vital. There was great detail

and realism about backgrounds. One novel included many quotations

from ancient Arabic poetry and the use of quite extensive dialogue

in Arabic. When I asked the author how she had acquired such a

background knowledge and had she engaged in a great deal of

research, she explained that she did check words in an Arabic

dictionary but that her knowledge had come because in a previous

existence she had been an Arabian woman. Not surprisingly she had

strong interests in the occult and is at the moment writing romances

for the American market which link astrology and romance.

My fourth interviewee was Annabel Murray, who writes what are,

perhaps, the archetypal romances in the mind of the public. She

writes for Mills & Boon's 'Romance' series, the short, contemporary

romances. When I interviewed her in 1988 she had had twenty-four

romances accepted, though since she writes one about every three

months, each of 187 pages, the total has, no doubt, grown. Her

writing mirrored some of the changes in women's lives in the way the

publishers had mentioned. <u>Master of Camariguo</u>, written in 1982,

featured a heroine who, in the second paragraph, is seen stamping

'one small, elegantly-shod foot, her widely spaced cornflower blue

eyes challenging the man who towered over her,' and who settles for

love, marriage and children very decisively by the last page. The book she autographed for me, written in 1987, featured, as the blurb says, 'a heroine "five foot twelve" with a degree in stonemasonry.' The author carefully insists that the heroine is allowed to keep up her stonemasonry business (inherited from her father) when she settles for children and marriage.

Who are the authors of romantic fiction, then? What sort of people are they?

To list some of the demographic details first. One of the writers who filled in the questionnaire did not fill in the demographic details. I do not know whether this was because she did not wish to give these details or from oversight as it was on the back of the last sheet and could have been overlooked. I suspect the latter since she had been perfectly forthcoming with the preceding details. I, therefore, had demographic information from fifteen authors through the survey, plus information from the four interviews.

The age distribution of the nineteen authors was unrepresentative of women in the population and also of the readers in that it was heavily skewed to the older age groups. Of the survey respondents, none of my respondents was under 35; four were in the 34 - 44 age group, four in the 45 - 54 age group, four were in the 55 - 64 age group and three were over 64. The publication of a book must be the basic sign of establishing oneself in the writing profession and it would seem likely that it usually takes time to gain some success in the field. It did seem a very usual pattern,

though, that the women had turned to writing after they had done other jobs and sometimes had started quite late in life. Maynah Lewis had started writing at fifty, having been a very successful musician and music teacher until increasing deafness hindered this career. Ann Weale was unusual in that she had started writing very young. (As, of course, did the redoubtable Barbara Cartland.)

When it came to marital status, the distribution was even further skewed. Seventeen of my respondents were married at the time and the other two had been widowed. So much for the stereotype of frustrated spinsters creating their compensatory fantasies. They were also untypical of the general population, where one marriage in three ends in divorce, in that most marriages were, or had been, unusually stable and long lasting. Divorces were unusual in the sample. The question on marital staus asked about present status and not about any previous divorces but from correspondence and publicity material and interviews it seemed that only three or four had been involved in divorce.

All my respondents had children.

Most had worked before becoming writers full time. The jobs had been many and varied - shop assistant, bank clerk, war service in ATS, office work (including several secretaries, in one case to an M.P., and running a West End secretarial bureau), publisher's assistant, civil service, a media computer services manager, several journalists, a theatrical costumier, a teacher in adult education and an actress. A recurring theme was the number of times the occupation was listed and then followed by ' . . . until I had children.'

Since social scientists have found that class as indicated by occupation is so significant a predictor of various patterns of behaviour and life chances, an indication of a respondent's class is valuable especially if one may want to compare one's findings to other social science information. Class is something of the *lingua franca* of research findings about social phenomena. It, therefore, seemed a necessary piece of data about both the writers and the readers. And though the debate about how valid it is to research women in terms of the job that their partner does is becoming a very pressing problem, (for a general summary of the argument, see Scott, 1987) in order to have information that could be compared to other social surveys, it was, I felt, necessary to put the question in the conventional terms.

However more and more, the way in which women are assigned to class is becoming very difficult. The question is usually posed in terms of the occupation of the 'Head of the Household'. Before the growth of employment for married women, this was a relatively easy question. The head of the household was the man of the house, the breadwinner. Even if a wife worked, her income was normally less than her husband and her employment much more interrupted. Though women may have had private resentment about the easy acceptance of the 'fact' that the husband was head of the house this was certainly an economic, often a legal, probably a social reality if not a psychological one. Unmarried women were almost always resident in their parents' homes. When there was no man in the house, the position of 'head of household ' was usually very clear.

Nowadays matters are not so easy. There are practical

difficulties - my respondents found that the question was often very difficult to answer. There are more theoretical difficulties. The conventional method of assigning women to their husband's or father's class makes the assumption that the woman's position reflects that of the head of the house and by treating husband and wife - or even more problematically daughter and father - as a unit, inequalities in the position of women and men are veiled. The point at issue is: are women's life chances most influenced by their husband's occupation, their own occupation or by the fact of their unpaid work in the home?

I, therefore, put the question on my surveys in the usual terms, 'Occupation of Head of Household, if not yourself,' (having asked in the previous question about the respondent's work) and sat back and waited for the flak!

In the event the replies fully bore out the misgivings that have been aired about the use of 'occupation of "head of household"' in any meaningful classification of the life chances and life styles of women. Of the nineteen respondents for whom I had demographic data most were Class A/B with two Class C_1. However, the difficulty is compounded in studying a category of women who rarely come under the social scientists' microscope - women preponderantly past the child-bearing part of the cycle of their lives - not necessarily biologically but socially. No author had children under five though two had children between five and ten. Most would seem to have completed their families and not be intending to add to them. Many of these women, therefore, were, by definition, economically active while their conventionally older husbands were

retired. It was quite likely, therefore, that they were actually contributing more to the family budget at the time than their husbands.

Since many of my respondents would not realise that the term 'Head of Household' (see Appendix 3) was in this sense, a technical term with a set definition, not surprisingly many of the respondents took issue with the question - which earned some vivid replies. (Some of the readers also objected to this question.) There was sometimes a genuine puzzlement as to just who is the 'Head of Household. My replies included such examples as: 'This is a dangerous question!', 'It depends on the definition: if by salary it's my husband (police sergeant); if family manager then it's me.' The simple query beside the term,'Head of Household.' 'Who? Our household is headless!', or a more unyielding, 'I object to term "Head of Household,"' or the forthright, 'I'm Head of the Household.' In this household the lady was married to a man twenty-five years younger than herself, this was her second husband and she had an extremely successful career as a writer. Who is to tell which is the more reliable indicator of their economic and social position - conventional social science or her own judgment?

I also asked about the level of educational attainment, couched in the most easily operationalised question, and one of the most often used, as to last type of educational establishment attended full time. For most, secondary schooling had been the last form of full-time education though five had gone on to higher education, four to college, including drama and art colleges and one to university, gaining a higher degree as well as a first degree. It

is perhaps surprising that more had not gone on to higher education, especially to university, in a career which exploited expertise in commmunication. Also educational success normally correlates strongly with middle-class status. To have such middle-class individuals not going on to higher education might seem unusual. I think several factors operated here. My sample was weighted to the older age groups. The trend towards more people going on to higher education was not so marked when they left school. Some of the older writers had been educated privately or had been to school when the leaving age was thirteen or fourteen. A second factor was that they were all women and the increase in women going on to higher education has been very marked, starting from a very low base line. Many of these women were of a generation where few women had the chance of further education. An interesting factor was that I suspect, though I have no direct evidence, that this lack of higher education may have been one of the factors that had contributed to their becoming writers. They were all lively, articulate people in their communications with me. They had married, had children and at some juncture had looked round for interesting ways to have a job and to earn an income. Writing had been a career which did not require professional qualifications.

The writers gave many details about the practical side of their work. They varied enormously in how long they had been writing. Perhaps few rivalled Barbara Cartland's writing career of sixty-eight years and 480 books but many had been writing for twenty or thirty years or longer. Paula Lindsay had 115 books to her credit.

Many wrote other types of books as well as romantic fiction;

thrillers, fantasy, straight fiction, children's fiction, non-
fiction works (including a 'how-to-do-it' instruction book called <u>To
Writers with Love</u> by Mary Wibberley which explains how to write
romance), autobiography, social history, biography.

They wrote for many different British publishers: Century
Hutchinson, Transworld Publishers, Hodder and Stoughton, Arrow,
Mills & Boon, Robert Hale, Collins and Basil Blackwell, and American
publishers such as St. Martin's Press, Harlequin, Headline Book
Publishers.

All the different forms of romantic fiction were well covered,
from romances which seemed rather arbitrarily assigned to romance
fiction, as many of Maynah Lewis's books, through contemporary,
historical, mystery romances. When Linda Acaster wrote to me she
told me that one of her books was set 'among the native Apsaroke
people of the plains of North America, while another had as hero an
'ulfhednar, a wolf warrior-priest of the god Odin - from where we
get our image of werewolf,' as she explains. Infinite variety,
indeed.

One of the features that many of the writers had in common, and
one they shared with the readers was that they had mostly been avid
readers from childhood. This was a feature that recurred time and
time again.

I asked what had led them to decide to write in the first
place, and found that apparently writers are born and not made. As
one reply stated 'I've always written since childhood. I assumed
everyone else did,' or as Jane-Ann Shaw put it more classically,
'*Cacoethes scribendi* - have scribbled since age of five, and thought

everyone else did, too.'

Most had been first published merely by sending completed manuscripts to various publishers until one was accepted, very often the first novel they had written but one author mentioned that it was the fourth she had submitted and one that it was her seventh which was accepted. Some had started by writing stories and articles for magazines. Times have changed from 1921 when, as Barbara Cartland writes, 'No difficulty. In 1921 it was very unusual for a Society Girl to write a book and my first book went into six editions and was published in five languages.' Two authors had won competitions which had started them on their path. Maynah Lewis said, 'I started writing out of despair. I didn't know what to do with myself. Because I was going deaf and I had to gradually give up on my pupils.' She also mentioned having read all the 'How-to' writers books she could find and that she had been very supported by the Writers' Club she had started herself in her area. Since she had never had a novel turned down, her self-education in writing seemed very successful. Only one writer had joined a Writers' Circle before she had actually written, almost as a training for the job. She had tried crime novels first but found her 'mind was not devious enough' and after hearing a talk by an established romantic fiction writer decided to try her hand at that and 'Now I quite enjoy it!'

The influence and input of the publishers was seen from the other side when I looked at the information from the authors. The authors, on the whole, perceived themselves as very free to write as they wished with the main input coming after the manuscript has been

delivered. As Rowan Kirby wrote, 'Publisher's Editor makes
requests/suggestions re plot detail, but only after MS. submitted.
Not too many restrictions, but some.'

Some writers were more definite when asked as to input. 'No.
Not at all. I decide what to write next.'

One was very responsive to her editor. 'I work very closely
with my editor. She gives me very good guidance. If there are some
things not quite right she'll send me back quite a detailed letter
sometimes,' and 'she likes me to submit one every three months.' It
was this same author who, when talking of the publisher's efforts to
keep up with the more liberated heroine and the less aggressive
hero, gets 'carpeted by the editor': 'when this new role hero and
heroine came out I was still writing in the old mode and she sorted
me out.'

However the publishers represent the market, and the demands of
the market in respect to formula fiction can be very stringent. The
writers are aware of the formula. When asked if publishers
suggested books I got replies such as,

> No, but I have been told the main theme must be
> contemporary and romantic.

> No. Very influential as far as parameters are
> concerned. Within the category limits they are
> firm but reasonable.

I think the most succinct recognition of their influence came in
the answer,

> They are very influential. They know what's
> wanted in the market.

I followed up this question of the dominance of the market and
the boundaries of the genre when I asked if their books started out

from ideas they wanted to write or did they visualise the market and write something they felt that market might want. The authors were mostly realistic.

> Market inevitably dictates possibilities. Ideas
> grow within that.

> Mostly the market, as I'm writing for money.

Some said that they wrote what they wanted but from experience knew what the market demanded so the ideas were produced within that parameter. Those who wrote for the American market pointed out that they had to bear in mind those needs as well.

Perhaps the last word on that subject should come from Barbara Cartland, 'I write to give people beauty and love and the idea comes to me from my prayers.'

These are stories by, for, and about women. So the heroine is all important as the figure with whom the reader identifies. The authors' ideas about their heroines reflected the determined drive to make heroines 'spirited', a word much used. Many stressed a sense of humour though from the novels I have read, this is not particularly apparent. Resilience and strength of character were also stressed. Although Barbara Cartland's 'Virginity and Femininity' were no longer equated, many stressed a moral integrity and faithfulness. Sex is allowed and is often an important part of the unfolding of the story but a certain type of 'virginity' remains, in that except for the few stories where the heroine has been married before, in the category romances the heroine is allowed to have intercourse with the hero only. In the strong romances she

is faithful to the man of the moment. No sex without commitment seems to be the slogan, certainly the heroine is always less experienced than the hero.

Although it is through the heroine's eyes that the story is seen, nevertheless in a very real sense the hero is the central character. Because the heroine's thoughts, feelings, desires, day dreams, are all dominated by the hero, so is the reader's gaze focused on this dominating central figure. While many of the authors strongly repudiated the stereotype of the tall, dark, handsome - and rich - hero there were a great many of them in the pages of the books I read.

It seemed, in fact, that the hero's wealth was an essential part of the story. In the short, category romances where stereotypes have to operate in order to get the story under way quickly, the hero is almost invariably rich. As one author said, 'Wealth is part of the fantasy. Heroes are always achievers. They wouldn't be poor,' and again, 'These Romance books are usually a variation of the Cinderella theme . If he's not rich, then he's usually an aristocrat who's been cheated out of his money.' Some of the authors replied that, of course, the hero did not have to be rich but themselves always wrote about aristocratic or wealthy heroes, and perhaps a reply like 'hero need not be rich - but one whose integrity and intelligence will ensure a comfortable future lifestyle,' is a little naïve. It must be only in the books that integrity and intelligence can guarantee that. And again, 'Readers of romantic fiction dream of being princesses or film stars - and that means money. Very few of them are married to wealthy men but

most are human enough to wish that they had a rich husband.'
However two authors did tend to reverse the stereotype and have
upper class heroine with working class hero. Often these were
historical in setting.

Apart from being wealthy, the most recurring feature of the
heroes in romantic fiction is their aggressive quality. They are
always dominant, usually dominating and very often domineering. The
heroine is very often, especially in the category romances, almost
literally frightened of him. Even in the strong romances the hero
is still at the socially masculine end of the scale of
masculine/feminine values - competitive, aggressive, dominant,
macho, with some of the more negative qualities also - given to
anger, terse, uncommunicative.

On the whole the authors were operating very much within these
stereotypes of masculine/feminine. Both the publishers and the
authors were at pains to assure me that the old passive
heroine/aggressive hero were dead. But while the heroines were
described as spirited and the heroes were shown as caring towards
the heroine in isolated episodes as the plot developed, in the
action and circumstances of the plot generally these qualities were
rare. The heroine's whole life was centred on the hero. Her
priorities were related completely to him. No job, interest, friend
or other claim on her ever competed for her attention. This may
explain the relative dearth of children in the plots. It would be
difficult to display a heroine in our present stereotype of the good
mother as not putting children first. The aggressiveness is an
essential part of the plot in some novels, where the development of

the feeling between the couple changes its pace when the hero demonstrates early in the story that underneath the aggressiveness there is the potential for gentler feelings.

The success of the heroine is in leading a tough, strong, aggressive and successful male to care for her. It is a very basic scenario. The female needs a strong protector who will, however, care for her and her offspring, and in fact it is the exclusivity of his gentler qualities, their being the prerogative of the one family unit that is the best protection of the female.

As one of the authors said, 'Heroes must be masculine and aggression seems to be synonymous with masculinity, particularly for today's women.'

It is often suggested that the attraction of the romantic novel lies in the victory of the caring female over the aggressive male in leading the male to uncover his latent tenderness and caring. This explanation is not a new one. It is only the Victorian image of the 'Angel in the House' brought up to date. I would suggest that the success is not in transforming the male at all but in securing his strength and aggressiveness for her exclusive use. This can easily be seen in that the hero is always successful, measured in economic and power or status terms in the real world. He is rarely in a caring profession - he is not a social worker or a nurse, he is not caring for small children or teaching. He can be a doctor, of course, but their professional status derives from their monopoly over diagnosis and the prescription of treatment. (For a discussion of the power of the medical profession and their success in retaining and maintaining this power see Friedson, 1970)

This aggressiveness of the hero is a very conscious literary device at times. In formula fiction particularly, stereotypes are necessary. The writer has entered into a contract with the reader. The reader expects a certain type of plot, and especially in the shorter stories there is not the space to develop the character. The opposition of characters is, therefore, a useful device. By opposing characteristics, they gain emphasis. So the aggressiveness of the hero is used to point up the femininity of the heroine. As Olga Sinclair writes '. . .that element does add to the conflict and helps to keep the story strong,' and Margaret Allan talks about the 'necessary atmosphere of friction between my hero and my heroine.' Paula Lindsay suggests, 'their rough, tough characters provide the right kind of foil for the innate gentleness and femininity of the heroine. And we mustn't forget that women like to feel that they have tamed the wild beast with the power of love!.' Anne Weale made an interesting point. She believed that, 'The aggressive hero is a comparatively recent introduction. I suspect that writers whose heroes are aggressive may come from a lower social class than, say, Mary Burchell, whose heroes were always chivalrous and gentlemanly - but not a bit dull.' As she says, it would be an interesting, if difficult, point to follow up. Her suggestion would support my contention that in the hero women are seeking social and economic security. Aristocratic birth no longer guarantees wealth and power in our society.

In some of the historical novels, particularly the notorious 'bodice rippers' most popular in the late Seventies, this aggression is reflected even in the sex scenes where the dominance can come

very near to rape. Janice Radway mentions Rosemary Rodgers and spoke of her readers' distaste for this author's work which relies heavily on scenes of this nature. Few of the authors from whom I got information wrote like this but certainly some of the sex scenes featured aggressiveness. Although I had not specifically asked the authors about this aspect of the aggressive nature of the hero, (Question 15 - The hero is also often very aggressive. Again, do you think this is an essential ingredient in the story?) one writer read the question in this way. 'The sexual aggressiveness of the male does, I think, fit the fantasies of many women, even those who claim to be or actually are, liberated in practice.' There was again some ambivalence.

> 'My men' tend to be tough, hard bitten perhaps
> even cynical, but *not* aggressive, i.e., boors.
> [emphasis in original]. Attractive, yes, - with
> perhaps an undertone of unsettling violence
> beneath the veneer of outward civilisation.
>
> A strong man for bored housewives? Yes, they
> like them to be so - grandsons of Rhett Butler,
> great-grandsons of Mr. Rochester, Heathcliff &
> Co.

Although in answer to my question, (Question 6 - Do you have an idea of your reader in mind? If so, could you describe him/her?) the writers did have ideas about 'the reader' and made generalisations about what readers wanted, a very significant and, to me, quite surprising fact, was that unanimously the writers did not write for a reader or readers. They wrote, exercising a creativity, bringing into existence a story, though obviously they have internalised certain norms about the conventions of a narrative in our culture - and very strong conventions in regard to genre

writing. They are creating and following the narrative where it seems to lead . This seems to me a radically different activity from that of non-fiction writing where the writing is very consciously addressed to a reader. In non-fiction the writing is a dialogue between writer and imagined reader. In fiction the story is closed, inward-looking, existing of itself, obeying the dictates of plot and character. Even where the audience is presumed, even addressed, it is an audience not a participant.

To operationalise this, since I think it is an ever-present danger when discussing literature to impute practices to writers and readers alike with no evidence to bear this out, I took a straw poll among academics at a Liverpool University women's studies course - women writers writing and learning about women's circumstances . It seemed to be a common experience that they did write for a presumed reader, often a very real presence from an audience of immediate colleagues or professional peers or interested 'lay' people.

The evidence as to the autonomy of the story for the fiction writers was quite definite. The writers did not write for readers at all.

> Basically, I write to please *myself* - things *I'd*
> enjoy reading. [emphasis in original]
>
> I think I really write for myself.
>
> I think every writer writes primarily for
> him/herself. If the hero gives *me* goose pimples
> and shivers up the spine, then he's just right.
> [emphasis in original]
>
> Probably someone like me: I think I really
> write for myself.

Basically someone like me.

The writers do not consciously write for a reader.

I particularly wanted to find out why the writers wrote romantic fiction. One view that I had met before I started to ask the writers had been that the writers were merely writing quite straightforwardly for money. Their approach was completely instrumental. On the other hand the publishers had told me, 'The thing they're looking for most is sincerity. These books are riddled with clichés so at the very least it must be apparent that the authors believe in them.' So, did the authors believe in them?

Not surprisingly, most writers had several strands in their choice of work.

Firstly, like most people they wanted to earn a living. And for exactly the same reasons as so many women have turned to writing as a career throughout the centuries, they found that writing was the answer to many of their problems. It is a means to make money without having to leave the home and the care of children or the elderly or other domestic duties. It can be done unobtrusively and at odd moments during the day or in the evening. It requires no capital to get started. It does not necessitate the permission or support of husbands or family. Women are often lacking in confidence in their abilities to achieve and writing is low profile. No one need know if the tyro writer tries and fails, unlike other more public business moves.

This instrumental approach was indeed apparent in many of the reasons advanced by the respondents.

Barbara Cartland wrote in answer to Question 12, (What made you

decide to write in the first place?), 'My father was killed in 1918 in Flanders and we were very hard-up.' Olga Sinclair replied, 'It is something I have always enjoyed. Opportunity came when I was at home with young children.' Rowan Edwards reported, 'Husband and self without work. Moved from London to country, started new (freelance) way of life/work.'

This instrumentalism was especially apparent in choosing to write romantic fiction.

> Commercial considerations, i.e. poverty.

> The market is popular and one has a better
> chance of publication for first novels.

But these instrumental approaches were by no means the only ones. As the writers had explained in answer to the question of how they started in the first place, the majority had always written. They enjoyed exercising the creative skill employed in writing. The pleasure they had in writing was apparent in all their information for me. Their pleasure in writing romantic fiction was analagous to that of telling a story to children. Accepting the boundaries of the genre, utilising the conventions, was an additional enjoyment. Just as the readers delighted in the familiar formula so too did the writers. Annabel Murray explained how by the end of writing one book she looks forward to taking time off but as soon as she does is impatient to start her next novel, or Mary Wibberley, 'It's as natural to me as breathing and great fun, so I never decided to write - I just wrote because pens were there, paper was there - all waiting for me!'

Although the writers did not consider the reader when writing,

the *post hoc* reasons they suggested for the readers' enjoyment of romantic fiction were interesting and correlated strongly with the readers' own explanations, suggesting that the writers and readers view the stories in much the same way. The overall reason given was almost always 'escapism' but then writers - and readers - went on to explain and expand this concept. The pleasures of romantic fiction were often complementary and overlapping but can be treated discretely for analysis.

1. REASSURANCE - INCLUDING THAT OBLIGATORY HAPPY ENDING. The actual content of the story is comfortable, day-to-day. The stress is contained and familiar. Arguments and misunderstandings, while upsetting are not terrifying.

> It is not frightening as is the case with crime, horror, etc.

Added to this sense of reassurance is the happy ending.

> No matter what obstacles to happiness the heroine meets en route she will eventually reach the happy ending that we all want.

> The safe assurance of a happy and satisfactory outcome.

2. RELAXATION.

An easy read which is undemanding.

This was a pleasure of reading romance often mentioned by readers and though recognised, not emphasised, by authors. Perhaps not surprisingly as the pleasures of reading something which is not too highly involving, which can be put down and taken up, which is not important, does not boost a writer's ego.

3. AFFECTIVE IDENTIFICATION. Women are particularly skilled at, and enjoy, relationships.

'This fiction provides food for the feelings,' and Rowan Kirby goes on to suggest that perhaps women are often starved of feelings in real life, particularly in modern Britain.

In the pages of the books is 'a sharing of someone else's joys and sorrows.' This identification can be a safe playing out of various emotional scenarios. 'Romantic fiction can play out a drama for the reader without the necessity of risk, can teach emotional truths without hurt.'

4. EXCITEMENT AND ADVENTURE.

It's escapism from the 'ordinariness'.

It's a harmless way of satisfying many longings
which they know can never be fulfilled.

As is probably well known, romantic fiction is often set in beautiful, faraway places, eventful periods of history. Heroines have exciting jobs or mysterious backgrounds. Heroes are men of power and glamour.

Mary Wibberly writes that her books are

Set in exotic places and in Britain, imaginary
tropical islands, France, Greece, anywhere that
is romantic!

5. REALISM. This may seem peculiar in view of the preceding feature but actually the two go hand-in-hand. As Olga Sinclair said, 'The reader should feel it could possibly happen to her.'

To engender this reaction, the detail has to be palpable and read almost like a shopping list at times. Minute detail of what people are wearing or eating is given, the architecture of houses, the design of interiors, the furnishings, all are given precise description. The airy nothings are given a local Habitat name.

6. EROTIC PLEASURE. There are few romances written these days
without quite explicit details of sexual encounters between hero and
heroine. Angela Wells sums it up,

> For the older reader it allows her to enjoy the
> (vicarious) orgasm that was taboo in her youth
> plus the opportunity (in the guise of the
> heroine) to lose her virginity time and time
> again. . . . The younger reader wants to
> experiment vicariously with a lot of different
> lovers without the sheer awfulness of packing a
> condom in her handbag every evening just in case
> (UGH!!!) Many women are being alienated towards
> the male sex because of increased reportage of
> rape and violence. 'Novel' love is emotionally
> (sometimes physically) satisfying and SAFE.

7. ROMANCE - OF COURSE. Women's eternal quest for true love,
vide Barbara Cartland:

> Everyone since the beginning of time, has been
> looking for the real love of Romeo and Juliet,
> Dante and Beatrice, and the troubadours.

Still romantic, another author:

> Most women dream of being in love with a hero
> and having a wonderful man love her too. It
> rarely happens in real life but for a few hours
> we can live the experience through the heroine.

But a more self-conscious awareness of the problematic nature
of "romance" was given by one author,

> In the Christian ethic, monogamous sex equalling
> marriage has become a major tenet. The ideal of
> true love is therefore bred in many Western
> women and to read about it in a form that does
> not tax the brain is pleasurable and acts - or
> can act - as a balm to reality.

This distancing from the 'ideal of true love', was rare in the
authors. I was interested to know what happpens when 'feminism
meets Mills and Boon,' as Ann Rosalind Jones (1986: 195) puts it and
asked the authors for their views on this meeting. I think perhaps

one of the most aware of the opposition being a powerful one was surprisingly Barbara Cartland who said quite simply 'That is why I write all my books in the past and not in the present,' and opted out of the difficulty. Only one author saw romantic fiction 'as opportunities to reach hundreds of thousands of readers, even inject a few passing "feminist" ideas in - or between - the conventional lines' and does not 'believe "romance" necessarily runs counter to these values at all.' She goes on, 'On the contrary, these stories enable women to see themselves as warm, female, successful, strong in their sexuality, and competing with men on their own terms - without losing the potential for long-term pair-bonding. Surely the ideal compromise we all want, if we are honest?'

Jane-Ann Shaw suggests that just as so many of the great novels are concerned with the disruptive power of sex, romantic fiction is concerned with this same power and marriage is supposed to contain it. While this is patently not true, she rightly points out that, '"women's lib." have yet to come up with an alternative.'

However, sympathy for the viewpoint of feminism was rare. Most felt that because the heroines of the stories had been given this more spirited character and the hero was now less aggressive, that the demands of feminists had been fulfilled. 'Heroines of romantic fiction have to an extent moved with the times in that they are "gutsier."' As Jones (1986) notes, there was in the early Eighties particularly some attempt to engage with the aims of feminism, either by describing the heroine as more independent or by giving her a more intriguing job, or alternatively by meeting the criticisms of feminists head on and having the heroine reject

independence for the sweeter return of marriage to a good man.

However it seems to me that later novels are beginning to fall away from this engagement. Annabel Murray, who had made conscientious efforts to incorporate this viewpoint in her work in response to editorial demands was quite specific in her idea that 'feminism is a fashion which is going again. It went into an overkill situation and people lost interest.'

Most of the authors were conservative in their own personal attitudes.

> Liberation is freedom of choice. Many women
> choose to enjoy the love and respect of a man
> whose strong arms hold, protect, love and
> comfort them as necessary, who treats them as
> equals and who shares with them the emotional,
> sexual and practical needs. This has nothing to
> do with professional success. The ideal is
> surely both - in default the majority of women
> will settle for the strong arms!
>
> For most women - however 'liberated' - a happy
> partnership - and children - are natural and
> desirable.

Some were quite definite.

> I am aware that romantic fiction appears to run
> counter to feminism but in some ways it is a
> statement of femininity. A few women may enjoy
> aggressive competition - I think the majority
> find their real fulfilment within their own
> family. They do need sufficient means for a
> good life, but without being dominated by their
> menfolk. The modern intelligent, spirited
> heroine achieves this with the happy ending.

Some of the stereotypes were operating strongly.

> The hard-line women's libbers are generally a
> scruffy lot with unwashed hair. Most
> unattractive.
>
> I feel that most women disapprove of blatant
> women's lib tactics. We all know that men are
> the weaker sex but a sensible woman avoids
> spelling it out too obviously. Men need to be

> bolstered because they are not really very
> confident at heart. They have to live up to the
> image expected of them and they need women to
> support them in this and not attack the
> fundamental male ego.

The double bind for women is very strong. At the risk of using

'blatant women's lib' arguments, it is a nice tactic. Those who

hold the positions of power in our society have convinced those who

do not, that the strains of being the powerful demand the support,

love and encouragement of the powerless.

Many drawing on their own lives, as the publishers had been at

pains to tell me, were able to testify to the possibility of being

financially independent and also having a happy marriage. As Anne

Weale pointed out, 'writing is a portable career.' But she felt

that the conflicts that arise when the hero's and heroine's career

take different directions will probably be one of the social

problems of the future. As she says, at present this sort of

problem is solved by the wife's career taking second place.

Many of the writers were quite consciously aware of the

conservative nature of romantic fiction. Joyce Marlow, a writer of

serious history as well as of romantic fiction pointed out. 'In

troubled periods, when the values of previous decades are

challenged, there is I believe an additional longing for the forms

and alleged certainties that in actuality never were.'

In talking to the writers, I started off wondering about their

own attitudes. If romantic fiction is ideology are they 'inside' or

'outside'? The writers were not deliberately exploiting a market,

though they were well aware that romantic fiction was a good market.

On the whole, though they wrote their stories to make a living, they

also enjoyed the exercise of their craft in re-telling the myth.
They relate again an old story which carries a heavy weight of
meaning and custom in our society and in general the story they tell
reflects meanings and values to which they themselves subscribe.

They were, on the whole, on the inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MYTH

Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.

George Eliot

Superficially, these are indeed 'silly novels.' Readers themselves readily talked of the simplicity and lightness of the manifest plot.

However, the books operate at, at least, two levels. Beneath the surface plot is a deeper myth. It is the combination of surface plot, the ideology of romantic love couched in the language of realism, and the deeper survival myth which produces such a powerful story.

These fairy tales do not announce themselves as such. In fact they are at great pains to disguise their status. Barthes (1973) has suggested that the illusion of realism which is carried by the novel form is the essence of bourgeois ideology. He suggests that the sign never carries reality or unreality. For, within the world of signs, reality cannot be directly known or shown. But the practice of the use of signs, the manner in which the writer hides behind that practice in order to create the illusion that the discourse is 'natural', that it is the only way of seeing when it is a signification of reality among other significations, is, he argues, the deceit of the bourgeoisie which always conceals from itself its own status. In the way in which the realistic novel conceals its own work, it is particularly the

creation of the bourgeoisie. 'We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature!' (Barthes, 1973: 129)

Romantic fiction is not written in the discourse of the fairy tale. The dominant discourse is that of literary realism. As Umberto Eco (1966: 58) says in his analysis of the James Bond novels, which I would suggest has implications for an analysis of romantic fiction and which draws on Levi-Strauss's positing of the polarities so often present in myth,

> The novels of Fleming exploit in exemplary
> measure the element of foregone play which is
> typical of the escape machine geared for the
> entertainment of the masses. Perfect in their
> mechanism, such machines represent the
> narrative structure which works upon obvious
> material and does not aspire to describe
> ideological details. It is true that such
> structures inevitably indicate ideological
> positions, but these ideological positions do
> not derive so much from the structural
> contents as from the method of constructing
> the contents into a narrative.

Fleming creates 'escape not by narrating the unknown but the already known'. (Eco, 1966: 58) Eco seems to have a contempt for the readers, with which I would take issue; an elite/mass theory seems to underlie his work, but his analysis of the James Bond books certainly finds a parallel in romantic fiction.

Romance novels are written in the third person usually, indeed this is dictated by the publishers, and the authorial voice is hidden, leading to a view of reality reporting itself. This is what is happening - not this is what someone is telling us. This 'realistic' code arose with the novel. Critics such as Ian Watt (1957: 27) have detailed the way in which the novel alone among literary genres does not tell of reality or point to reality but

purports to *be* reality, it 'purports to be an authentic account
of the actual experiences of individuals'.

A more mundane reason for the favoured third person telling
is, of course, because it is so difficult to describe just how
attractive, valuable and generally endearing the heroine is, if
the story is told in the first person, particularly as *the heroine*
is always very modest as well.

I would suggest also that the third person narration is
essential if these books are, to use the phrase that the Mills &
Boon spokeswoman ascribed to Peter Mann, the Literature of
Reassurance. If the first person were used and the reader invited
to identify with the heroine, the reader would lose the distance
which exists in the books between heroine and reader. As Modleski
(1982) has pointed out, though readers are invited to identify to
a large extent with the heroine, the fact that this is a formula,
that the reader knows what the ending will be and indeed most of
the moves in the intervening game, leads to a distance between the
reader and the heroine. Without this distancing the books would
not be reassuring because they play out again and again a
relationship in which the heroine is fearful of the hero and
threatened by him. Without the knowledge of the happy ending, the
anxiety provoked could not be contained. It is interesting here
that in spite of the fact that everyone knows what the ending will
be, many of the readers I interviewed nevertheless looked at the
ending first - just to make sure. I would agree entirely that
popular fiction is the literature of reassurance and romantic
fiction fulfils this more than any other. There has to be no

doubt in the reader's mind that the book will fulfil this purpose

exactly. There must be no chance that she will be threatened

unexpectedly. It may be apt here to quote Christopher Pawling

(1984: 223), drawing on Marx,

> Marx argued that the function of mythology was
> to allow early man to dominate the forces of
> nature 'in the imagination and by the
> imagination'. Once man was able to exert
> mastery over the forces of nature in a
> practical manner by means of technology, the
> cosmos of classical mythology was bound to
> lose its original function and meaning.

So that myth is no longer necessary when man controls his

world.

This is why myth is necessary for women!

A device to enhance the 'reality' of the myth is the wealth

of small detail with which surroundings, descriptions of

characters, houses, furnishings, food is described. Eco has

commented on Ian Fleming's use of this device in the James Bond

novels.

> Fleming takes time to convey the familiar with
> photographic accuracy, because it is upon the
> familiar that he can solicit our capacity for
> identification . . . . Our credulity is
> solicited, blandished, directed to the region
> of possible and desirable things. Here the
> narration is realistic, the attention to
> detail intense; for the rest, so far as the
> unlikely is concerned, a few pages suffice and
> an implicit wink of the eye. No one has to
> believe them. (Eco, 1966: 67)

While Eco seems to criticise Fleming because the devices are

used to such effect in a form of literature that is 'for the

masses', it seems to me that within the bounds of the formula it

works. As in romantic fiction the mass of realistic detail serves

to provide an 'alibi' for a plot that is not realistic.

To take an example at random, in <u>A Haunting Compulsion</u> (Mather, 1981), the couple are decorating a Christmas tree.

> Rachel knelt down beside him, looking at the tree decoration in his hands. It was a silver ring, with a velvety red and silver harlequin suspended from it, and she did not have to invent her gasp of pleasure. . . . .
> 'I brought a dozen of them back from Hong Kong about five years ago.' (1981: 54)
> . . . a collection of glass trinkets he had unpacked earlier. They were small and delicate, shaped like lanterns, and fruit, and huge frozen teardrops. (1981: 55)

The heroine dresses in,

> wine coloured corded pants and a matching shirt, a maroon velvet waistcoat added for warmth. (1981: 65)

Even the more mundane activities come in for this detailed treatment.

> She pulled out a tissue and blew her nose, regarding herself critically over the scrap of pink paper. (1981: 66)

All these details, and this one book is typical of most, make a background of absolute realism to stories which, while not impossible, are not the stuff of everyday life. Social scientists have established the prevalence of assortative mating. It seems unlikely then, that secretaries, governesses, office workers, from humble backgrounds, should meet and marry wealthy and powerful film stars, business magnates, rock and pop idols. In the books it is commonplace.

The texts offer the Cinderella story at its most extreme but the reader is invited to experience the narrative in the most realistic of manners.

Alan Dundes (1968: xv) in his introduction to the second

edition of Propp's <u>Morphology of the Folktale</u> asks, 'To what

extent is the structure of the fairy tale related to the structure

of the ideal success story in a culture?' I think this is exactly

the point of the significance of romantic fiction in our society

today. Anthropologists have pointed to the way in which myths

enshrine the deepest cultural ideas. Ever since Frazer's <u>Golden

Bough</u> (1978) the significance of myth in a particular culture has

been recognised. As Rudolph Bultmann (1972: 10), who used the

idea in his Biblical research says, 'the real purpose of myth is

. . . to express man's understanding of himself in the world in

which he lives.' There have been many attempts to point to the

underlying importance of myth in literature. Northrop Frye

(1957) argues for the persistence of myths as certain fundamental

stories which reappear again and again. As he writes in <u>The

Stubborn Structure</u> (1970: 55), 'The humanities . . . express in

their containing forms, or myths, the nature of the human

involvement with the human world, which is essential to any

serious man's attitude to life.' (We note, of course, the lack of

any serious women.) Fairy tales are a particular aspect of mythic

story telling. While religious myths try to explain relationships

between man and the supernatural world, the inexplicable in

transcendent terms, fairy tales work out the difficulties of

living in this world. At this level, the stories that are filed

under romantic fiction on the shelves of the library and the

bookstore are part of a long tradition. The girl of humble birth

who eventually marries the all-powerful Prince is the stuff of all

the fairy tales. Many of the publishers, writers and readers

mentioned specifically that they were Cinderella stories.

In a structural analysis of fairy tales the pattern of the

stories can be approached in two main ways. It can be analysed in

a sense diachronically, in that the constituents of the plot are

analysed in a linear fashion, in the order of time in which they

are related by the narrator (stated or not). This was the

approach of the seminal study of the Morphology of the Folktale by

Propp (1968). Claude Levi-Strauss (1955) brought a different sort

of structuralism to bear on his analyses of myth when he took a

more synchronic approach, in that he abstracts what he sees as the

patterns of features which underlie the structure of the story.

As, for instance, using the Oedipus myth as an example, he sets

out those elements which cluster around the same themes or ideas.

As he says of his method, 'it also enables us to perceive some

basic logical processes which are at the heart of mythical

thought.' (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 440)

The structure of the plot can even be broken down into many

of Propp's items in his fairy tales.

Propp (1968: 20) sets out his basic premise,

> The names of the dramatis personae change (as
> well as the attributes of each), but neither
> their actions nor functions change. From this
> we can draw the inference that a tale often
> attributes identical actions to various
> personages. This makes possible the study of
> the tale *according to the functions of its
> dramatis personae.* [emphasis in original]

Propp mentions, for instance, that one of the first elements

in the plot is that one of the members of the family absents

himself from home and suggests that a very frequent extreme of this is the death of the parent. In romantic fiction the story almost always starts with a heroine who is orphaned. There are rarely relatives or supportive friends from before the beginning of the story. The heroine is unusually isolated socially . Very often the heroine does acquire a friend or confidante during the story in the way that in fairy stories the hero is so often in his quest given the help and support of a friend. Unfortunately the scope of this research does not allow for a full exploration of the very enjoyable parallels to be found between Propp's elements and the constituents of romantic fiction. But the comparison with the familiar quest where the heroine journeys through the various misadventures and misunderstandings, where she has to pass through the tests of the hero's apparent cruelty, the machinations of the other woman, where she has to display a modesty and long suffering quite equal to Chaucer's Patient Griselda, often overtly spending time in unpleasant or hard work, is obvious. Some of Propp's concluding elements, such as 'The Task is Resolved', 'The False Hero or Villain is Exposed' and the essential ending, 'The Hero is Married and Ascends the Throne' are, when the terms are gender transposed, the stuff of the last few pages of every romance.

In contrast to the delineation of the procedure of the plot by Propp, Levi-Strauss concentrates on those recurring structural elements which he sees as underlying all myths. Levi-Strauss especially suggests the polarities which he postulates as an important part of the repeated structures. (Propp also began to point out that his functions could be arranged in pairs, 'We

observe that a large number of functions are arranged in pairs (prohibition-violation, reconnaissance-delivery, struggle-victory. pursuit-deliverance etc.' (Propp, 1968: 64))

So, in romantic fiction the binary oppositions are there: the Heroine/the Hero; in the strong romances, especially, the Heroine/the Villain; Heroine/Other Woman; Heroine/Other Man; Hero/Other Man; Heroine/Female Confidante. Occasionally other characters take on the characteristics of the members of the usual cast. An older, fatherly man may take the role of confidant. An older woman may, like the Queen in Snow White or the Stepmother and the Ugly Sisters in Cinderella, be a Villain, often being a Mrs Danby figure as in Rebecca (Du Maurier, 1938) where the villainy is caused by excessive devotion to the other woman or to the hero, where in fact the villainy is understandable, if not forgiveable. The other woman may double the role with the friend - through misunderstandings, of course. Played straight it would be too near to a familiar situation in real life and too threatening.

It is my impression that the cast of characters is becoming more restricted. In the University of Quebec's La corrida de l'amour (Bettinotti, 1986), the authors list the usual cast of characters and mention the children who so often figure as the means by which the heroine can live in the same house as the hero while she is governess or nurse or nanny. They point out that while not long ago children were very present in the books, they have tended to disappear since 1980. I feel that it is not just the children. The number of minor characters is getting smaller. This tendency intensifies the social isolation of hero and

heroine. It seems that the essential of the books is that they should be, to some extent, emptied of too particular a meaning. The characters should be types, so that they can act in the same way as the Rorsach ink blot tests, to convey the meaning that the reader projects. More than with most books, the reader writes the text.

The true impact of the plot of romantic fiction novels is the journey, the quest, not through the world, but in the consciousness of the heroine. The stories are of the unfolding of the plot within the consciousness of the woman - of her journey from alienation, from standing alone, uncertain and fearful, through terrible doubts, worries and fears, to a happiness rooted in security and safety. The happy ending is in the peace of mind of the heroine. The polarities of the characters serve to illustrate and develop this journey. The heroine is inactive, desirable, waiting, innocent, caring, bearing all the stereotypical virtues of the female. In contrast the hero is the foil bearing all the male stereotypical qualities. He is active, desiring, initiating action, sexually experienced, brusque in his dealings with others. His masculine qualities emphasise her feminine qualities, making them seem desirable and praiseworthy when for the most part they are qualities of absence. The polarity is a signifier, suggesting that to win the love of the hero it is not neccessary to do anything, only to be.

The polarity Heroine/Other woman reinforces the signified femininity of the heroine in contrast to a more aggressive model of femininity. Here the message conveyed is that while all that

is necessary is to be feminine, an active femininity is going too

far and is dangerous. In fact the Other Woman can be at the same

time a Rival and a Trap. In some books the heroine is tempted to

behave as the other woman and this becomes an obstacle in her

quest for the love of the hero since all the time, of course, he

does not care for the other woman.

This is the theme which runs through <u>Rebecca</u> (Du Maurier,

1938: 255), until the tragic highpoint of the fancy dress ball.

> Why, the dress, you poor dear, the picture you
> copied of the girl in the gallery. It was
> what Rebecca did at the last fancy dress ball
> at Manderley. Identical. The same picture,
> the same dress. You stood there on the
> stairs, and for one ghastly moment I thought
> . . . .

Or in a lighter vein,

> Her hopes must now be pinned on the grand
> birthday ball in honour of the Prince Regent.
> He would surely be there, and if she was to
> have any chance of winning him back, that must
> be as good an occasion as any. She had taken
> the greatest pains with her gown; the current
> vogue for wearing the flimsiest, most daring
> of styles was not wholly to her taste, but she
> had managed a compromise between fashion and
> elegance that did not displease her. (Walsh
> 1985: 99)

The Hero/Other Man comes in two flavours. Sometimes the hero

is contrasted with a young man, nearer in age to the heroine,

unsophisticated, gentle and faithful, which emphasises the

superior strength, power and position of the hero. The kindness

of the other man is equated with, as one author put it, 'being a

wimp'. In fact, these attractive characteristics are the right

property of the heroine, they are feminine, they are not part of

the hero's characteristics. Yet the hero is portrayed almost always during the course of the story as nurturing the heroine. It is this characteristic which has led many commentators to suggest that the attraction of the books lies in the Hero as Male Mother (e.g. Miles, 1988, Radway, 1984). The difference between the kindness of the Other Man and of the Hero is that this quality is seen as a generalised caring by the Other Man but as a hidden quality in the Hero, reserved for, and to be discovered by, the heroine and/or those very close in family to him.

In the polarity Heroine/Other Man is depicted the relationship that is to be rejected in favour of the final relationship between Hero and Heroine. The kind Other Man/Heroine relationship is one of equality, support, caring and understanding. One might say that this relationship would seem very desirable and one that in real life would have a very good chance of success. However there is no sex in it. This relationship is rejected in favour of one of inequality where the hero is dominant and the heroine dominated. Though the imbalance varies from a traditional Barbara Cartland historical novel in which the older hero is completely dominant and the young heroine completely dominated, to the novel where there is a more spirited heroine, the male is always the stronger in the partnership. The heroine only finds her sexuality with the older, dominating, aggressive and successful hero.

If the other man takes the role of Villain his surface charm, masking evil intent, is contrasted with the fact that the hero's brusqueness or unpleasantness is coupled with integrity - in spite

of apppearances the Hero can be relied upon. It is essential to gain a strong protector whose sexuality, worldly success and strength can be devoted only to the protection of the heroine.

Minor polaritiess such as children/Heroine serve to emphasise the caring, maternal, socially desirably qualities of the female which will fit her to be a good wife. The Confidante/Heroine polarities contrasts a usually very stable, supportive woman, full of common sense and wisdom, with the heroine who is bewildered and confused in a difficult situation. She is the female equivalent of the kindly other man.

Ideas as well as characters are opposed to one another: purity/experience, sexual appetite/control, desire for marriage and commitment/avoidance of these, youth/maturity, city values/country values, naïeveté/knowledge, and the one dominating polarity, male/female.

These oppositions are similar to the others pointed out by Eco (1966: 39) in the James Bond novels, though even more pervasive through a whole genre. As he says,

> These dichotomies constitute a constant
> feature around which minor couples rotate and
> they form, from novel to novel, variations on
> them. These pairs do not represent 'vague'
> elements but 'simple' ones that are immediate
> and universal, and if we consider the range of
> each pair we see that the variants allowed
> cover a vast field and in fact include all the
> narrative ideas of Fleming.

Pari passu this can be applied to the romantic novel.

Cawelti's (1976) discussion of popular fiction has been very influential. He has suggested that formula fiction should be judged on different grounds from what he calls mimetic fiction.

Formula fiction, he suggests, provides reassuring escape. In one sense there is escape in romantic fiction, though I would suggest only to the extent that to partake in any fictional entertainment, to read any novel, to watch any play or television or film, is to enter another world. However, I would query how real this aspect of escape is in the sense that people are leaving their own world behind. It is the only popular genre where people try to escape from their own lives into more of the same. Women turn from problems involving male partners or the desire to gain a male partner into books which deal with just that sphere of life.

It is interesting that the often stressed 'exotic locations' are frequently an idealised Britain. There is in some books little of the real feel of another country. It is travel brochure country, very visual, with little feeling of a different climate, atmosphere or way of life.When I talked to the authors, much of the background appeared to be due to diligent research in the library rather than boats and trains and planes.

If formula fiction is myth as I would suggest, its function is the same as that of myth, to show by means of the fairy tale, ways of successfully making out, of coping with the life of the reader or member of the audience. The escape is in the reassurance. It is here that romantic fiction parts company with the fairy tale, by obliterating the real cruelty that is often in the fairy tales. Hero and heroine are merely united, their enemies are not made to dance in red hot iron slippers or eaten by bears, the threatening aspect of sexuality is contained and made safe.

The heroine, the character with whom the reader is invited to identify is Everywoman. Although described in detail, there is a curious generality in her, like those ink blots, so that the reader can project on to the heroine all her own feelings, doubts and desires. La corrida de l'amour (Bettinotti, 1986: 30,31) gives a nice summary of the physical characteristics of the heroine in Harlequin novels. She is aged 16 to 31, with the largest number (34 per cent) being 22 or 24. The books stress the quality of youth, of innocence, of freshness. She is never sexually experienced. In 41 per cent of their sample the team at Quebec University found that the heroine had blonde hair. This is a colour particularly associated with childhood, within white communities. The description of both the hero and the heroine are lyrical though there is always the stress on the fact that in spite of the purple prose, she is not 'conventionally beautiful.' There is much recourse to comparisons with precious stones, flowers, nature.

> Caitlin blinked up at the man who stood next
> to her, eyes the colour of sapphires flashing
> as brilliantly as the stone they resembled. .
> . . .
> Caitlin gave an agreeable inclination of her
> head, the silky curtain of her flaming-red
> hair falling forward . . . . (Mortimer, 1986:
> 7,8)

The 'defects' are listed to emphasise the attractivenesss.

> She moistened lips glossed a tempting red, her
> other make-up kept to the minimum, a light
> blue shadow on her lids, mascara lengthening
> the darkness of her lashes, blusher
> accentuating her high cheekbones beneath those
> slightly slanting eyes. She had been taught
> from an early age to make the best of her
> looks, knew exactly how to draw attention from

> her small snub of a nose, that tended to
> freckle during the summer months, so that it
> was the deep blue of her eyes that drew the
> admiration. Slightly above average height,
> she was willowy rather than curvaceous, her
> figure very suited to the fashions the
> Princess of Wales had made so popular.
> (Mortimer, 1986, 11)

This is a rare lapse from the policy of authors, mentioned by

Annabel Murray, not to put detail into the books which could date

them. Caitlin also turns out to be a nursery nurse.

The detailed instructions on 'how to make the best of

yourself' could have been taken verbatim from the beauty columns

of a woman's magazine.

It is noticeable that the descriptions of the heroine are

those of an onlooker. We are invited to identify with the heroine

so that we see our face and body as the object of a gaze. Here we

see the woman as John Berger's 'other', she who is seen and who

experiences her own self always as the object of the gaze of the

hero. To quote John Berger's (1973: 47) much quoted observations,

> *Men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women.
> Women watch themselves being looked at. This
> determines not only most relations between men
> and women but also the relation of women to
> themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself
> is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns
> herself into an object - and most particularly
> an object of vision: a sight.

The notion of the woman as seen object has largely entered the

mythology of feminism. Modleski (1982) draws heavily on this

concept. To some extent the observation may be valid but I am

tempted to ask what Peter Berger (1966: 80) suggests is the

sociologist's axiom, 'Says who?'

I would suggest that women, like men, but perhaps to an even

greater extent, play many roles in modern life. Their socialisation leads them to place greater importance on the views of others. Since they have less power, this is necessary for them. The opinion and appraisal of the significant other goes to make up their 'self' as it does for all human beings. And work on eating disorders suggests that women's internalisation of the gaze of the other can be pathological. It may be too much of a generalisation, however, to suggest that women are *only* capable of seeing themselves in this way. I think, (and talking to the readers bore this out), that it is possible for women to see themselves in the mirror with affectionate acceptance as well as being adept at adopting the gaze of the other in critical appraisal. This is not to belittle the importance of that mirrored image. In a world which sets such high value on youthful beauty it is the package that women have to sell. But the idea that the objectification of women is necessarily internalised seems to be part of that double oppression where women are oppressed and then oppressed for being oppressed! So that women are objectified and then this objectification is further objectified as part of the presumed character of women. It is particularly contradictory, that the internalisation of objectification is taken as a given by women actively engaged in feminist criticism or politics. The 'self' of real women is complex.

The heroine is passive. Later novels, their publishers and writers make much of the new-found independence of the heroine,

her interesting work, her 'spunky' character. However, even in
today's novels the job often disappears.

> 'You do what you think is best, darling,'
> she said, reaching out to touch his side. '
> Where you go, I go.'
> 'Then I think I've made up my mind,' John
> said, lying back beside her and slipping his
> arm across her waist. 'I'm going to build my
> schoolmarm wife a house, and we'll turn it
> into a home, with music and laughter and kids
> and room for Debbie and her family when they
> visit. Your mother said once you would make a
> marvellous piano teacher.'
> 'Oh, I'd love that! I could stay home
> and give lessons when I wanted . . . .'
> (Garrett, 1986: 302)

> 'Charles Robbins is waiting for you to
> call. He wants you to come back and take over
> the department, and he's hoping against hope
> that you'll accept his apologies. Think
> you're interested?'
> 'I'd need maternity leave,' she smiled.
> (Huxley, 1984: 187)

The plot of this last novel had started off on a very different
track, of the heroine's fight to retrieve her career after a
sexual harassment case. But the implication of the last few pages
is that the heroine will now remain at home as a housewife and
mother.

I would agree with Ann Barr Snitow (1979: 151) when she says,

> Small surface concessions are made to a new
> female independence . . . but the novels only
> mention the new female feistiness to finally
> reassure readers that 'plus ca change, plus
> c'est la même chose.' Independence is always
> presented as a mere counter in the sexual
> game, like a hairdo or any other flirtatious
> gesture; sexual feeling utterly defeats its
> early stirrings.

Most of all, the character of the heroine is anodyne. Apart
from the almost *de rigeur* show of bad temper and stubbornness

which will either lead to, or augment, the misunderstandings which prevent the happy ending for the requisite pages in the soft romances, she rarely behaves unpredictably. She meets the hero always accidentally, falls in love, suffers his disapproval, the misunderstandings and difficulties which lie in the way of the quest's successful completion. She rarely initiates any part of the story or even carries the action along. In every character-istic it is stressed that she is not outstanding. In fact at the heart of the story, there is a circular motif. The heroine wins the love of the hero by no other means than by being lovable. She attracts by being attractive. There is nothing else.

However, in the strong romances the heroine is portrayed as making her way in the world by her own resource and ambition. Very often, the road is towards success in business from humble beginnings. Here the heroine is portrayed as having the beauty of the heroine of the soft romances but the character of the hero. In the strong romances it is the heroine who is strong, driving, ambitious, unpredictable. This last quality is undercut by the reader's awareness that it is caused by the suffering of her early years, which may include straightforward poverty or early rape or the death of parents. Many of the features of melodrama are used; cruel step-parents or seduction by employers and subsequent pregnancy. The quest in the soft romances is towards safety and security through the right marriage, the quest in the strong romances is towards safety and security in straightforwardly economic terms, with marriage to the right man as part of the package. In fact the code of the strong romance is that liberal

and individualist message which underlies the Western or the
pioneer novels - the lone individual riding to conquer the
hostile environment.

Everyone knows about the heroes of romantic fiction: tall,
dark, handsome and impenetrable in their moods. Heathcliff, Mr.
Rochester, Mr. Darcy, Rhett Butler, all were mentioned as the
recurring heroes of the books.

Two particular attributes are striking.

They are almost invariably rich. As the authors pointed out
in the previous chapter, to be wealthy is seen as necessary,
firstly because it is part of a 'macho' image. It is part of
social masculinity to be successful. In our society economic
success is taken to be success. So that if the hero were not rich
or about to become rich in the story he would be seen as less
masculine. Secondly, as the authors said, these are Cinderella
stories and part of the dream is to achieve economic success
either directly or by means of marriage to a rich man.

Secondly, they are aggressive. They are fierce, angry,
forbidding and the heroine is often almost frightened of him.

> She got quickly out of bed and put on her
> dressing gown. A good wash would wake her up
> - and maybe give her the confidence to face
> him. She hoped so anyway. (Wibberley, 1979:
> 61)
> Christie tried to pull herself together; it
> was absurd to be so disturbed, nothing had
> happened, nothing had changed, the tremors of
> fear running through her had no real cause,
> yet she felt like some hapless insect on that
> sunlit wall, stalked by the silent predator
> behind the sway of green ivy. (Lamb, 1984: 76)

Although the Other Woman is becoming less ubiquitous as the

cast of characters seems to get shorter, she is still a very important presence. <u>La corrida de l'amour</u> suggests that she is usually the same age as the heroine. However, in my experience of books popular in the British market I found that she tends to be older. She is usually even more beautiful than the heroine who beside her feels plain and uninteresting until reassured towards the end of the book that she is infinitely more precious to the hero. She is portrayed as more sophisticated, more worldly wise, certainly more sexually experienced. In the soft romances she figures as the supposed rival for the hero's affections. In the strong romances she may be that or a business rival or more directly a figure scheming the heroine's downfall.

Jensen (1984:94) has suggested that the Other Woman portrays all that is worst about the conventional female sex role.

> the negative portrayal of her character, which incorporates the most personally and socially destructive aspects of the traditional sex role, can therefore be read as a criticism of the sex role rather than a defence of it.

Jensen suggests that the Other Woman is a condemnation of the fact that, 'She is willing to abdicate all her power in exchange for a man and a traditional marriage', (1984: 94) so that it is a blow for an oppositional reading. However I find that reading difficult when the heroine is equally 'feminine' but in an even more submissive conforming-to-the-hero sort of way. The other woman may be willing to trade power for a man and a traditional marriage - the heroine is trading powerlessness for the same thing so it is difficult to see the message as being oppositional to the traditional role of women.

It may be that the Other Woman can portray a splitting off of those characteristics of female sexuality and experience that women may not wish to recognise in themselves or may recognise as a bar to successful marriage. The Other Woman can represent those socially unacceptable facets of female personality, the drive, assertiveness, eroticism and undisguised ambition, which are not allowed to surface successfully in real life without male condemnation. These characteristics need to be repressed within women themselves if they are to be successful wives and mothers in conventional families. In the wider society also they may be more successful if they adopt the heroine's role rather than that of the Other Woman. From judges' condemnations of 'women who ask for it' to businessmen who exclude the successful businesswoman from their cosy club, the verdict of society on achieving women can be less than congratulatory.

In strong romances this can pose problems. In the archetypal Woman of Substance (Bradford, 1981), the ruthless businesswoman of the title is portrayed absolutely sympathetically and by the end of the book is represented as a woman who has made a success of her life. Yet of her five children only one loves her and four have plotted to bring about her downfall. Her vanquishing of them is the climax of the book. The discourse of the book is that of triumphant individualism. Yet the enmity of one's children is, surely, the stuff of tragedy. Here the myth of success, latent in the soft romances, is spelled out, but the cost of opposing the traditional route for women is hinted.

At another level, however, the character of the Other Woman

plays a particular part in the reassuring nature of the books. By their socialisation women are encouraged to feel inferior, unsuccessful and to lack confidence in their abilities. Commentators, writers, publishers and readers are agreed that the pleasure of the books is that they offer a safe, secure, reassuring antidote. The Other Woman represents all that women doubt in themselves. She is beautiful and successful. She is confident and sure of herself. Nevertheless it is the heroine who triumphs - *because* she does not possess these qualities. No wonder the books, *as several readers said*, are a great deal better than Valium. They particularly answer the sexual double bind which women have to suffer. Sexually experienced men are admired. Sexually experienced women are still considered soiled, second-hand, morally inferior to their inexperienced sisters. Virginity is still the woman's main bargaining counter. It is striking how, even if the heroine is not technically a virgin, a sort of spiritual virginity is stressed. Until she met the hero she had not been 'really' awakened.

> It was incredible. It was as if she was experiencing strong physical needs for the first time. Her marriage bed lay so far in the past and there had been almost nothing since, certainly not the passionate desire that was seizing her now. (Ferrarella, 1987: 141)

> 'A man can often tell when a woman hasn't been made love to for a long time - her body tightens up, makes her almost like a virgin again. And you haven't, have you?'
> 'No,' she whispered. 'There hasn't been anyone since you.' (Wentworth, 1981: 176)

On the other hand magazines, newspapers, books and films

stress that men's pleasure necessitates an ardent and responsive partner. Women cannot afford to be experienced yet their sexual response must be immediate when they meet 'the' man. How gratifying to find that the Other Woman who, as well as achieving in every other field is also sexually accomplished, is not attractive at all and, incidentally, that under the hero's tutelage the heroine's response will be immediately just as skilled.

In the person of the Other Man, alternative ideas of masculinity are explored - and rejected. The Other Man in his appearance as the kindly comforter bears many resemblances to the New Man who figures in so many media features about the accompanying changes in men to accommodate the more liberated woman. It is significant here that as Michèle Barrett (1982: 56) has asked,'How can we widen the purchase of feminist ideas, if we cannot understand why so many women read "Woman" and watch Crossroads?' It seems to me that those who are active politically in trying to advance a more equal place for women need to look carefully also at the women who read romantic fiction, which includes many of those women who are sympathetic to their aims as was evident in the reader's interviews and questionnaire answers. It may be that as Andrea Press (1989: 239) points out women are well aware of the 'hegemonic view that families need not change to accommodate working wives.' She quotes research such as Hewlett (1986), Friedan (1981) and Eisenstein (1981 and 1984), where it has been shown that the newly freed woman who is now not only 'allowed' but expected to go out to paid employment is also still

expected to perform the same domestic and emotional support work as before. The hegemony is, as Gramsci would expect, incomplete. Many wives are all too aware of the disparity between reality and the images purveyed by the media.

It would seem that they reject the New Man as insufficient security in an oppressive society.

The role of the villain is not so obvious in romantic fiction as in Gothics or melodrama. And in many ways, in the earlier pages of the story, the hero combines the fearsome aspects of the villain. Real villains often combine economic power over the heroine with sexual designs. Sir Jasper lives! In _Living Together_ (Mortimer 1986) a previous husband had married the heroine because it was the only way he could have his evil way with her, only to rape her several times before offering her to his friends, and getting her pregnant. The career of the 'Woman of Substance' is springboarded from seduction by the son of the employer - owners of t'mill.

It is often admitted that the stories are predictable, sometimes not too well written and when examined critically, banal in their treatment. Nevertheless they have one very powerful characteristic - the compelling nature of the narrative. Reader after reader commented upon the fact that, although they knew what the end of the story would be, they had to go on reading. Many readers told how they would start reading late at night and would then feel compelled to finish the book, staying up into the early hours. Mrs. Cairns mentioned four or five o'clock in the morning. It is a characteristic of popular fiction that the story draws the

reader on to its closure.

Narrative is basic to much of human communication. As well as underlying most written literature, it is the essential form of the oral tradition. Much non-fiction depends on its structure. In all the studies of narrative, however, it is difficult to find critics advancing reasons for the attraction of narrative and there seems an area begging for research as to what it is that constitutes the appeal of narrative to all human beings.

The power of narrative has been consciously recognised from Scheherezade, and Mary Wibberley, one of the authors I surveyed, was in that long tradition when she said quite simply, 'I tell stories people like reading.'

Barthes (1977: 170) states that

> Since the Russian Formalists a unit has been taken as any segment of the story which can be seen as the term of a correlation. The essence of a function is, so to speak, the seed that it sows in the narrative, planting an element that will come to fruition later - either on the same level or elsewhere, on another level.

He goes on to work out a very detailed structural analysis of the various components of narrative but it seems to me that the idea of the unit and its correlation lies at the heart of the attraction of narrative. Formula fiction, by definition, sows seeds, initiates action, for which the readers know the outcome. So that the unit is like the one shoe that drops on to the floor above - and the expectation is as strong. Even in novels which seem to rely on mystery or surprise, the reader knows that there will be a body, that there will be clues, that there is a

murderer, it is just a matter of waiting for the other shoe to fall. This tension between the units which gives the anticipation of waiting, the turn-the-page quality of popular fiction is working at all the levels in the book.

In the manifest plot, particular heroines meet particular heroes, with different jobs, countries of origin, different lifestyles, and the story will be set in different parts of the world. The first paragraph of most books is full of signifiers which the experienced reader is able to decode immediately.

> Do come, Rachel. You can't possibly spend
> Christmas alone in London. Jaime won't be
> home, you know that. We wouldn't expect you
> to come, if he was. But you know how much
> Robert and I would like to see you again, so
> do come, do come, do come . . .' (Mather,
> 1981: 5)

Rachel is the heroine. Jaime will be the hero with whom she has had some sort of romantic relationship before, which has obviously failed (but will be right again by the end of the book.) He travels and is, therefore, probably successful . 'Robert and I' are probably his parents or other relatives, who obviously love the lovable heroine. As usual the heroine is in the 'orphaned' state of so many heroines. She works in London and Jaime will come from the country. The London/country dichotomy is a familiar one in the novels. London is representative of a cluster of qualities. It is stale, alienating, work, ugly. The country is fresh, with affective relationships, home, beautiful. In spite of Dr. Johnson's aphorism, the heroine is tired of London.

But beyond the plot of particular hero and particular heroine is the formula which structures the whole genre. The

meeting will occur in the first pages. It will be succeeded by anger and difficulties, which will be succeeded by some attempts to work out a relationship. Usually a major difficulty or angry scene will provide one climax just after the middle of the book (the end of Act III?), to be followed by the long procedure to the final resolution. (It is interesting how well the plot follows Knapp's (1978) model for initial relationship development - initiation, experimentation, intensification and integration.)

And beyond these two the metanarrative of heterosexual romantic love in our society.

At all levels then the units of the narrative are alerting the reader to their inevitable correlates, drawing her along to the anticipated and expected other shoe falling.

However, I would like to suggest that the popular romantic novel and more particularly the readings given to it both by writers and readers constitute a very complex social act on the part of women. I shall trace this complexity through succeeding chapters on the readings women take from romantic fiction and the links they make with their day-to-day lives, through feminist theories and theories of ideology. Even from a reading of the books themselves, I would suggest that beyond all the levels that have been mentioned, there is a further one. It is one that binds all types of romantic fiction together.

The stories bear a central message to all women. They are a dream of how to survive in an inimical world. They are quite simply survival handbooks. More compelling than the theme of romantic love is the coded message that in an oppressive world a

successful relationship with a man who scores well in the highly rated status areas of society and in the practical and economic areas of social life is still the most secure way for a woman and her future children. As Gérard Klein (1977: 9)) has said, 'literary works . . . are attempts to resolve through the use of the imagination and in the aesthetic mode, a problem which is not soluble in reality'. This is not to say that either readers or all writers feel this is desirable. Many are strongly feminist in their attitudes but all were aware of this as an omnipresent fact in our unequal society. The books are about ways of dealing with the power relations in a patriarchal and capitalist society.

Perhaps one of the simplest and most surprising evidences of this aspect of the romantic novel is how lacking in what most people would understand by love is the central relationship of these 'love stories'. The heroine is frightened of the hero though she learns to fear him less as incidents occur that suggest he cares for her. Their meetings are full of tension. The whole book often suggests a particularly fearsome series of interviews for a job for which the heroine eventually proves her capability. Sometimes the atmosphere is even more unpleasant than this. Audrey Thomas (1986: 11) writes of her disquiet at the anger and aggression of the hero towards the heroine. 'I have read perhaps two dozen of the "modern" romances and they scare me. The happy ending simply doesn't make up for all the fear.' I would agree with this. Especially in some of the strong romances and many of the historical novels the sense of man's inhumanity to woman seems only too obvious. This sort of writing seems to me to belie the

'nurturing heroes.' A reader whom I interviewed put clearly what many mentioned, that the books did not reflect her idea of real love, 'Not the slow development of getting to know someone but a whirlwind type of affair with them knowing the other was "the" one immediately,' or as another reader said, 'The reality of a relationship for life is to compromise and grow together.' This is missing in these 'love' stories.

It is apparent from the popularity of the books and the psychological salience of them for their readers that the books are satisfying at many levels. They are addressing many concerns and appealing to different needs. This is demonstrated by the many themes, concepts and ideas that seem to recur in the novels and which, themselves, are operating symbolically at several levels.

One of the most pervasive was what I came to recognise as the Manderley theme. 'Last night I dreamed I went to Manderley again.' Daphne du Maurier's depiction in <u>Rebecca</u> (1938: 5) of the beautiful old house at Manderley, drawing on her own home at Menabilly, is repeated time and time again in the novels.

In a psychoanalytic analysis, the house has always been a female symbol and certainly this constant evocation of a beautiful, noble and much loved home is a feature which is almost obsessive in the genre. It is a particularly powerful signifier because it does operate at all levels. The house, the home, can be seen as a return to the womb. It is a symbol of the female. It can represent that turning inwards, that living an internal consciousness which is such a feature of the books. This

Manderley effect is not just confined to houses and dwellings.
Sometimes this strong yearning and sense of place is attached to
an area of the country - always a country area, the Yorkshire
Dales, the Lakes, a Scottish island. They are not foreign places.
When occasionally one finds a South Sea Island playing the
Manderley role, the book turns out to be written by a New
Zealander or an Australian. Even in the most awkwardly written of
the genre, the setting out of this territory of a spiritual
homeland is marked by a great yearning, almost that feeling for
which the Welsh maintain there is no translation, of *hiraeth*, the
mixture of yearning, love and sadness for one's homeland. Within
the novels the reader finds the answer to her *hiraeth*, a house and
a landscape which is hers and she is its, an extension of herself,
of which she is a part, which reflects her feelings and at the
same time can change them.

The foreign settings which are really home intensify this
effect. The scene of the book is always the consciousness of the
heroine and in that terrain the landscape is a surreal one where
the familiar, the home is bathed in a golden light.

A recurring motif is the arranged marriage. The couple for
some reason are married or have to give the appearance of being
married but it is only a charade. Within this arrangement the
familiar ramifications of the plot are made to take place. Here
the literature of reassurance even manages to provide the happy
ending at the beginning. At one level it provides an even safer
environment in which the misunderstandings can take place. At
another it permits the reader to face the facts of which she is

perfectly well aware that within marriage there can be aggression and misunderstandings but that the game is still the only way and that it can be played and won.

An intriguing fact is how often in the books the heroine is in a position where circumstances, or often the hero, have conspired to put her into a situation where she has to play a part, to put on a false identity. This charade is extremely psychologically distressing for her and it is a part of the happy ending that she is able to return to her true self.

The aggressive nature of the hero has been mentioned. The writers of romantic fiction seem to agree with Sylvia Plath (1981: 223),

> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you.

While publishers and writers suggested that the heroes were becoming less aggressive, there still seemed quite a few around. It was interesting that the spokeswoman at Mills & Boon, herself a Canadian, felt that the British liked 'horrible heroes' whereas American women had moved on from this. Could this be because American society is less strongly patriarchal? However, many of the books published first in the North American market, seemed to boast their quota of aggressive males.

A point which may seem a very light one in these seemingly unimportant books and one which is often joked about is the roll call of names. There are very few Gerties, Dorises, Jims or Berts in romantic fiction. But the names are important. They sum up the themes of the stories. One writer told me that in order to

find new variants, she often uses a surname as a first name for the hero, and this seems a usual practice. Here the name which belongs to the world of work, the outside world, the world in which the getting and spending goes on is used to denote the man. Names are often one syllable and the sound rather than the usual meaning is the signifier. It is the sign itself which indicates the signified here. I imagine that the name Marsh, for example, for a hero depends on the sound of the word rather than its meaning! The heroines' names, in contrast, while they avoid the mundane, are much more usual. In fact they echo the same 'orphan' quality as is represented by the heroine's social isolation. They are names like Jenna, Laurie, Elizabeth, Frances, Sarah, Jennifer; some more unusual than others but mainly rather empty signifiers. Those Rorsach ink blots again.

A very popular scene is one in which the hero, having tried to get the heroine into bed for most of the book suddenly succeeds. However the hero actually stops the heroine from committing herself by exercising inordinate self-control and decides that,

> Perhaps you should put some clothes on, Helen.
> I intend to stay until I've spoken to your
> father, and I shouldn't like to shock him.
> (Mather, 1974: 182)

Again, it seems that the books are setting up a situation for their readers where it is safe to allow their sexuality full rein, where they are not required to take responsibility or be concerned about the consequences of what they are doing - a situation which rarely obtains in real life.

'. . . but please don't ever imagine that sex doesn't sell to women. It is still one of the most powerful and unacknowledged sales points.' Rosemary Cheetham, as Publishing Director of the Century fiction division, knows what sells to women. This is one of the most striking changes to be observed in all romantic fiction - the growth in more explicit sex scenes in the novels. As Snitow (1979) has argued, the great strength of mass market romantic fiction for women is that it does indeed deal with sex in a way which is sympathetic to the demands and needs of women. Drawing on Dorothy Dinnerstein's The Mermaid and the Minotaur she points out that, as well as the seriousness of sex for the partner who can get pregnant, the seriousness of sex for the partner who is economically and socially dependent on her lover, the biological response of women to coitus, the slower build-up, the more diffuse orgasm, demands a secure and stable relationship.

> In fact, the Harlequin heroine cannot afford
> to be only a mass of responsive nerve endings.
> In order for her sexuality, and the sexuality
> of the novels' readers, to be released, a
> number of things must happen that have little
> to do directly with sex at all. Since she
> cannot seek out or instruct the man she wants,
> she must be in a state of constant passive
> readiness. Since only one man will do, she
> has the anxiety of deciding, 'Is this the
> one?' Since an enormous amount of psychic
> energy is going to be mobilized in the
> direction of the man she loves, the man she
> sleeps with, she must feel sure of him.
> (Snitow, 1979: 157)

The novels answer these problems, and here those recurring themes, such as the beloved landscape, the erotic encounter in which the hero takes responsibility, add to the sense of secure freedom in which women can indulge in a sexual letting go. There

is the essential romantic setting, the importance of emotions, an emphasis on that diffused eroticism of the whole body. The romantic novel is a rare source of cultural eroticism for women. As Alison Light (1984: 23) has said rather sardonically, 'The reader is left in a permanent state of foreplay, but I would guess that for many women, this is the best heterosexual sex they ever get.'

A significant thread within the novels and one on which the whole narrative is supported is that of the conversations. The development of the plot is carried on almost always by the dialogues between hero and heroine. It is interesting that J. K. Alberts (1986) was able to investigate 'The Role of Couples' Conversations in Relational Development' by 'using a content analysis of courtship talk in Harlequin Romance Novels'. As the author says,

> . . . these novels are predominantly
> conversation, and most of that conversation
> occurs between the female and male romantic
> partners; approximately thirty conversations
> took place between the courtship participants
> in each novel. There is therefore a rich
> collection of conversations to analyze and
> there are enough of them to detail the
> development of the relationship . . . . (1986:
> 129)

and he goes on to say that that these conversations are those that progressively move the individuals toward increasing closeness and commitment.

It is exactly the detailing of this progressive relationship as set out in the conversations which so often forms the romance novel. The consciousness of the heroine and the talk between the

couples at each of their meetings are a musical form in which
these two themes intertwine, each growing from the other,
incorporating each development into the other and then returning
to influence and be influenced again.

It is well established that females show superiority and
facility in language from a very early age. The controversy over
whether this facility is actually inherent or whether it is a
result of social conditioning - nature or nurture - does not
obscure the fact that it is there. Language is important to
women. They have a strong need to verbalise experience and
emotions and at the same time it seems that verbalising their
experiences facilitates social interaction for them. I found this
empirically, on talking to the readers, when they so often
discussed how important it was to them to talk to their male
partners. Many of the women commented with regret on how
uncommunicative their partners could be. Others repeated with
approval the fact that they could talk to the men in their lives.
It was obviously a very significant subject. It may be that there
is a divide here, again possibly only through socialisation, that
women need and like to talk over their emotions where men do not.
The *disadvantages* of talking through feelings may be paramount for
men - that vague feelings of discontent are reified when put into
words.

The romantic novel posits an emotional situation which is
unusually attractive to women, where the action of the plot
resides in the dialogue.

This is particularly the case when the climax of the novel is

considered. The course of the plot does not come to its resolution in a sexual encounter - contemporary novels have these scattered through the pages and they are actually used as part of the plot - nor in the proposal of marriage. The climax of the plot lies in a 'Resolving Dialogue'. There is a pattern in all the separate talks, some of which advance the understanding of the couple, some of which threaten it. leading up at the end of the book to a long conversation, sometimes taking several pages, (which in the shorter novels represents quite a percentage of the whole), in which one of the couple decides that a confrontation should take place in which all the misunderstandings must be cleared up. In this Resolving Dialogue all the explanations are given, mistaken assumptions challenged, fears allayed and finally their mutual love declared. When the shape of the novels is examined it is in these conversations and the final Resolving Dialogue that the narrative advances. It is also the factor which makes it so overwhelmingly satisfying to women. The hero, unlike the men they meet in real life, speaks to them in the language which is theirs.

Accompanying this discourse that reflects the feminine, however, is the discourse in which the books are narrated.

Work by feminists within literary studies has suggested that there is a 'feminine' discourse that differs from the conventional 'male' discourse. There has been much argument as to just what constitutes feminine writing. It has been suggested that feminine writing is fluid, discursive, admitting of all possibilities, whereas male writing is precise, logical, rational, following

plans and arguments. It is, of course, axiomatic that these forms of writing are not necessarily located only in people of that sex.

These romantic novels are all that is *not* 'feminine' in their writing. The discourse is in the 'male', bourgeois, patriarchal pattern of narrative. It is logical in its telling, according to pattern. The consciousness from which it tells the story is cognitive. It is an interior dialogue coded in the same way as the spoken dialogue in the books. It tells of succeeding thoughts, proceeding a logical path. There is nothing of the jumble of thoughts, emotions, desires and memories which really go to make up a consciousness. There is a very busy mind at work. It is bourgeois in that it tells of how the individual may succeed in the world, in its quite overt holding up of the advantages of wealth and status, in those detailed descriptions of items of materialist consumption. It is the story of liberal individualism so popular from the nineteenth century, where any individual can succeed. It is patriarchal in that it tells the story within the bounds of the reality of a patriarchal society. Its solutions are those of that same society. This is not to say that the discourse cannot be undercut by writers and readers who bring a shared social experience to bear upon it.

Lucien Goldmann (1975) has suggested that the real subject of a literary work is the situation of the social group to which the author belongs. Romantic fiction is particularly the province of both the author and her readers who belong to that largest of 'minority' groups - women.

CHAPTER SIX

THE READERS - THE SURVEY

The human race to which so many of my readers belong.
                                        Chesterton

Increasingly sophisticated and complex approaches are being

used to explore the meanings of a text or of visual or audio

messages. Literary studies draw on such theories as Russian

Formalism, Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism;

communications theories utilise, in addition, models drawn from

cybernetics, linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, ethnography.

In Literature studies, there is at last growing a

consideration of the reader. Previously such studies have tended

to concentrate upon elucidating a reading of the text which is in

some way 'right' without considering that the reading so elicited

will probably be that of English Literature teachers and not

necessarily the 'general reader'. Such commentators as Gerald

Prince, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Stanley Fish and Michael

Rifaterre have begun a new emphasis on the simple fact that the

text is nothing until it is read. As Jonathan Culler says, in The

Pursuit of Signs (1981: 78),

> . . . it is important to stress that if we
> want to understand the nature of literature
> and of our adventures in language we will have
> to recognise that the 'openness'and
> 'ambiguity' of literary works result not from
> vagueness nor from each reader's desire to
> project himself into the work, but from the
> potential reversibility of every figure. Any
> figure can be read referentially or

rhetorically.'

or Michael Rifaterre (1978: 1,2)

> 'The literary phenomenon is a dialectic
> between text and reader. If we are to
> formulate rules governing this dialectic, we
> shall have to know that what we are describing
> is actually perceived by the reader; we shall
> have to know whether he is always obliged to
> see what he sees or if he retains a certain
> freedom; and we shall have to know how
> perception takes place.

Reading is an active engagement with a text. Until there is a reader, the message is incomplete. No-one can say that this is the meaning of a text. There may be in Morley's terms (1980) a preferred reading by the author, and sometimes a different one by people whose business it is to pronounce on these texts, and the framing of the text, the preferred message of the author, will dictate certain limits and directions into which a reading will fit. It is true that the readers bring to their individual readings a shared language, and also a shared tradition and a shared culture which encourage homogenous readings. But on the other hand, they also bring heterogenous personal psychologies, individual life experiences, differing needs and desires.

Formula fiction, by definition, encodes a message which is very strongly programmed and with which its readers are familiar and therefore read with a strong sense of expectation. The readers of romantic fiction collaborate with the writers in a shared venture, a shared frame of expectations. This is usually suggested by literary critics to mean that the readings of popular fiction will be more uniform, less open. Eco (1979) has talked of <u>Finnegans Wake</u> as an open text whereas comics or detective fiction

are closed texts. Barthes (1970) talks of 'readerly' and 'writerly' scripts. However, I would like to suggest that in one sense these distinctions can be reversed. Perhaps popular fiction, certainly romantic fiction, is more 'open' in a sense. In high culture, particularly in *avant garde* work where readers have little frame of expectation, they have to follow the writer completely, waiting for the plan to be revealed, the pattern, the purpose. They do have to be open to every word of the author, every very particularistic twist and turn of the writing to take part in the enterprise. Because it is unfamiliar they must be certainly open in their minds to as much of the author's intents as they are able to perceive. However, within the known world of the romantic plot, the reader is free to project her own ideas and imagination on to the participants, to compare and contrast their feelings and decisions with her own, to engage with the text as a very active participant rather than having to be completely receptive. Because of the predictability of the story, the reader is, paradoxically, free.

In 'serious' literature, there is a tyranny of the text. Unless the reader abdicates his or her subjective self and takes on the role of the 'narratee,' (Prince, 1982), the subject inscribed in the text to whom the narrator addresses the story, to the greatest extent possible, then that reader will probably find the book or poem less than absorbing. In popular literature the writer and reader are partners. The reader in her reading is able to slide in and out of the narratee position, to identify and to distance at different points in the story; to be narratee,

implied reader '(the real reader's second self shaped in accordance with implied authorial values and cultural norms' [Prince, 1987: 79]) and actual reader.

In popular fiction, because of the joint enterprise, the collusion of writer and reader in producing a text with which both are familiar, there can be a variety of positions from which to read; often the same reader can vary her position within one text as she brings her own experience to bear. In both surveys and interviews it was apparent that this was really happening. While well able to decode in Morley's terms (1981: 10), by 'Sets of rules for the production of meaning - rules governing the combinations of signs into specific patterns which regulate the production of texts by authors and the reading of texts by audiences,' she can slip from a 'preferred' reading to a 'negotiated' version and even to an 'oppositional' code.

The focus on the active interaction of the reader with the text which is the material of this chapter and the next does not however veil the reality of the strength of the taken-for-granted, the 'common-sense facts' which lie behind the books, which feature in the succeeding two chapters. Berger and Luckman, (1966: 7), have talked of the 'paradox that man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product.'

Each reader, nevertheless, brings to the act of reading an individual perception. Psychologists have constantly shown how different may be the perceptions of any event by different observers. As Vernon (1962: 237) sums up, '. . . no two observers

may perceive a given scene in exactly the same manner and they may disagree considerably as to its nature and contents.' As Bettelheim (1976) has shown in regard to fairy stories, different readers can project their own personal fears and anxieties on to the stories and these hopes and fears can be different at different stages of their lives. The child achieves the ability to cope, 'not through rational comprehension of the nature and content of his unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams - ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures.' (1976: 7) These adult fairy tales perform the same function and work in the same way. Bettelheim shows how the same tale may be read in different ways, or different aspects emphasised to give a different reading. Similarly the readers stressed different aspects of the romances, saw the same stories in a different light, worked on the stories in different ways.

This chapter presents the information gathered from the survey. This information complements, and forms a background for, the information which came through the interviews, which is set out in the next chapter.

SURVEY INFORMATION

One hundred and thirty-seven completed surveys were returned.

The list of questions is provided in Appendix 1.

The surveys elicited the standard demographic information about age, marital status, age of (first) marriage, children,

occupation, age at which full-time education was completed and type of educational establishment last attended.

Apart from these questions, the survey was a very open one so that the information acquired was qualitative rather than quantitative. The returned survey represented an interview in writing. This quality of a dialogue between myself and the respondent was very apparent in some of the replies. They bore many of the features mentioned by researchers in regard to interviewing women (e.g., Finch, 1984), the readiness of women to talk, the pleasure in putting forward their opinions, the feeling of equality and friendliness between interviewer and interviewee. The flavour of dialogue was also captured in the way that many of the qualities in female speech patterns noted by researchers was apparent. (For a discussion of these, see, for instance, Smith, 1985) Respondents used many modifying words, avoiding the use of too assertive or definite statements. Often when one point of view was put forward as the writer's opinion, a second sentence setting out and recognising the alternative and its merits was appended. There was often humour in the replies.

To take one example, in answer to Question 15 as to whether the stories reflect real life?

No, do these things happen to real people?

Definitely Not!

No, I only read stories that are not like my life.

In answer to Question 17 as to whether the hero's attitudes and behaviour resemble that of men in real life,

>If there is a man or men like in the books
>send him along to me.

Or sometimes more bitterly,

>No. I've never met a decent fella in my life.

Or poignantly, in answer to Question 21, relating to

attitudes about married women with children going out to work,

>I feel sorry for them. My husband is
>unemployed and it destroys me and him. I have
>to go to work and he stays at home. He has
>written and applied for hundreds of jobs but
>with no luck.

The unemployment statistics take on a deeper dimension when

reading this.

AGE DISTRIBUTION

11 per cent of my respondents were aged from 15 to 18. (All

percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.) 15

per cent were aged 19 to 24; 10 per cent aged 25 to 34; 16 per

cent aged 34 to 44; 15 per cent 45 to 54; 15 per cent aged 55 to

64; 10 per cent aged 65 to 74 and 9 per cent were aged 75 and

over. This reflects fairly well the age distribution of the

female population (all general population figures taken from

Social Trends 18, 1988) though the age group 24 to 34 is rather

under-represented. (See Figure 1) I would suspect that, quite

simply, this is an age group highly involved in raising young

children with little time to spare for filling in questionnaires.

However, I have no way of validating this. Mann's postal survey

of Mills & Boon readers had an opposite result with an unusually

high proportion of this age group. It may be that they find it

FIGURE 1

Plot of Age Distribution of the Female Population and Age Distribution of the Readers.
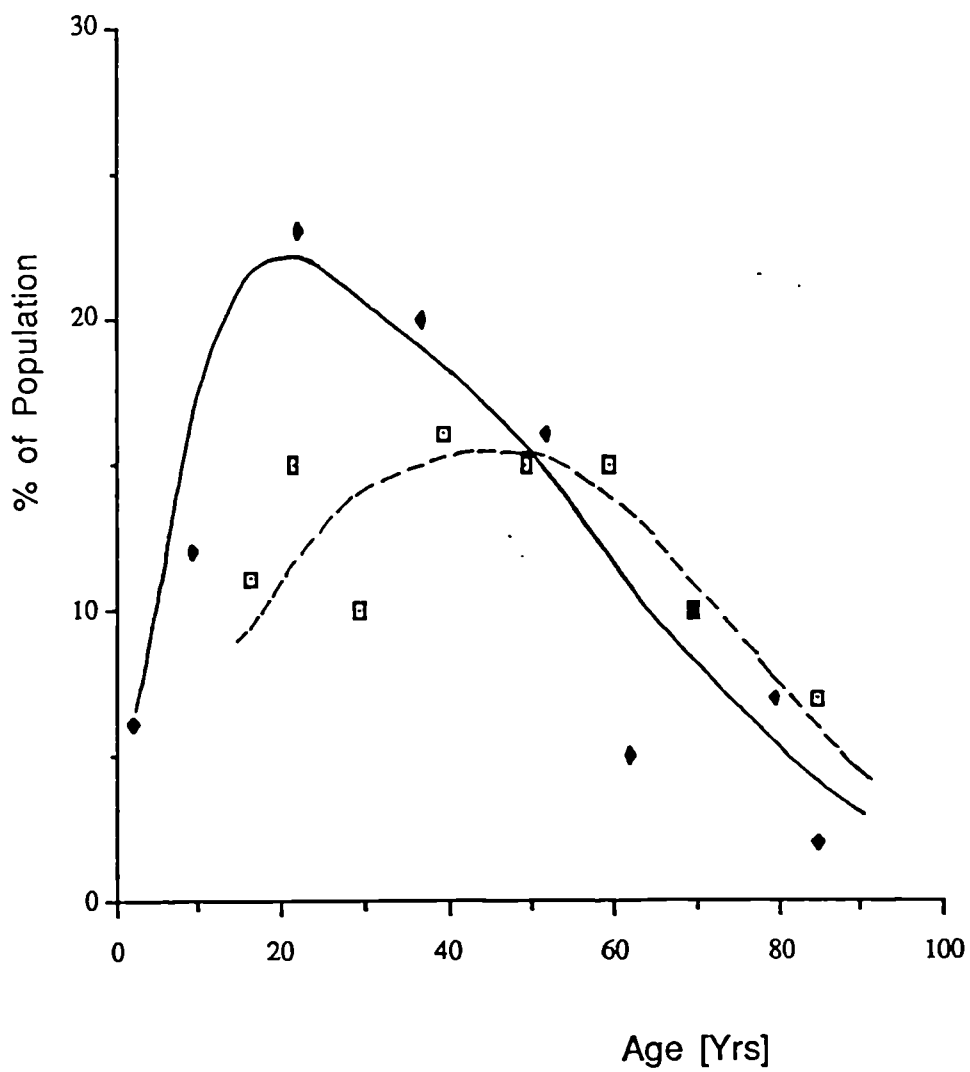
_____ Age of General Population

- - - - - - - - - Age of Sample

easier to buy books from local newsagents and supermarkets with their general shopping than to make special journeys to the library, especially as during my survey the library hours had been heavily cut from 1986, when cost cutting exercises were in operation.

MARITAL STATUS

28 per cent of my sample were single, 47 per cent were married, 4 per cent were divorced, 19 per cent were widowed. None of my sample was separated. It has to be remembered that the percentage of my single respondents includes a proportion of girls under the age of legal marriage.

This compares with the marital status of the female population as a whole, of those of marriageable age: 22.5 per cent single, 57.7 per cent married, 5.5 per cent divorced and 14.3 per cent widowed.

The average age at first marriage was 22.8 while in the country as a whole the age of first marriage for females is 24.1. The figures in the sample ranged from a first marriage at 16 to a first marriage at 41.

EMPLOYMENT

21 per cent of the sample was employed full-time, including 17 per cent employed and 4 per cent self-employed. 17 per cent were employed part time, (less than 30 hours per week.) 5 per cent were unemployed and looking for work or between jobs. 13 per cent were full-time housewives. 14 per cent were students, including many mature students and 23 per cent were 'retired.' (The remainder did not answer the question.) The retired category

is a particularly ambiguous one. Many women who classified themselves as retired were considerably under the age of statutory retirement. It would seem, from remarks made by interviewees later, that many women stop work when their husbands do, irrespective of their own age, and then see themselves as part of a retired couple. Also many older married women who for various reasons become unemployed and who either could not find further employment or who opted not to re-enter the labour market, again classified themselves as retired. Many married women had very sporadic employment patterns, as children were born, older relatives needed caring for, husbands moved jobs, so that retirement was not a very clear-cut phase of life.

CLASS

The difficulties which arose when discussing the social class of writers were compounded when looking at the readers. Christine Delphy (1984: 39) has pointed to the dangers inherent in judging women by the class of their partners.

> Not only do the relations of production which
> put husband and wife into patriarchal and
> antagonistic classes override commonality of
> industrial class, since they precede it both
> chronologically and logically, but they
> contradict it, since women without an
> occupation are by definition outside the
> industrial class system. Certain women,
> however, in so far as they have an occupation,
> fall within the confines of the industrial
> class system. Nevertheless, the fact that
> their dependence on their husbands is chosen
> as an index of class membership more
> frequently than their own occupation,
> constitutes a sign, though not the only one,
> that the patriarchal class system overrides
> the industrial one.

Delphy has pointed to the fact that analysing the class of women

by their husband's occupation veils an oppression shared by all
married women that they do not have the same life style as does
their husband, that their production in the home has no economic
price put upon it, that it is work expected of them by virtue of
their marital status. One might add, that the further work of
caring for aged and ill members of the family is also part of the
role of the domestic worker. The difficulty is also at the very
practical level of establishing whether it is the 'Head of the
Household's' occupation which really defines the type of life
lived, the life chances and the quality of life of all members of
the household. Delphy points out that class is economically
allocated except to married women where it is role allocated which
is not theoretically consistent. Since class is used as a basis
for much political and economic thinking this intellectual
inconsistency is incorporated into social action.

I feel that there is perhaps room for a more sophisticated
calculation of class where both the respondent's ocupation or
former occupation and the Head of the Household's occupation or
former occupation could be combined to give a more complex index.
Though, as Delphy points out the inconsistency of using two
indicators for women, as opposed to one for men, is obvious when
one realises that since women usually occupy occupations lower in
income and status to their husbands or fathers, a married woman
without a job would usually be ranked higher than a woman earning
a wage.

At a practical level, I felt that the difficulties of
allocating to class came over quite vividly in the survey answers,

respondents often writing their difficulties with a query as to 'Head of the Household'. However, in order to be able to compare results with other surveys, I have classified by the Head of the Household's occupation and discussed the respondent's occupation where this was significant.

Sixteen per cent of my respondents fell into Class AB - professional and intermediate occupations, the higher and intermediate managerial, administrative or professional classes. Twenty-one per cent were in class C_1 which covers the 'Lower Middle Class - supervisory or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional. Only seven per cent fell into Class C_2 - skilled manual workers. Fifteen per cent were in Class D - semi- and unskilled manual workers. Fourteen per cent were stated to be in Class E, the unemployed, state pensioners without other income and those otherwise dependent on benefits. However, eleven per cent of these had listed the Head of the Household as retired without giving a previous occupation. It may be that some were in a higher class. It did seem to be a practice that where the respondent put retired and explained the previous occupation, this was often higher status work so it seems likely that those who did not explain the previous occupation would have been in the lower grades. Class C_1 represents about 22 per cent of the general population while class C_2 represents the largest class of 28 per cent. The very marked difference from my sample, of course, is because of my all-female respondents. Those who were themselves head of the household clustered in the predominantly female work of the 'white-collar' and caring workers. Few women

are 'skilled manual workers'. Unfortunately, twenty-six per cent
gave no answer or an unclassifiable answer, (e.g., 'Occupation of
Head of House - Husband') Perhaps many found the complexities
just too much. A good example is the student who decided to write
down all the circumstances, with a certain enjoyment. Her father
was a retired police officer. He had retired at an early age and
might possibly, as so many police officers do, take up alternative
employment later. The family had moved to the area recently in
order to fit in with the mother's occupation - a very senior
position in the banking world.

Social gradings in the general population consist of 17 per
cent AB, 22 per cent C_1, 28 per cent C_2, 18 per cent D and 15 per
cent E.

Individual occupations for the readers themselves varied from
high-ranking positions like a senior bank executive through civil
servants and local government officers and teachers, through
secretaries and clerks to care assistants and shop assistants. It
is noticeable that most of the occupations were in the caring
sector or in some sort of assistant or supportive role whatever
the class. My sample bore out strongly the fact that while
employment for women has increased, the jobs they are doing are an
extension of their role in the home. There was a high percentage
of part-time working. When talking about employment to the
interviewees, there was a great stress by those who had children
on the fact that their choice of job was firmly based on what
would fit in with the demands of the family. This prioritising of
the needs of children also showed up in the answers to Questions

21 and 23 about how the readers felt about married women with children going out to work and about their opinions of families where the wife goes out to work and the husband runs the household.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

The stereotype of the reader of romantic fiction rarely includes any high estimate of their intelligence but my sample both from the surveys and the interviews gave a picture of very lively and intelligent women, even where their formal education had not been extensive. As with the authors, education was measured by the age at which full-time education had been completed. Because my sample included all ages, there were, of course, many older readers for whom higher education had not been so readily available. Nevertheless the ages at which education was completed are set out in Figure 2.

A further idea of the educational background is suggested by the answers to Question 32 as to the last type of educational establishment attended full-time.

FIGURE 2

Plot of Number of Readers Against

Age Left Full Time Education
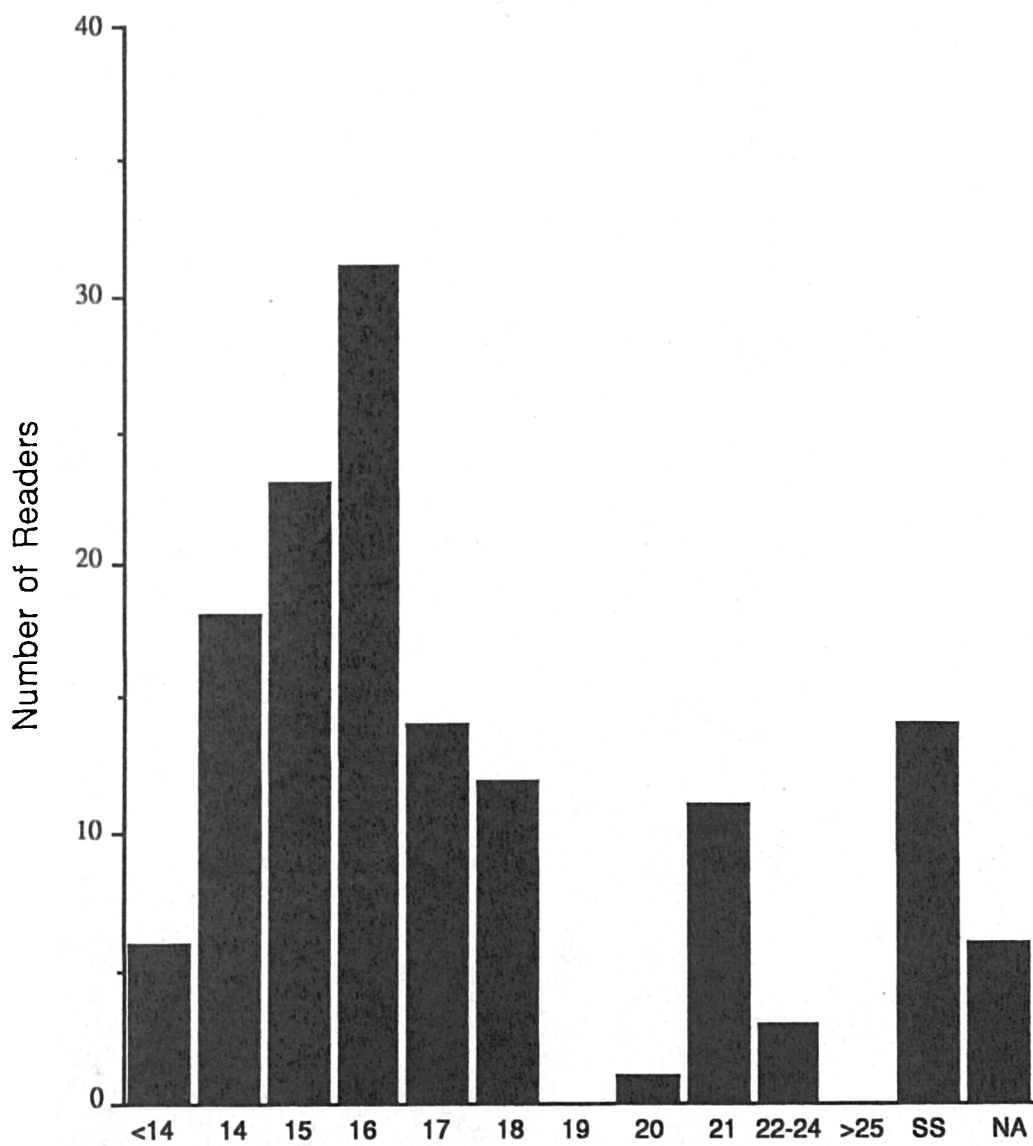
Age Left Full Time Education

SS - Still Student

NA - Not Answered

< - Less Than

> - Greater Than

(Percentages)

School	62
College of Further Education	14
College of Higher Education	6
Polytechnic	4
University	4
No answer	9

(See Figure 3)

It cannot be stressed too strongly that because education has not been rated so essential for girls in the past, a fact which was often mentioned, many women have, sadly, not had their full potential for education, realised. Many replies bore this out. A particularly poignant one was from an old lady of over seventy-five who still resented the fact that her brothers had been given further education while she had been passed over. Her comment is listed in the discussion on Question 22 on education. However, the fact that 28 per cent had gone on to some form of further education is of interest.

Other sections of the survey asked about the reading of romantic fiction - how many novels the respondents read, how much time they devoted to reading, when they liked to read, did they own books as well as borrow. There were questions about the actual books they read, favourite authors, and favourite books, ideal romantic novels, features which made a book disappointing.

FIGURE 3

Plot of Percentage Readers Against
Last Type of Educational Establishment
Attended Full Time.

Last Type of Educational Establishment
Attended Full Time.
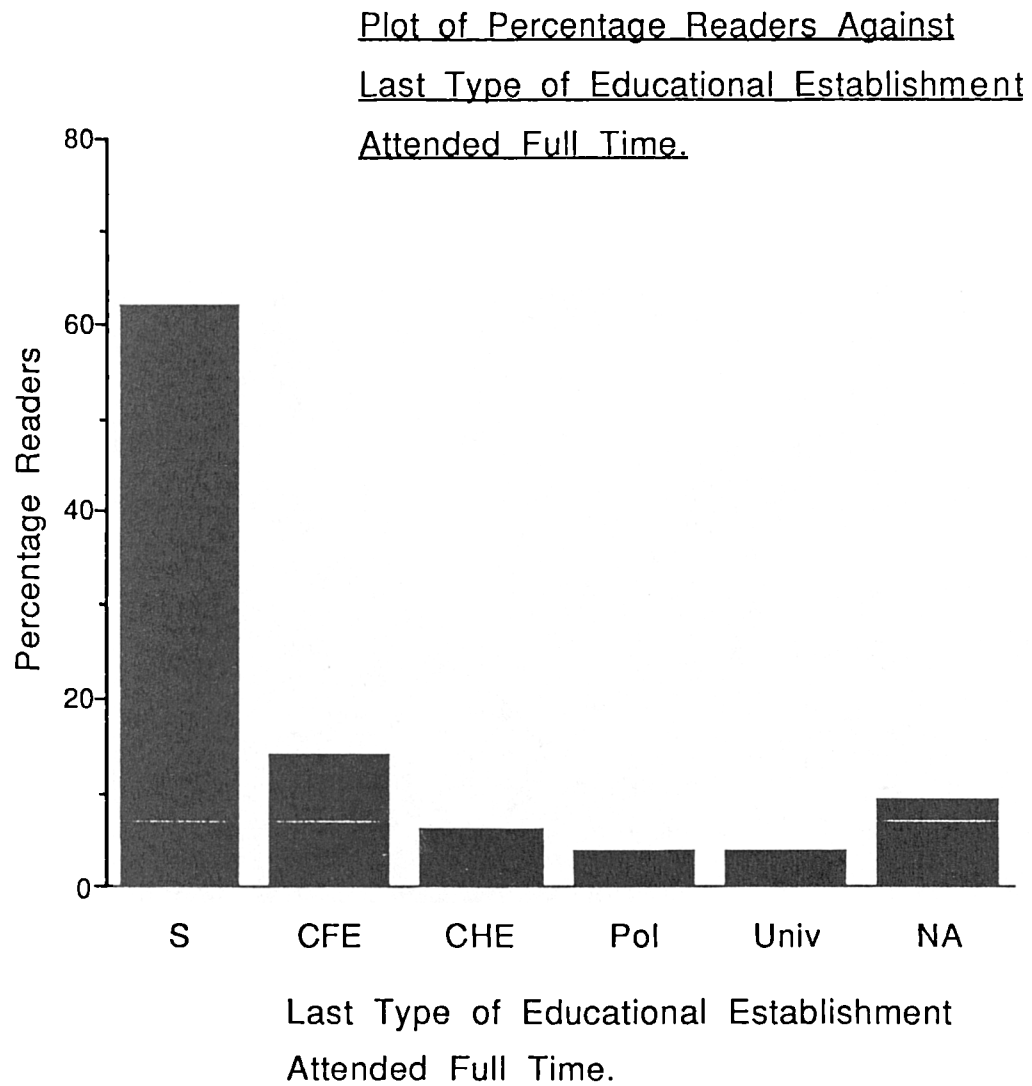
```
  S   - School
CFE   - College of Further Education
CHE   - College of Higher Education
Pol   - Polytechnic
Univ  - University
NA    - No Answer
```

I asked about other reading and also about television - I was particularly interested here in the correlation many commentators make between romantic novels and the soap operas.

My particular interest, however, was in the links, if any, between what the respondents were reading and their own lives. How far do the readers decode a preferred reading, to use Morley's distinctions, how far a negotiated, how far an oppositional meaning? Is there a range of meanings which can be drawn from the text, depending on the writer's manifest intention (not forgetting that the writers also are complex beings constructing a creative product which is born of their own psychological, social, economic and historical needs) and also the readers' particular place at that particular individual and social moment of history. Since the concerns of the novels are the concerns of the readers to a large extent, how far do the readers make connections with their own lives? Can an investigation of romantic fiction evoke information and enlightenment on the lives of women?

Reading was a psychologically salient activity for my respondents. One reader stated that she had read fifty novels in the month before the survey, borrowing twelve to fourteen per week; ten had read between thirty and fifty; twelve per cent between twenty and thirty books. The average fell between one and four books a week. One reader took the opportunity for a plaintive *cri du coeur* when asked how many books she had read in the last month, 'Not as many as I would like because of the shortage of new books in the Bromborough library.'

However, more significant than the number of books read was

probably the time spent in reading, since speed of reading varies and it may have been that readers who reported reading only one or two books a week were, nevertheless, spending as much time as faster readers on their novels. This question evoked a very wide range of answers, varying from nil from some who had not read a book the previous week and therefore answered on that basis (although the question was a generalised one asking for the time usually spent), to estimates of forty, forty-two and even fifty hours per week, which would imply that some were putting in more than a working week on their reading. Fifty per cent of the replies clustered at between seven and twenty-one hours per week. Several mentioned a great variation in their reading and suggested that one week would be several hours and another less. One reader neglected to put a figure on her reading and just said, 'Unknown - perhaps too many but keeps me happy.'

When asked at what time of the day they usually read, there was an overwhelming response that it was in the evening or the night, often reading in bed before sleep. Many gave several answers to this question. Not surprisingly the answers followed the usual pattern of work and leisure in our society. Sixty-nine per cent of the occasions cited were in the evenings and night. Very few, even of pensioners or full-time housewives read in the mornings - only about three per cent. Many said specifically that they read late at night, in bed, often until the early hours of the next morning, two or three o'clock. The student who read 'between lessons' presumably put the book away during them, of course! One young housewife, with three young children said that

she read all day and night which links up with the point that many
readers made as to why they enjoyed romantic fiction, that it was
easy to pick up and put down which, one imagines, she would have
to do fairly frequently as her children were aged from two to six,
and would also need to be picked up and put down.   Others read on
buses, 'travelling on the bus to and from college,' 'at lunchtime
at work', 'on night duty.' There was an impression of the books
being valued companions of daily life, particularly in the rare
times that the women were able to please themselves.

Although my sample had mostly been contacted through the
library service, many owned romantic fiction novels also (77 per
cent of the sample). Many of the remainder explained that they
bought novels but then passed them on to friends or to charities
or family. Nine per cent of the respondents owned over a hundred
books; 480, 330, 300 were figures mentioned; some just simply said
'hundreds'. This can represent quite a substantial investment.
Even though they are mostly paperbacks the price of the longer
'blockbuster' novels can be quite high. Again, at interview, many
of my respondents talked of reading and re-reading their novels.
The books were prized possessions and when they were passed on to
friends or family they often went highly recommended.

The readers did not read romantic fiction only. Ninety-six
per cent of the respondents read other sorts of books as well.
The range of interest was extremely wide. Some of it was genre
reading. Detective fiction was particular popular, in line with
findings that this type of fiction appeals to women, as was
science fiction, but there was one devotee of westerns, and war

novels were the main interest of one reader. Writers who usually figure in the popular best sellers such as Jackie Collins, Wilbur Smith, Jack Higgins, Sydney Sheldon, Jeffrey Archer, were well represented. Non-fiction played a great part and the range of interests represented was staggering - archaeology, religion, travel, biography, local history, politics, art. The lady who wrote a long list of non-fiction books and added, 'How to get rid of pests and grey hairs - (I'm busy writing this myself),' should find a wide market. It is perhaps a reflection of the locality of the research area that the books of the semi-autobiographical trilogy of Helen Forrester - Twopence to Cross the Mersey, Liverpool Miss, By the Waters of Liverpool - which tell a story of dire poverty in the Liverpool of the early years of the century, were mentioned many times. Respected contemporary writers such as Margaret Drabble and Iris Murdoch, Allan Sillitoe, Joseph Heller, were accompanied by Evelyn Waugh, Jane Austen, Steinbeck, though perhaps Aphra Behn and Macbeth owed something to school or college curricula.

I wondered about the newspapers that the romance readers read - both as a reflection of their general interest in the printed word and also as I was curious about their interest in political and social issues. Of the pilot study, three replies came from a 'pre-pilot' run at the first three libraries, of just a handful of questionnaires left at the libraries to test out the ground, on which this question did not appear.

I should mention that the question was inserted in the main study, because of a very tentative hypothesis that arose out of my

first interviews - and which was subsequently disproved. Jane
Gilbert (all names of readers have been changed) was a single
woman, between 19 - 24 years old, who was unemployed. At our
interview, though she was very lively and intelligent and
interested in life, she showed a strong feeling that political
events, national or local, formal or informal, were quite beyond
any influence from her, alone or acting in a group.

Almond and Verba (1965) have characterised different
political cultures according to how far people feel they can
influence political events in their society. They suggest a
classification of three types of attitudes - parochial, subject
and participant. Parochial political culture suggests one in
which there is very little knowledge of what is happening at
governmental level and therefore little participation. This often
occurs in underdeveloped countries where communication is lacking.
Subject culture suggests one where, while people are knowledgeable
about what is happening in their society, they feel it is almost
'an act of God' There is nothing to be done to influence events.
Participant culture is, of course, where people are not only
knowledgeable but feel that they can, if they wish, have a very
real input into events.

People with an individual subject culture feel that whatever
happens, 'they' will continue to act and 'we' are powerless.
Jane's reaction were so markedly that of the subject culture that
I wondered if the reading of romantic fiction could be correlating
with a highly felt sense of impotence in the real world - that
romantic fiction was indeed a compensatory device for social

impotence. When Mrs. Barnaby, the second interviewee, showed the same attitude, I felt that perhaps many of the stereotypes might be true.

But then an equal run of interviewees turned out to be lobbying M.P's., active in politics, active in pressure groups, and generally (wo)manning the barricades!

I decided to use the question about newspapers to try to cast some light on the question of political involvement and also to include some discussion of the point at interviews.

Many of the answers to the question of newspapers mentioned more than one newspaper, to the extent that one reader answered, 'all dailies.' However, 11 per cent took no paper at all. Again, showing the pattern of leisure, especially for women, many took papers on Sunday but not during the week - 24 per cent, while only 10 per cent took no Sunday paper. The Daily Mirror was the most popular daily paper with 12 per cent of the respondents naming it. The Sun was second with 11 per cent. The Liverpool Echo, the local evening paper came next with 10 per cent and the Mail followed closely with 9 per cent. Peter Mann in his 1968 survey had supported the intellectual respectability of the Mills & Boon readers by citing their 12 per cent readership of the Telegraph. I'm afraid my sample did not reach these intellectual heights as the Telegraph only scored one mention. Of the 'quality press', the Guardian had 4 per cent and the Times, one mention also. Of the Sunday papers, reflecting the general trend in the country, the News of the World was most popular, quoted by 15 per cent of the respondents, with the People following at 13 per cent. The

Mail on Sunday and the Sunday Post were mentioned by 12 per cent, the Sunday Mirror by 11 per cent and the Sunday Express by 10 per cent. The Observer and the Sunday Telegraph with four mentions each represented the quality press, with the Sunday Times gaining only one vote.

In order to get a broad picture of leisure interests I asked about favourite television programmes. However, as replies in interviews cited in Chapter Two showed, programmes were often on in a household while my respondents were reading at the same time, and many readers made the point that they preferred to read and were not great television watchers. Following national viewing patterns at the time of the survey, East Enders and Coronation Street were at the top of the list of mentions as favourite programmes. Both of these were listed by 18 per cent of the respondents, closely followed by 16 per cent who mentioned Brookside. Perhaps reflecting a regional taste again, 'Bread' was a very firm favourite coming immediately behind the soaps with 14 per cent. Other programmes that were mentioned by more than 4 per cent of the respondents were Neighbours, Moonlighting, Casualty, Mastermind, 'Allo, 'Allo, Dallas, Blind Date, Question Time, The Bill, Top of the Pops, Dynasty and the News on both BBC and ITV. Other than those I think the whole of the schedules at the time was covered. Every possible programme was mentioned. The readers had very catholic tastes when it came to television.

What about the books themselves?

I asked about the books they had been reading recently and also about their favourite books and authors. In spite of her

disclaimer to me about not being a romantic novelist at all,
Catherine Cookson easily topped the list of most read romantic
author, with Danielle Steel and Penny Jordan following. Anne
Hampson, Janet Dailey, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Charlotte Lamb,
Barbara Cartland, Ann Mather and Victoria Holt were also mentioned
often. Catherine Cookson again headed the list of favourite
authors, again followed by Danielle Steel. Following these two
were Penny Jordan, Janet Dailey, Anne Mather and Jilly Cooper,
Barbara Taylor Bradord, Jean Plaidy, as well as her alter ego,
Victoria Holt, Georgette Heyer, Ann Hampson, Betty Neels, (who
writes doctor/nurse romances and was also mentioned as an author
who is least liked), Jessica Steele, Charlotte Lamb. The
contention among the publishers that it is their name that sells
the books, especially that of Mills & Boon, may be borne out by
the fact that they were so many different writers mentioned as
favourite authors - eighty-five in all.

As can be imagined, when invited to give reasons for enjoying
their favourite authors, the replies were various. However, even
though it was such an open question, consistent concepts could be
picked out in the replies. These concepts clustered around
various aspects.

Some were extrinsic aspects. One of the most constantly
mentioned, by ten per cent of the readers, was that the stories
are light and easy reading. This was backed up both in replies to
this question and others and by the interviews, by comments about
how the books fitted into the life styles of the women. They were
stories which could be picked up and put down. A few pages could

be read when time allowed. They did not distract too much from the demands of home and family. As so many mentioned in answer to the question of when they read, the books were happy and relaxing before sleep.

A second cluster was based on the literary competence of their favourite authors. Fourteen per cent gave as a reason for enjoying their favourite authors, their attractive style, or commented on the fact they felt their novels were well written. 'Nice easy style/language, easy to understand and interesting from beginning to end.' Akin to this was the comment that the books were well researched or that the medical background in the favourite stories was enjoyed or that the period of history the author usually wrote about was a favourite. One reader enjoyed the 'good English' of her favourite authors, Robyn Donald and Linda Howard. As she was an English teacher, this was an informed opinion. 'Well written, good plot.'

Easily the most cited reason for a favourite author at eighteen per cent, which echoed the interviews, was that their favourite told a good story. Several other concepts were very close to this idea: such aspects as 'exciting,' 'interesting,' 'intriguing backgrounds,' 'the happy ending,' 'the escapism,' 'development of believable characters.' Several said specifically that the books were involving: 'Lose myself in their books' or 'Her books are absorbing.' The seven per cent who commented that they enjoyed the books because they were 'realistic' or 'based on real life, 'exciting and could really happpen', were balanced by the six per cent who enjoyed them because they were not realistic,

'different from my life', which bore out the characteristics of the books, discussed in the previous chapter, of a plot which is statistically unlikely to happen but is told with the most realistic detail of everyday life, to the most mundane accounting.

It is interesting that the readers who mentioned that they liked the books because they were 'not sexy' and the readers who liked them because they were, were often reading Mills & Boon. It is true that Mills & Boon put out different imprints, some of which are more explicit than others, and indeed the publishers had told me when I asked about the more explicit sex used in the novels these days, that it did not pose a problem or necessitate guidelines. They merely read a new manuscript and assigned it to the appropriate imprint. In a curious way, however, the books are both sexy and not sexy. They are more detailed and explicit than they used to be but as Snitow (1979: 159) says 'In these romantic love stories, sex on a woman's terms is romanticized sex. Romantic sexual fantasies are contradictory. They include both the desire to be blindly ravished, to melt, and the desire to be spiritually adored.' The sex is always 'romantic.' It is suffused with feeling.

Other comments were, from a younger reader, reading 'Sweet Valley High,' the teenage romances, 'they write the story to suit my age group,' that the age of the characters of the story was suitable. Many commented that in a world perceived as increasingly violent, the stories could be counted upon not to disturb. One reader's husband was prone to sitting up late at night watching horror movies which frightened her so much she

retired to bed with a romance to counteract her fears. 'Have to get a book to read while my husband watches horror films. I do not watch them as I dream about them so I go to bed with a book.'

Question 4 was the crucial question in some ways. I asked specifically, after all the point of the whole survey, why the reader liked romantic fiction. Again, the answers were chatty and informative, often developing from the previous question about their favourite authors, but constant clusters of ideas emerged.

LIGHT, EASY READ As in the previous question, many respondents, (24 per cent) mentioned the very extrinsic advantage of the books, that they were a type of fiction that was easy to pick up and put down, that they could be read quickly and easily in the short leisure periods in the day. Some mentioned particularly that they were a contrast to more serious reading, whether for pleasure or work. 'They make a light hearted interlude in more serious reading.' 'Offers a light alternative to the factual reading for school work.'

CONSTRUCTION OF THE STORIES. A little more involved were those who looked at the books as literary constructions. Here the readers talked in general terms of enjoying the books as 'a good read', 'because they tell a good story.' Nine per cent stated specifically that they read the books because they could rely on the happy ending. Several talked of the books as being well written.

Recurring features of the books such as the settings and the exotic backgrounds were mentioned. The interplay of character was

a particular favourite. 'I get quite involved in whatever is happening to the people in the story.' 'You can have a good cry when it all turns out right in the end.'

ESCAPISM Far and away, the word most mentioned was 'escapism'. Almost half of the respondents (43 per cent) talked of using the books as escape from their daily routines or more strongly, from their troubles and worries. 'It offers a chance to distance yourself from everyday life.' 'To escape from the mundane things of life,' or more sombrely, 'Takes you away from the hardness of reality. Escape from debts, working, other problems.'

MOOD CHANGING It was apparent from the replies that more than anything, readers used the books to change their own moods. There was a cluster of descriptions of the books which suggested the readers' involvement with the stories and their desirable effect. Sixteen per cent talked of the books as being relaxing or lightening moods. 'They make me feel good.' 'They cheer me up.' The books give 'peace and quiet.' Or they were 'nice.' Many readers said they enjoyed them because they were 'romantic' themselves and the stories accorded with their own personalities. 'Because I feel at heart I am a very romantic person.'

PROJECTION As is apparent, the reasons for reading were very close and shaded into one another and, of course, readers often gave several reasons for their enjoyment. Adding to this mood-changing function was the ability of the books to tell a story and depict characters which involved the readers. Many, particularly

of the younger readers, liked the books because they told a story

which they hoped would happen to them. 'Because I would like life

to be exactly the same.' 'People need to love and be loved.' 'It

gives you something to dream about, wondering if you'll ever find

a man like that.' (age 19 - 24) Certainly many of the younger

readers I interviewed were using the books as anticipatory

socialisation and rehearsing a plot that they expected to happen

to them. Perhaps it will surprise the cynical that many of the

older readers said they enjoyed the books because they told a

story of which they had once been the heroine. 'I suppose because

you think your life is or could have been like that.' 'They take

you out of your own mundane existence and can take you back to the

times when perhaps you were the heroine of your own love stories.'

As Rita C. Hubbard (1985: 124) has written,

> . . . we can note that the novels contain
> potentially powerful rhetorical messages
> related to the nature of the sexes and the
> recommended repertoire of behaviors which
> theoretically lead to happiness-ever-after.
> While romances are generally considered escape
> entertainments, they can also recommend and
> validate specific social orders for those
> caught up in their visions.'

True to the romance's function as being all things to all

women, the opposite view also came across equally, 'It's the only

romance I get.'

Again and again, the use of the books in the same way as any

other mood-changing substance came across. Also like any drug,

including alcohol, it is the potential for change that was there.

Psychologists have noted that, depending on the setting, the

company and the previous psychological orientation, drugs do not

have one predictable effect on people's moods. It is common-sense knowledge that someone who is depressed will become more depressed with alcohol, a happy person enjoying a party will become happier. Even hard drugs are not as predictable in their effects as people surmise. While heroin is considered one of the most addictive of drugs, research suggests that, for instance, Vietnam veterans were no longer addicted when they left the war setting and returned to their homes.

The comparison with drugs came to mind often as readers told of diametrically opposed effects of their reading. It was commonly reported that the books were enjoyed in bed as an aid to sleep, whereas a night nurse reported, 'I can get through one a night at work. They help me to stay awake.' The contrast between such comments as, 'Sends me to sleep at night,' and 'Entertains [me] and keeps my mind busy,' is striking.

REALITY PRINCIPLE On a more cognitive level, readers often also perceived the books in equally opposed readings. Many readers saw the books as echoing real life and also, more importantly, holding out lessons for real life. 'Because they can be so true to real life.' 'Typical of real life situations.' 'They can relate to own life.' On the other hand, 'A fantasy world, away from reality.'

EROTICISM As in the previous question about their favourite books, many liked the books because they were sexy and many because they were not sexy. 'I can relax with a light novel without details of sex.'

One reader more or less summed up all the various pleasures of this particular type of text when she wrote, 'Utterly soothing, doesn't wreak havoc with one's emotions, a couple of hours pleasant reading, also possibly a journey into other countries.'

Questions 13 and 14 asked respectively about the reader's idea of a good romantic novel and that of a novel which was not enjoyable.

There was a proportion, (14 per cent in answer to the question about the ideal novel and 20 per cent about the 'unideal' novel) who did not answer this question at all, possibly finding it difficult to put into words. In contrast, those who answered the question wrote at great length. The answers developed ideas and concepts of other answers.

Well written stories were wanted, 'skilfully written'. Authentic detail was expected in historical situations or foreign locations and, of course, the corollary was that in poor stories the writing was bad. Twenty-eight per cent specifically talked about the actual writing being weak in stories they did not enjoy, the plot poor, detail repeated, poor English. The readers could be quite scathing, 'Badly written weak story line, obvious mistakes in spelling, grammar etc. Dr/Nurse books often very weak stories,' or 'Poor unprofessional writing.' Often the criticism was an indirect indictment of the writing such as 'Too much like books have already read,'or 'characters I don't believe in.'

A particular dislike was where the strength and aggression of the hero and the femininity and submission of the heroine had become too obvious. 'Heroines who have no gumption', 'weak

heroines, chauvinistic heroes,' 'hero who's too arrogant,' 'Boy too macho. Pig headed. Girl too dependent.'

The lack of reality in the poor novels and the fact that ideal books are 'real life stories to do with everyday life, 'stories that could possibly happen,' are echoed in the criticism of the poor novels where the constant theme is that the story is so badly written as to be unbelievable. It was particularly noticeable that whereas the writing was mentioned in a small proportion of the ideal novels, bad writing was mentioned by twenty-eight per cent of those readers who answered this question. When the book is satisfying the technique of the writing is not noticed. Bad writing obtrudes its lack of technical skill into the story.

In ideal books, interesting settings were enjoyed, beautiful countryside in this country, exotic locations abroad, 'Life in another country amongst vineyards etc. Sunshine.'

The writers might perhaps beware of scattering their research too lavishly, as several readers said that they did not like 'odd words in other languages'. To the writer this may be authentic flavour, to the reader who does not understand the language it immediately breaks her absorption in the novel and excludes her.

The publishers are right to insist on the happy ending as far as my sample were concerned. It was mentioned again and again for the ideal romantic novel and it was with a real sense of loss that one reader complained of a story that had not pleased her, 'the ending was not the way I wanted it, is not "a happy ever after

ending" as I had expected.'

The enjoyment of the erotic in the stories was succinctly put by the reader who, asked about the stories she enjoyed, replied, 'the sordid ones.' There was a great sense of self-control though, as with the reader who wanted 'erotic love scenes (one or two only)'. However this was balanced by many readers who stressed how unacceptable they find some of the treatment of sex in the novels. Of the eleven per cent who specifically mentioned this aspect, perhaps not surprisingly, having been brought up in an age less open about sexual matters, the older readers figured largely. However, every age group except the nineteen to twenty-four year olds mustered at least one who commented upon this aspect. The numbers are possibly too small to draw conclusions but, in fact, in view of the very detailed descriptions of sex in many of today's stories it was perhaps surprising that more did not object. It seems likely the telling of the tale is now so intertwined with the development and recounting of the sexual relationship that this story is actually 'romantic fiction' and is therefore accepted by those who enjoy the genre. As was found in the last chapter, also, the eroticism of the stories is diffuse and infused with feeling and this is what seems to make it acceptable. One of the protestors about too much sex specifically expanded her definition of unacceptable to be 'where the hero practically rapes the heroine.'

As so many readers stress, their enjoyment of the novels depended to a great extent on being able to sympathise or empathise with the characters, to be able to project themselves

into the story and to see the predicaments of hero and heroine and their developing relationship as real and believable. Questions 11, 12, 16 and 17 asked about the qualities the reader liked the hero and heroine to possess and how far the reader saw the heroine as like herself and the hero as like men she knew in her own life.

I shall take the hero first as he is the central character of the books and dominates the story. The questions were open and left the readers free to write as much as they wished within a fairly limited space. Again, clusters of concepts emerged. Desirable qualities were both inherent, to do with the physical appearance of the hero, his dominance, worldly success, a 'macho' cluster, his sexual success and prowess and a certain 'rake' cluster to do with being 'not too good' as one of the readers suggested, and also those qualities which were part of the relationship towards the heroine.

Very predictably twenty per cent mentioned that he had to be handsome. Close behind, less to do with ideals of male beauty than the compelling nature of the cliché was that he had to be tall and dark. There was only one mention of the desirability of a blond hero. He had to be slim or with 'rugged good looks.' However, looks seemed to be taken for granted in a romance hero and few readers bothered with much detail, many just writing 'tall, dark, handsome' as a shorthand for a physically attractive man, although 'with lovely eyes' had a wistful ring about it.

The detail came with character. The dominance that was required came in such descriptions as 'rough', 'determination,' 'slightly arrogant', 'slightly mysterious', 'sure of himself',

'assertive,' 'powerful,' 'dominant.' He also had to be older.

Worldly success was suggested by such desirable qualities as rich, worldly, successful, good job, good education, authoritative. But perhaps the reader who wrote 'Tall, dark, handsome, dominating, M.C. Pig,' had her tongue firmly in her cheek. 'Manly', 'masculine', 'macho', seemed to accompany these sort of qualities.

Specific qualities to do with his sexual prowess were not often mentioned, in line with the finding that eroticism was part of a complex relationship rather than a separate aspect of the books, though 'excellent lover, 'sexy,' 'excitement,' were three mentions.

There was one group of qualities which clustered about a quality I called, from the definition of one reader, 'a bit of a rake.' Under this heading one reader even wrote, 'But occasionally it is nice for him to be a bit of a womaniser.' Another wrote, 'deceitful sometimes,' and another,'not too good.'

In contrast to the inherent qualities of the hero were the qualities that went with his attitude to the heroine. Here were qualities such as faithfulness, understanding, caring, loyalty. Although many stated that he had to be dominant and aggressive, riders were added such as, 'but sometimes let his feelings show', 'ability to make a woman feel good.' One quality that was very often cited was 'a sense of humour'. However, it was a quality very definitely lacking in the heroes of the books. I think the answer to this question was often a projection of what the reader believed to be the ideal masculine character rather than any

amalgam of the fictional heroes she had come across. Certainly a sense of humour was the one quality conspicuous by its absence in the books. However, this was exactly the link between the books and the reader's own attitudes and hopes in which I was interested. It is noticeable that in sum, the qualities most desired were those of being rich, dominant but caring towards the heroine.

So to the heroine. As with the hero, there was the same stress on that sense of humour. It is obvious that this is a quality which is very highly prized in both men and women. And again the heroines of romantic fiction very rarely have an opportunity to display their sense of humour. The whole thing is usually taken very seriously indeed, which suggests that the readers again project the quality on to the fictional heroine because they value the quality as helping to oil the wheels of real life.

The attribute most mentioned in connection with the heroine was that of intelligence (by 12 per cent) and this was allied with a set of other characteristics which emphasised that 'spunky' quality so often mentioned also by the authors. A word or phrase which suggested that the heroine should be spirited and independent was quoted by forty-five per cent of the respondents: such phrases as 'not too soppy', 'to be able to meet the hero in whatever he hands out to her', 'must stand up for herself and her ideals', 'strong willed in approach to male sex', 'strength of character', 'like Jane Eyre but more spirited', 'bit less helpless than they usually are', 'not the type to be browbeaten'.

Although there were some mentions of the heroine's looks, this was emphasised even less than when discussing the hero's looks. 'Not too pretty, not too plain,' 'pretty,' several 'beautiful's.' The stereotype of long blonde hair and blue eyes, did come out in one reader's reply.

Her femininity was stressed, two readers emphasising particularly however that this should be without being a feminist. In addition she should have the more traditional feminine virtues of loyalty, kindness, love of children, caring, 'understanding of a man's working duties.'

Perhaps when readers suggested the heroine should be a 'little bit of a temptress' or 'slightly flirtatious' or 'devil may care,' it was the female equivalent of the 'bit of a rake,' but on the whole the solid virtues of honesty, truthfulness, sincerity and kindness were most cited.

As emerged in the chapter on the contents of the books, however, these most stressed qualities of spirited independence and intelligence, though the author was careful to tell us that her heroine possessed them, were not always demonstrated in the action. Indeed very often these qualities were shown as barriers to achieving the happy ending. It was only when the spirited, independent heroine realised that these qualities were less conducive to future happiness than devotion to marriage to the hero that she was able to achieve happiness.

Hubbard (1985) has suggested that there has been a gradual change in gender prescriptions for ideal male and female roles and interaction behaviour in the novels, moving through four styles

from the 1950's where relationships were basically complementary through models of tentative female rebellion to symmetrical relationsip styles in the '80's. However, in the books which my readers were reading, it seemed to me that this symmetrical relationship triumphed in very few cases, though there were some. More often the female challenged male dominance only to 'realise' in the end that her independence is less precious than caring for the hero and concentrating on the love between them.

In fact one of the authors recorded in Chapter Four had felt that this 'feminist' stress on the independence of the heroine had actually lost its impetus and would be less important in future years, that it was only a passing fashion.

In assessing the readers' views about the hero and the heroine, it was important to distinguish how far the characters were indeed just characters in a book. It seems to me that reading is a part of everyday life and every act, especially one so freely chosen, reveals a great deal about the attitudes of the individual who performs it. It would seem likely also that all experiences feed into the social being of the actor and influence and shape her attitudes, beliefs and actions to some degree. While it is impossible for any of us to be able to evaluate fully just how far our actions influence us, I tried to approach the connection of the fictional heroes and heroines with the reader's circumstances by asking how like the heroine's feelings and attitudes were to the reader's own and how far the hero's attitudes and behaviour resembled that of real men whom the reader knew.

At first glance relatively few readers identified completely with the heroines, only sixteen per cent gave a clear 'Yes.' 'In the main most women want to be loved and cherished by the same man for all their lives,' or 'Yes, I think they are. I get all worried about if the boyfriend is really serious,' or more sadly, 'I am a romantic but my husband is not which makes for a difficult life.'

Thirty-five per cent said that they did not identify with the heroine. However, when examined, even the 'No's' were engaging with the heroine. 'No. I am not as romantic as them.' 'The type of person I like to read about is more go ahead and interesting than myself.' But the bulk of the replies (9 per cent gave no answer or a 'Don't know') were in the 'sometimes' category.

> In some stories they do and somehow we dream
> they would be.

> Occasionally they're so naïve. It's
> unbelievable. Other times I do associate with
> them.

> Like a part of me - the romantic part.
> I think I can fantasise about being in the
> position of the heroine; but I don't think I'd
> be as naïve as most heroines.

> Occasionally - but usually they act more
> 'noble' than I do.

Older readers put such things as 'Like mine [attitudes of heroine] when I was teens/twenties. I'm not so involved and not thinking about anything else now.'

I'm afraid few of my readers found romantic heroes in real life. The question asked 'Do the hero's attitudes and behaviour

resemble men in real life?' Twenty-seven per cent just said 'No,'

with no amplification, or gave no answer at all and in fact this

question elicited more unamplified 'No's' than *any other question*

even when the reader had answered other questions very fully.

Sometimes a 'Yes' answer was more dismissive of real men than a

'No.' 'Yes, sometimes, usually before you really get to know

them.' 'In real life men are sometimes like that of the heroes.

Arrogant and bigheaded,' or 'Yes because men usually have the same

attitude as they couldn't care less.'

Respondents seemed often to take the opportunity to be bitter

about the men they knew, whether out of personal experience or

perhaps a more generalised resentment which they cannot usually

voice.

Some were practical, 'They're nearly always playboys and

powerful. Obviously the man on the street is not like this'.

Some of the answers were more romantic than the books. 'Only in

wishful thinking until I met my husband.' A divorcee who had been

left with seven children stated, 'Men now are selfish.' Sometimes

the heroes were not as attractive as real life. A reader of

Danielle Steel, said 'Yes, [the heroes do resemble real-life men]

often the men are cheats on their women. This I don't like.' An

intriguing puzzle was the answer that said, 'My former partner was

tall, dark and handsome, and was quite . . .' We shall never

know!

Some were sympathetic to men. 'Sometimes. Again real men

have more sides to them than this.' 'They always end up with the

best of fortune and this does not resemble real life.' 'No, most

of them [the heroes in the books] have such an easy life.' 'I don't think they keep their feelings to themselves as much as the heroes do. In real life they have to share in order to get to know a partner.'

I felt a slightly chilling remark from a schoolgirl was that the 'heroes are more romantic and expect less in return for small favours.'

Much of the discussion of the mass media has to do with how far it feeds into everyday life. I thought it would be interesting to ask the readers themselves if they thought 'reading romantic fiction helps you to deal with real life?' Given the idealised and superficial manifest content of the stories, it is not surprising that fifty-four per cent answered, 'No,' or some variant or gave no answer at all. However that left the remainder who did feel that it helped with real life. This was something that I had not anticipated. The greatest proportion of these (15 per cent of respondents) explained that the mood changes the books induced helped the reader to cope with real life in a positive frame of mind, 'it gives a happy relaxing feeling which stops tension, is good for you that way.'

Again, sometimes the answers were bitter. The books were described as positively not helpful for real life.

> No, it leads you to believe too much in everything works out for the best.

> No, I daydream a lot.

> No, because all men seem to be faulty compared to Mills & Boon ones.

> Not necessarily - turn off quality.

> Passes the time. But can make life seem
> drearier and the house dirtier.

The librarian's point, mentioned in Chapter Three, that she worried that teenagers reading the books might consider them like real life was perhaps borne out by one school girl who suggested that the books were helpful because they helped her 'to be aware of men.'

One of the aspects of the books and of women's lives in general that I wanted to explore was the contrast between the generally conservative stance of the books and the certain amount of increasing equality between the sexes in real life. I did this mostly during the extended interviews described in the next chapter. However, I also wanted to try to get some idea of attitudes in the larger sample of the survey respondents. To avoid making the questionnaire impossibly burdensome to fill in I had to limit the questions on this aspect and make them very simplistic. I did this by asking three questions on general attitudes to equality. Question 21 asked about attitudes to married women with children going out to work; Question 22 asked about the importance of education for girls and Question 23 asked for the respondent's views on role reversal in families where the wife goes out to work and the husband runs the household.

Question 21 which asked about married women with children going out to work was a question which elicited answers! Only three per cent of respondents gave no answer to this question and the answers were very full and often born out of personal experience. Only five per cent of the replies stated

unequivocally, 'I think it is wrong and bad for the children,' or 'I don't. [approve of women's going out to work] If women give birth to children they should care for them' although this respondent added, 'Logically they may need money.' Equally only seven per cent thought it a good thing, without putting in provisos. Half of these were schoolgirls and it would be interesting to speculate whether it is the climate of increasing equality having an effect or is it just that they have not had experience of the practical difficulties of reconciling child care and paid work. Overwhelmingly the question at issue was the welfare of the children. The right to work was not normally seen as the right of an equal member of a family, but as a desirable course of action, once the protection of the children had been established, and it was presumed that the balance was between the children's welfare and the mother's desire to work. The father's position did not seem to be a factor in the decision. The distinction was constantly drawn also between children of pre-school age and children who went to school. Most recognised the fact that financial necessity was often a factor. The general consensus was that the welfare of the children was paramount, that a majority felt that a mother should be there for pre-school children but that if finance was a factor, loving, caring substitutes for the mother must be found. Ideally, individual mothers should have freedom of choice, freedom to stay at home with children as much as freedom to go out to work but that the welfare of the child, which was only discussed in reference to the mother not to the father, was the priority. There was very little

emphasis on the needs of the mother herself.

Many spoke of their own experience. Re working mothers, 'I am one!! I feel we do a good job because we do some menial job that men will not do.' (From a married 'general service worker') 'I go to work but don't like it.' (a 35 to 44 year old mother with four sons.) 'If they can cope, not be overtired, make adequate arrangements the children can cope with too, most times both parents MUST work.' A very self-sacrificing, 'I think it is fine so long as it fits in with the husband and children and doesn't make more work for them at home.' An unemployed 25-34 year old, 'It's all wrong. Young people would have jobs if married women stayed home and did what they should do.' (Although there was a slight preponderance of older people against married women with children working and young people being in favour, this was by no means universal. Sometimes younger people were very much for mothers being at home and older women very much aware of the difficulties of working mothers and the reasons for their working.)

Question 22 asked if the respondent thought education is as important for girls as it is for boys. I felt the answers would be predictable, both because I think it is an accepted value in our society that education is desirable and should be equally available and on an individual level that no one would accept that they should not have a right to education but I also asked for the reasons and in this I think lay the interest.

Even here, there were a few 'No's.' 'No. Boys are most likely to be breadwinners.' (aged 65-74) 'Not really. I believe

all women want to get married to look after a man they love so if
the man is going to be the breadwinner he should have the
knowledge.' (Unemployed 25-34 year old) 'No. Boys' education
much more important.' (75 and over) 'No as when she marries her
husband supports her.' (65-74) 'No as job more important for the
boys as they should be the bread winner.' 'Yes and No. Most
women will marry and the lucky ones can give up work' (35 -44)

Those who did believe in the education of girls, however, had
varying reasons. The reasons clustered round four concepts. The
first was instrumental. Girls needed education, because they,
too, needed to work, to earn. They might not marry, or they might
be left widowed or divorced and need to support a family. Or in
today's financial climate both partners needed to work. Also it
enabled women to be independent. 'Yes. In today's more liberated
society fewer girls give up their careers for families.
Qualifications are therefore needed by both boys and girls.'
Secondly, girls should have education because education leads to
fulfilment and development as people and girls have a right to
this also. 'Yes - girls should have the opportunity to have a
fuller, more rounded life, appreciative of art, music, literature,
science, natural history etc. as should boys.' Thirdly, equality
in education was seen as inherently right, as a principle of
justice. 'Everyone should have an equal chance - it is up to them
to use it in whatever way they wish.' 'Yes because everybody is
entitled to the same privileges in life. As you only have one.'
Fourthly, education was seen as a good, because it would enable
girls to be better wives and mothers. ''Yes, because a well-

educated woman is more able to run the home properly, and
understand her husband's and children's problems.' 'Yes to be an
intelligent wife and mother not just a housekeeper.' 'Education
is very important. One doesn't want to be a bore to one's
husband.'

Some comments were very revealing. One old lady said, 'Yes.
The better the education the more opportunity there is for getting
the most out of one's interest. Yes, certainly it's as important.
It was considered when I was at school 60 years ago that my three
brothers got priority educationally. I think I always resented
it.'

One mother said of her adult children, 'One daughter had to
hide 'A' level to get employment. Boys needed 'A' level to get
job.'

One reader declared roundly. 'Of course it's important for
girls to have a good education; I think most are more
intelligent.'

One reader whom I later interviewed who had gone back to work
because she had lost so much confidence in herself that she had
begun to avoid going out, said, 'It is equally important that
girls receive a good education as boys so they can compete for
jobs and satisfy themselves that they can succeed.'

Question 23 asked what the respondent thought of families
where the wife goes out to work and the husband runs the
household. If we are really approaching a society of symmetrical
families then both sexes will need to be able to accept either or
both the work role and the child care and housework roles. How

far were my readers happy with these ideas?

Only 7 per cent were against the idea. I wondered if it would be the older readers who would be against role reversal but the distribution of this view was scattered through the age groups and some of the most definite reactions came from the young. 'Terrible,' wrote one school girl or a more moderate,'I don't like it. I'm not saying women should be tied to the kitchen sink but they should be at home and the husband work.' (a 19-24 year old single nurse)

Other young women took an opposite point of view, 'Wonderful, it makes men appreciate what women go through running a home,' or 'If she can gain meaningful employment, fine. Good for her for marrying a liberated man.' (single 15-18 year old) Most felt that if both parties were happy then it was all right, but the tenor of their own feelings about the situation split fairly evenly between enthusiasm and a feeling that it was not a right state of affairs but if the couple felt it would work, then that was fine. Many felt uneasy about the effect on the man. 'Admiration for the man as it cannot be easy on his pride.' 'Could work but would lead to many difficulties. Man would find it hard.' 'It takes away a man's ego. He really should be the bread winner.' 'Degrading to the man.' 'Fine if of necessity, i.e. medical reasons or husband can work from home. Otherwise emasculating!' One 19-24 year old spoke from personal experience. 'My Dad used to but it was soul-destroying. Now they share it and that runs perfectly.'

Rather as with the preceding question, respondents agreed with role reversal but their answers fell into different

categories. There seemed to be two approaches here. Some were
for it because of a theory of justice and equality, some were for
it because in this time of unemployment it was often the only way
to survive. It was seen as the wife going out to work because the
husband was unemployed. Only one reader visualised a scenario
where the wife's career was more successful and more financially
rewarding. One reader took the view that no matter what the
circumstances, 'a child needs the support and love of its mother.'

There was a footnote to this survey of women's reports of
their reading. Question 19 asked about the attitude of other
members of their families to their enjoyment of romantic fiction.
Often female members of the family shared the enjoyment. Other
than this situation, families' attitudes varied from tolerance to
outright hostility. This was very similar to Janice Radway's
findings with her readers. Readers reported comments of 'trash'
or 'rubbish' but sometimes the attitudes were stronger. 'It
annoys my husband when I read. I think he feels shut out
somehow.' 'My husband thinks they are a total waste of time. He
can always think of something better that I should be doing with
my time.' 'My husband doesn't like me to read - he feels I should
watch television as he does.' One woman observed wryly that the
attitude was that the books were 'Lightweight and typical women's
reading only. Although it gives them freedom to watch their
choice of T.V. programmes!'

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE READERS - FORTY WOMEN

One is not born a woman, one becomes one.
                    Simone de Beauvoir

In writing about popular culture there is much said about
what it 'means', about its significance. The act of communication
is only completed when it reaches the receiver. This fact, though
sometimes mentioned and even enshrined in literary modes of
criticism like reception theory, is seldom carried as far as an
examination of real people reading.

Much research into the mass media concentrates on the text,
whether written, spoken or visual. Certainly research into the
printed word rarely focuses on the recipients of that message. I
had a strong interest in the mass media and a belief that it
formed an important part of people's lives. At the same time, I
feel as a woman and as a teacher who has taught women a great
deal, that the changes in the lives of women are one of the most
striking and stimulating social factors of the present day. In
teaching a class of 'A' level students about the mass media one
day, I casually mentioned popular romantic fiction as an example.
The class more or less erupted. There were no middle-of-the-
roaders. The girls either adored romantic fiction or hated it.
My curiosity was aroused. Why was a form of popular fiction,
always denigrated by commentators and dismissed as 'trash' so
important? I began to notice how many women read romantic fiction
and how avidly. Were women really so sentimental that these tales
of romance, of being swept by passion for a tall, dark, handsome

stranger, were what they wanted from life? Somehow this didn't

equate with the practical, intelligent women I saw going about

their daily lives. The books were intellectually undemanding to

say the least. Yet I observed that the women reading them were

intelligent, often successful, always resourceful. What was it

about the books that so pleased them? Feminism would suggest that

these books were absolute brainwashing of the most overt kind.

Were women really so naïve? Why, when feminist ideas seem to be

gaining ground, were so many women so captivated by reading about

that brooding, aggressive hero?

When questions arise about the consumers of the mass media,

it seems to me that the only real explanations must result from

asking those consumers. It seems a practice of arrogance to

impute motives to, in this case, the readers, from a reading of

the text only. An exploration of the attraction of romantic

fiction must be rooted in the experiences of the readers.

We constantly read in newspapers or hear on television or

radio, opinions about the changes in women's lives, the greater

equality which has been brought about between the sexes, about

changes in attitudes to marriage, family, children, work,

education. But often the feeling that ideas have changed is

inferred from extraneous and objective facts such as that more

women go out to work, that people have fewer children, that there

is a higher incidence of divorce.

Because of the manifest importance of romantic fiction to

women and because of the subject matter which dealt with this

central relationship in women's lives, I believed that romantic

fiction could be reflecting important facts about women's lives -
for example, their feelings about men, marriage and family,
careers, sexuality. I felt, therefore, that an exploration of the
importance of these books would reveal much of the ideas and
feelings of real women about the conditions of those lives.

The reader takes from the text and also projects herself and
her personality and her experience into the text. At the most
basic level she brings to the text the learned experience of the
language and its conventions, at its most complex, a shared
philosophical outlook or expertise in a field which leads her to
have chosen that book, on a subject or by an author with whom she
feels some empathy. It is the life of the reader which writes the
text and the text, like all other life experiences, writes the
reader.

The interplay between text and reader can be mirrored in the
exploration of the significance of romantic fiction. Just as the
texts can be explored for their deeper meaning, for the echoes
they have in myths that are central to women's existence,
psychological truths which are common and social structures which
are the pattern of life in a culture, so the reader's act of
reading can be explored at a deeper level to show that the
salience and significance for the reader of this type of fiction
is one facet of the salience and significance in the reader's life
of the issues with which it deals, love and marriage and the
relations between men and women in a patriarchal, contemporary
society.

I note 'contemporary' because even in historical novels with

great attention to authentic background detail there is no attempt
to suggest that the essential, private relationship between men
and women was any different from today's. There is never any
suggestion that the framework of expectations about the nature of
this relationship could ever have been any different in any
different century or country. But then, of course, the books are
not about history. They are about coping with the present. As I
have suggested, they are about surviving in an inimical society.

The value of investigating romantic fiction, as suggested in
the sub-titles of this thesis, is therefore not only that it is an
excellent case study in the field of popular culture but that it
can be a key to give some idea of the ideology of women - ideology
in the sense both of the overarching set of beliefs within which
they operate and also the extent to which they have taken on the
view of heterosexual love presented in romance fiction, that more
'political' definition of ideology where 'love' serves to
interpellate women in the service of a patriarchal society. As I
shall discuss later both in this chapter and later ones, not only
are these two 'ideologies' often incompatible but the readers were
overtly aware of this incompatibility.

Occasionally researchers and commentators on romantic fiction
look at the reader, but more often they infer from the books a
psychological disposition towards the reading and discern a
longing for the mother, an unsatisfied need to be cared for, a
desire for revenge against men, or domination by them. But people
are social beings and the *social* circumstances of women are not
always brought into the picture. Women's lives are heavily

constrained by their social roles, as mothers, wives, daughters and workers, and in the wider social structure as occupying positions of comparative powerlessness, of being a disadvantaged group with, even now, practical, legal and economic disadvantages. It is these social conditions which, I suggest, underlie the attraction of the novels.

Lillian Robinson (1978: xxi) has said the study of literature 'could be a significant mode of apprehending the lives and consciousness of women.' She also critiques the psychological studies of women's novels. 'All too many commentators have been tempted to assess the influence of the modern Gothic and the contemporary romance in strictly psychological terms . . . . Once the psychological aspect of both content and influence has been understood, however, a feminist reading demands that these categories themselves be placed in their history.' (1978: 206).

I started from the premise, then, that a valid explanation of the use of any branch of the mass media must include, indeed should focus on, those who use it. As well as utilising a survey, I wanted to talk in depth to women who read the books because I felt that only in this way would women themselves speak. It is, I think, always important in social research that the people concerned in an investigation should be respected and assumptions made about what they say only with the greatest caution but it is particularly essential that this approach should be used when women are the focus of the enquiry. Too often presumptions are made about why women do things and not often enough are the women empowered to report on their own situation.

I felt also that it was important to talk to a sufficient number of women so that generalisable conclusions could be drawn. I feel concerned when conclusions are drawn in social research from interviews with a few women, say ten or twelve. I believe that there must be a sufficient variety to allow one to essay generalisations. Forty seemed to me a number large enough to throw up patterns of behaviour and ideas. The experience of interviewing made me feel that the number of new trends and patterns was diminishing at this figure. So that it would seem that interviewing a greater number would have merely confirmed the ideas and concepts that had already emerged. Fewer than this, I felt the conclusions would not be convincing.

I was also aware that it could be argued that the interviewees having volunteered, were self-selected and could be assumed to be extrovert personalities. However, in practice, rather to my surprise, I found that when I met them, many of the women were shy and nervous. It may have been the anonymity of filling in the questionnaire which had emboldened them to volunteer and I know many of them regretted their previous courage. As discussed in Chapter Two, however, regarding the reasons for their volunteering, no one seemed uncomfortable in the interview itself; most went out of their way to say how much they had enjoyed talking and valued it as a rewarding experience.

Before the interviews I had already rejected as inappropriate the 'ideal' social science interview where the researcher remains remote and unresponding. Ann Oakley (1986: 233) quotes Goode and Hatt,

> He (sic) must introduce himself as though
> beginning a conversation but from the
> beginning the additional element of respect,
> of professional competence, should be
> maintained. . . . He is a professional
> researcher in this situation and he must
> demand and obtain respect for the task he is
> trying to perform.

Oakley explains at length why this method merely duplicates the hierarchical nature of society. I feel Goode and Hatt's attitude highlights the difference between professional and lay, between academic and the public, between someone who is going to benefit from the exchange and someone who will probably gain little, who will be exploited however politely. It is particularly inappropriate in research about women by women, since it perpetuates relationships in which women too often find themselves, in which they are treated as inferior, unintelligent, inexperienced in the ways of the world.

More than that, I would suggest that it is just not effective. The relationship of interviewer and interviewee must be as equal as possible, not an exploitation of a hierarchy of the knowledgeable and professional to the ignorant. Within this equal relationship the interviewees felt, and were, respected and their opinions valued. In my experience, for the very reasons discussed in Chapter Six in regard to class, that women are perceived as occupying economic positions in relation to men, that they are peripheral to the economic and social hierarchy, they are perceived in relation to their roles and the most significant of women's roles are not occupational but personal. So women relate to each other with less stress on the distinctions of status,

wealth and class than operate between men. (Though this is not to underestimate the differing effects of class distinctions on the life chances of women.) They feel they have more in common with each other than dividing them. I found that the women I interviewed perceived me as like themselves. While the interview, by definition, was about their opinions, they expected the normal supportive work of a conversation between equals.

Jennifer Coates (1986) has given a useful summmary of the research on gender differences in language use.

> There is considerable evidence that the
> patterns of interaction typical of all-women
> groups differ from those typical of all-men
> groups. . . . In all-women groups, women
> often discuss one topic for half an hour or
> more, they share a great deal of information
> about themselves and talk about their feelings
> and their relationships. Men on the other
> hand jump from one topic to another, vying to
> tell anecdotes which centre around themes of
> superiority and aggression. They rarely talk
> about themselves, but compete to prove
> themselves better informed about current
> affairs, travel, sport, etc. The *management*
> [emphasis in the original] of conversation
> also differs significantly between women's and
> men's groups. Members of all-women groups are
> concerned that everyone should participate and
> dislike any one person dominating conver-
> sation. Men in all-men groups, by contrast,
> compete for dominance and over time establish
> a reasonably stable hierarchy, with some men
> dominating conversation and others talking
> very little. (1986: 152)

Other characteristics of female conversation, mentioned by Coates, include the use of questions to ensure that a conversation continues, the even use of turn-taking in conversation, with links being made between what has been said by the previous speaker's contribution and the gradual development of topics with speakers

taking turns in this development, 'women tend to see conversation as an opportunity to discuss problems, share experience and offer reassurance and advice' (Coates, 1986: 153)

From the work done in the field of linguistics it can be seen that to interview women and not take the expected turn in maintaining the conversation would be severely disruptive and unsettling. This does not mean that the interviewer puts forward her views. The very fact that the women see the interviewer as sympathetic and supportive leads them to feel free to express opinions that they realise may not be the same as those of the interviewers. Because it is a relation of equality the women are free to say what they want to say. Although I was careful to take my turn in the conversation and to mention experiences where these made common ground, the women were perfectly aware that the encounter was arranged for them to give *their* views and they enjoyed doing so.

The interviews were very open, in the sense that I encouraged the women to talk freely as different subjects arose in the conversation. I had a schedule of topics (listed in Appendix 2) which I wished to cover and by using the books as a starting point I found that these were always discussed though often in a different order.

Four of the women interviewed were in the 15 - 18 age group; five were in the 19 - 24 age group; three in the 25 - 34 age group; ten were in the 35 - 44 age group; eight were in the 45 - 54 age group; seven in the 55 - 65 age group; one was in the 65 - 74 age group and two were over seventy-five. So there was a good

distribution of age ranges with all ages being represented.

Of the forty women ten were single, though two of those were living in stable relationships and indeed one was expecting her first baby within a fortnight of our interview. Twenty-one were married. Seven were widowed. Not all the widows were in the older age groups. One was in the thirty-five to forty-four group. Two were divorced.

Of those who were or had been married and had filled in the question about children, only one had no children at all. One had a stepson. Three had given no reply on the survey but during the interviews I found that two did have children. Mrs. Castle had only married at the age of forty and had no children.

The class of the women I took according to occupation, or previous occupation if retired, of the head of the household. In the case of widows I also tried to bear in mind the previous occupation of the husband as it seemed strikingly obvious that Mrs. Castle's circumstances, whose husband would have been Class D, living in a council maisonette in the poorest part of Birkenhead, were strikingly different from those of Mrs. Edwards, also in a maisonette in one of the most expensive areas of the Wirral, in Class AB by the previous occupation of her husband.

Most of the interviewees under retirement age worked. Overwhelmingly the work was in the caring sector as had been the larger sample from the survey. Jobs included nursing -a clinical nurse tutor, a staff nurse, auxiliary nurses and care assistants - teaching, secretarial and clerical, civil service and local government, shop assistants, cleaners, a dental nurse, an

accompanist at a dancing school, a florist, school dinner

supervisors and students.

Gérard Klein (1986: 4), writing on science fiction, suggests

that the

> real subject of a literary work (or group of
> works) is the situation of the social group
> the author belongs to. The anguish conveyed
> in the work is provoked by the inadaptation of
> this social group to change in the world
> society, a change that may entail the
> dissolution of the social group I
> only want to suggest that a collective
> phenomenon, such as the literature we are
> considering, cannot be regarded as a
> mechanical sum of particular subjectivities.
> In all human activity, extraordinarily complex
> social and psychological determinations
> intersect. Where exactly is one to even begin
> getting a hold on these determinations is a
> matter of epistemological grids, which are
> necessarily imperfect. But the most useful of
> such grids in this case seems to be one which
> delimits a social group as the privileged
> subject of a creative opus.
> . . . The idea that the authors, and no
> doubt the readers of SF belong to a social
> group which is, at least from certain points
> of view, fairly homogeneous seems to be
> supported by two facts; first, the great
> cohesion of the particular cultural sub-set
> that forms the SF literature, a cohesion
> confirmed by a whole display of internal
> references which tend to define it as a real
> sub-culture; and second, the non-assimilation
> or rejection of this sub-culture by other
> social groups, and in particular by the
> dominant cultural group which pretends (quite
> successfully) to represent the 'real culture.'

Gérard Klein goes on to draws conclusions about 'the

scientifically and technologically oriented middle class'. I

would suggest that each of those conclusions can be equated

directly with romantic fiction and its readers.

Both authors and readers of romantic fiction bear the marks of that social group which is more pervasive than class - that of being women. Indeed they are defined as women first and foremost in all their social roles by themselves and by others. As Robinson (1986: 203) says, 'gender cuts across all social categories.'

'The anguish conveyed in the work' is provoked by the constant struggle of *this* social group to adapt to the Procrustean choices of life in a patriarchal society, though it is these very changes and adaptations that do bring about the dissolution of not only the group as a group but the dissolution of the very identity of the individual herself.

Klein suggests that the most useful of epistemological grids for understanding human activity is the 'extraordinarily complex social and psychological determinations' which mark a social group. The answers to the questionaires and interviews help to detail this complexity in romantic fiction readers.

The 'great cohesion of the particular cultural sub-set that forms the [RF] literature, a cohesion confirmed by a whole display of internal references which tend to define it as a real sub-culture' is obvious as soon as one begins to study romantic fiction. Strong links could be seen between publishers, authors, readers, the awareness of sub-genres, authors, prizes, writers' circles, informal groupings of readers. A practical example was that of Mrs. Ireland. She lived in a road called Gordon Avenue. Several of the residents in the road enjoyed reading romantic fiction. They were all very friendly and met regularly at one

another's houses for coffee and had begun to exchange books. Someone had then brought a pile of books and people had taken the ones they favoured. This grew into the practice of heaving a huge bag of the books to the regular meetings. Mrs. Ireland had for a long time been the custodian of the bag. They had even christened their circle of book lovers the 'Gay Gordons', presumably before the time that the adjective had changed its meaning.

Klein emphasised that the existence of the sub-culture is marked by its non-assimilation or rejection by other social groups. In no other genre is this so apparent as in romantic fiction. Romantic fiction is trash, a heading used by Robinson in her book Sex, Class and Culture, 'On Reading Trash'. And all of my respondents were well aware of this. The genre is, of course, particularly rejected by the 'dominant cultural group' which is, in connection with romantic fiction and all of its concerns, men. It is rarely literary standards which are invoked in the criticism, but the concerns of romantic fiction which are downgraded and their specific connection with women and women's lives. The unease with which men view women's reading of romantic fiction will be discussed later.

The books then 'work out the problems of the social group.' What are these problems, and areas of significance, and how do they surface in the books?

Perhaps the most important point was that in no way were these readers a captive and mindless audience. As was described in the last chapter, formula fiction can, paradoxically, be more

open than high culture texts. My most overwhelming impression
from the forty interviews was that the readers adopted many
posititions within the text, slipping between the positions of
narratee, implied reader and actual reader. They read in a very
complex way, drawing from the text the benefits and pleasures
which answered their felt needs and demands. While the texts are
simply constructed and usually bear clear and uncomplicated
messages, the readers' response is not. The texts are simple: the
readers are complex.

As was shown in Chaper Six, the readers did not fit the
popular stereotypes, in demographic characteristics or presumed
intelligence and range of interests. The women had a wide span of
interests, from Hilary Bourne and Mrs. Warden who researched
genealogies to Mrs. Wells, whose experience in Labour politics
included a meeting as a child with Aneurin Bevan. Another
reader's hobbies included an enjoyment of holidays in Yugoslavia,
which involved acquiring some knowledge of Serbo-Croat. This is
not to say that all the leisure pursuits were in heavyweight
subjects. Bingo and dancing featured as well.

The women were aware that there was a generally held view
that romantic fiction readers are silly women succumbing to dreams
of romantic love. This was reflected when they talked of the
views of those around them. The same conclusion seems to prevail
among academics, though couched in slightly longer words. Even
feminist critics can hold a view of romantic fiction as an
ideology holding the readers in absolute thrall, as discussed in
Chapters Nine and Ten. So that the view of the audience is of

people who are not active, not in control, with no feeling that
they could control or change their circumstances. This brought to
mind Almond and Verba's (1965) discussion of different political
cultures, mentioned in Chapter Six, in which a 'subject culture
is one where, while people are knowledgeable about what is
happening in their society, they feel they can do nothing to
influence events. By coincidence, the first two interviews had
been with women who did feel like this. Jane Gilbert told me,
'All [political] parties [are] the same. They all talk. They all
talk about the same things but when it comes down to doing things
they - they're all the same. They let people down.' She saw the
situation as impersonal, just happening. 'Any of them will make a
mess of the country, I think.' I must add that I was talking to
her just before a General Election and she was out of work. Mrs.
Blackwell, the second reader I interviewed, was also not working.
She had been a 'stewardess' at a local hospital which she enjoyed
very much. However, she had had to give up her job because her
husband had been made redundant and if she had been working he
would have lost part of his claim for social security. She
resented this bitterly and was very angry at the system. The
common denominator seemed to be unemployment. Other interviewees
who were unemployed and looking for work were more relaxed about
the subject. They were wanting employment but it was not so
pressing for them or they seemed more hopeful of employment. It
is difficult to see, of course, whether the corollary was
operating and those who felt more able to influence events in the
outside world were, therefore, more confident, relaxed and hopeful

about employment.

Certainly all the other interviewees, while showing varying degrees of interest in formal politics, were confident that they could and would act to effect change in society. This might involve just writing letters, organising petitions or the like. Their interests ranged far and wide. Mrs. Bellman believed, 'you can work till you get through to them.' She had written to her M.P. and attended meetings over the fluoridation of the district's water supply. When her parish priest was moved on before she felt he should have been, she wrote to the Bishop, the Cardinal and to the Pope - and had replies. Mr. and Mrs. Platt, both pensioners, were proposing to join like-minded citizens in a protest demonstration outside their local hospital which was planned for closure. 'If they have any marches I'll be there.'

Often when I mentioned politics the women would immediately say they were not interested - although they would always vote. (One reader gave me quite an impassioned talk on women's duty to vote, after the heroism of the suffragettes.) When I widened the discussion to the sphere of local and regional politics or more informal matters, women like Dorothy Cairns immediately changed their answers. 'Not interested in politics. [Just] Go to vote.' Then in regard to more informal politics, 'Oh yes. People can influence. People should. Got to fight.'

One of my important findings, therefore, was that most of the readers were far from being members of a subject culture. They were fully paid-up members of a participant political culture, active and interventionist.

As was mentioned in Chapter Five, because the texts are simple, the readers can project on to them, like Rorsach ink blots, the shapes that they desire and that arise out of their own feelings and needs. This leads to intriguing contradictions, where readers draw messages and pleasures from the texts which are diametrically opposed to those that other readers draw. The texts can be all things to all women.

At a very simple level, Chapter Six detailed how some women read the books late at night in order to help them to sleep. Some women read them in order to stay awake. The same contradictions that showed up in the survey were repeated in the interviews.

Because of this characteristic, one of the most important qualities the readers found in their reading was that the texts could be used to enhance a feeling of well-being. Mrs. Blackwell felt that people who do not read are missing something that could be very helpful to them. She told of her sister who had been a more-or-less lifelong invalid and had died at the age of fifty-three. Mrs. Blackwell seemed to convey that it would have helped her sister's illness if she had been able to read in the way Mrs. Blackwell did. I felt she was describing the bringing of a state of mind similar to reports of the effects of meditation or relaxation exercises. Perhaps her belief that her sister would have been a healthier person if she had read is not so far-fetched in the light of many doctors' belief that a relaxed and positive mental state boosts the immune system. It is this state of mind that so many readers referred to as the benefit of reading romantic fiction.

For this reason, reading was an activity that had very important psychological significance in readers' lives. They were avid readers, reading widely in all types of fiction and non-fiction. The pervasive influence of the books was apparent in Anna Delaney's attempt to explain the importance of her reading,

> And it's helped me to deal with situations.
> Not consciously. Not *a* [her emphasis] book
> but it's gone in - the attitude. Well, in my
> case it comes better from books. I just had a
> thirst for knowledge. But when you've got a
> book. I find myself I'm not conscious of
> putting it into practice but on reflection I
> am.

All talked of the deep pleasure they found in the books. Mrs. Prince talked of the 'joy of reading'.

The books carry a very simple ideology. They purvey the message that marriage or its equivalent in a long-term heterosexual relationship is the central focus of all women's lives. It is presumed by most commentators that the readers, out of whatever motive, simply take on this ideology. I shall go into the topic of the reader's relationship to the ideology of the books in Chapter Nine but I would like to point to some of the reactions which the women told me about in our meetings, to demonstrate the empirical findings which lay the groundwork for the conclusions in Chapters Nine and Ten about women's relationship to reading romantic fiction.

The concept of ideology has been discussed and argued about as long as it has been used. Its very widest meaning can merely suggest the overarching system of beliefs and concepts that are

the working knowledge of a particular culture. So that the idea

of love as a valued and meaningful emotion between human beings,

especially that between partners and between parents and children

is taken as self-evident. Since there are other cultures where

this is not so self-evident, even this basic belief is culturally

based. However, the more 'political' meaning of ideology as

suggesting a system of beliefs which advantages one class or group

and disadvantages another underlies these texts. Again, the

relationship between ideas about love that the women held outside

their reading and the message which they recognised within the

books, which I explore further in Chapter Nine, was a very complex

one.

Though the readers entered into the stories and obviously

enjoyed them, they were aware of the 'romance' ideology being

purveyed. Rita Overton, (in the '25 - 34' age group, unemployed,

single, very cheerfully expecting a baby by a boy friend who had

returned to the Middle East) talked of how a 'bad plot - doesn't

attract - straight away.' Although she enjoyed romantic fiction

she felt it was very unrealistic,

> Most of them just don't ring true. . . . The
> thing is, in most of the books the women try
> to be like men, don't they, they try to
> dominate. They're the dominant ones until
> they meet the man who can dominate them. You
> know what I mean and then they're all weak and
> pathetic whereas they think, you know they're
> business people and all this but then when
> they meet a fella it's just back to nature,
> isn't it, and the man takes over. They end up
> getting married.'

This distancing from the ideology of the books was a constant

factor and will form part of the discussion of the readers'

relationship to that ideology.

Readers developed in their reading as they got older. At school age they were using the books to explore ideas about marriage, love, sexuality, men. Gemma Moss (1989) in her book Un/Popular Fictions writes of how her pupils in a large comprehensive used the form of the genre in creative writing to do this. While reading is obviously more passive than writing, the school students in my sample were also actively exploring the text for information and ideas. It was a form of anticipatory socialisation. The nineteen to twenty-four-year-olds also were thinking themselves forward into possible scenarios that might happen though predictably as their experience of the real world increased, the detachment and the wry amusement at the books and themselves grew. At the same time, however, they were able to read 'naïvely,' to become the 'narratee,' the person to whom the books were addressed, in order to enjoy the story, unless the books were not able to sustain the reality that was so desired. Then, of course, the books became the 'unenjoyable' novel that they had described in the survey.

According to Mills & Boon, the essence of the books is 'about conveying her heroine's innermost thoughts so that the reader understands and sympathises' (guidelines from Mills & Boon, Editorial Department) and I suppose this is as good a summing up as any of all the books that make up this genre, soft and strong, from Jane Eyre to A Woman of Substance, to the latest 'cheapies' as the librarians called them.

There is often a picture of readers dreamily seeing

themselves as the romantic heroine - no matter how unlikely this would be. How far *do* the readers 'understand and sympathise?' How far do the books mesh with their own experience?

Some readers did report a sense of identification. Harriet Cheyney enjoyed historical novels and particularly felt that circumstances may change but 'then and now people [are] the same still.' Here again is the point that these are novels about living with to-day's problems.

Those who reported in a more distancing way, saw the heroine, as in the survey answers, as more naïve, 'sillier', more extreme in her emotions than the reader felt herself to be. As Mrs. Bellman said when asked about identification, 'No, I don't think so. Some of the things they would do are a bit silly. Silly, yes, but you admire them for having the courage to do it!'

Modleski has pointed out that the reader as well as the narrator is in a position of omniscience. Because of the nature of the genre, that it works to a formula, the reader knows what the heroine does not, that there will be a happy ending, that the surly, arrogant hero does love her. Embedded within the text, therefore, is an ambivalent position for the reader, invited to be the heroine at one level, but with that bargain, which undercuts the narrative, between formula romantic fiction writer and reader, always present.

> This is an important function of the formula.
> It is easy to assume, and most popular culture
> critics have assumed, a large degree of
> identification between reader and protagonist
> but the matter is not so simple. Since the
> reader knows the formula, she is superior in
> wisdom to the heroine and thus detached from
> her. The reader, then, achieves a very close

> emotional identification with the heroine
> partly because she is intellectually *distanced*
> [emphasis in the original] from her and does
> not have to suffer the heroine's confusion.
> (Modleski, 1982: 41)

The readers were not actually identifying but engaging strongly with the heroine and the dilemmas with which she had to deal, and certainly feeling emotions of puzzlement and distress at the various misunderstandings and pleasure and relief at the obligatory happy ending. In fact the point was that they saw her as engaging with some of the same problems and difficulties which they had to face. In other words they, too, saw, that one of the primary tasks they had to negotiate was the relationship of marriage or a relationship equally committed, permanent and heterosexual.

As Hilary Bourne says, 'Sometimes I find the heroines irritating. I think it's probably because I enjoy reading so much it's not - I tend to live the book. I very often find myself quite apprehensive as to what is going to happen - I very often have a laugh about what is going on.' Hilary worked in a hospital and said that obviously the books that correspond most to her own life are the hospital ones because 'it's my setting' but 'I never think, oh gosh, that could be me.' But she went on to talk at length about the fact that though she was not married herself nor thinking about being married so to some extent felt detached, nevertheless, 'I have no patience with these people who just dismiss it outright [romance and romantic fiction] because I think it's part of the human experience.' There was this conscious distinction which the readers made between 'real-life' love, a

strong and valuable emotion, and the romantic love of the books which was recognised as an ideology, even where the full implications were not worked through. This distinction between the different meanings of love is explored in Chapter Nine.

There was also a distinction made between 'soft' and 'strong' heroines. Sally Hall, who cited Catherine Cookson as her favourite romantic novelist, did identify and particularly wanted to identify with what she saw as strong independent heroines, making decisions and choices. She saw this as applying even to the softer romantic heroines though not to the same degree. Of Catherine Cookson's heroines, she said, 'the females are generally very strong people. I like the strength of the characters.'

Mrs. Hayley said she was 'a bit of a feminist, equal rights etc. and they [the heroines] weren't.' Anne James, a schoolgirl, felt that, although the stories could be 'far fetched' they might 'be helpful in the future' - the anticipatory socialisation that was operating with many of the younger readers. Mrs. Kearney expressed the uncomplicated view when she said that romantic fiction 'reflects what is the basic function of being a woman. This is what women really want.' Anne-Marie, saw the complexities, when she said wryly that she took a great deal from reading about the heroine, 'You utilise situations, that you're *not* going to do that.'

That tall, dark, handsome hero of the novels calls forth an even more complex reaction in the reader than the heroine. In Chapter Five I suggest that, far from offering a sentimental picture of romance, the books in reality tackle the problem of

what it is to to live as a woman in a society which is not made

for her, in which she is part of the dominated class. They paint

a picture in which the different factors which go to make a

woman's possible life are combined in such a way that they provide

a happy ending. All the problems of being disadvantaged in an

unequal society, discussed in Chapter Eight, are countered one by

one, as described in Chapter Nine. The character of the hero,

therefore, sums up the contradiction that men represent the image

of all that threatens women, psychologically and in practical

reality, yet at the same time in a patriarchal society, for most

women, are the only way to security and survival.

The strongest key to this view of the hero, not as lover, but

as the only path to security, was the fact that he had to be

wealthy and successful. Out of my forty readers, only three said

that they would enjoy a book where the hero was poor and worthy

and even they expected the hero to rise in status and wealth

during the book. The successful and dominant hero was an

essential. However, the readers were well aware that the heroes

of the books were just that, and represented an ideal type of the

successful man. Hilary Bourne put it very objectively, 'romantic

novels would like to project themselves as being the idealised

state. I would think the hero does have to have money.'

Mrs. Chamberlain felt it was essential for the story that the

husbands were rich because only in this way could the hero fly out

to the heroine, arrange things for her, move the story on. A

schoolgirl felt that it was important because otherwise the hero

couldn't provide an exciting life for the heroine, 'because he

needs to give presents.' Mrs. Cairns said it enabled him to 'buy romantic things'. Mrs. Daniels pointed out that 'Romances are my fantasy world.' It was necessary for the hero to be rich 'to have the ability to be where he wants at the time and manipulate the story.'

This ability to distance themselves from the reading and see that the money that the hero had enabled the story to be a fantasy where whatever the hero - and the reader - wanted to happen could happen, was frequent. As Mrs. Hayley said the whole point of the books was a day dream of what might happpen rather like dreaming of winning the pools, therefore a poor hero couldn't 'take you away from all this.' Mrs. O'Bannion stressed that the reader takes the hero with a 'pinch of salt'. 'The attraction *is* a bit that the hero is unreal.' The hero, his power and his wealth, was the fulcrum of the story enabling all the fantasies of the reader to be fulfilled. In the strong romances, the achieving of this power to create the fantasy world was more directly through the heroine achieving the same wealth and power.

The aggression of the hero was seen in the same way. While not necessarily attractive in real life, 'I'd like to be dominated for a week, say,' said Mrs. Evans, it was, on the whole, an essential quality of the hero. As Terry Black said, 'I couldn't say I knew anyone as nasty or as stupid as them'. It was part of the power of the hero to create the Utopia. Mrs. Giles felt that Heathcliff was the prototype for the masculine hero, dominating the action. Mrs. Fitzandrews agreed, 'I don't actually fancy the man that is portrayed there [in the romantic novels] very much.

They're like Heathcliff really and why the hell is he so popular.
He's a dreadful creature. . . . You haven't got to cope with him
at home.'

In contrast, Mrs. Banks said, 'Women like masterful men.
They can cope with it.' She felt that the reason for the
aggression was always explained by the end of the book. The
characteristic always necessitated some sort of explanation, that
he was unhappy or had misjudged the heroine, for example. Mrs.
Ireland preferrred 'rounded heroes', 'not like Mills & Boon.' She
felt many heroes are 'brutes' but 'these are in all the stories
even the classics' and she feels they are attractive. She doesn't
like 'dithering.' Mrs. Redding said that aggression 'was part of
the character who is very rich and has everything and this is just
a part.' She put these qualities into a social rather than a
psychological setting when she said, 'Heroes are not like real
life because they're yuppies in a different class, the jet set
type.'.

It often seemed to be the attitude that while the reader
herself did not like the aggression, she thought 'other people'
might. This was a constant feature in the interviews, suggesting
yet another layer of complexity, - the 'other reader'. The
interviewees constantly compared and contrasted their own readings
to those of a possibly 'other reader'. It may be that this was
part of the socialisation of women into awareness of others so
that they constantly modified their own opinions by reference to
those of significant or generalised others. It may have been a
useful projection of feelings they did not wish to own, though

most women seemed remarkably frank in their discussion of quite
intimate areas of their lives and indeed some of the respondents
did say they enjoyed the aggression. I think also it was another
manifestation of the strength of Klein's sub-culture in that
though the women read alone they did, at the same time, hold an
awareness of those other readers.

The aggression of the hero, like his wealth, was seen as a
literary device which enabled the action of the story to proceed.
Mrs. Chamberlain thought it was 'just for the story because it's
not real,' 'real love is attentive and caring with no aggression.'
Harriet Cheyney felt the books 'should be kinder and nicer' and
certainly didn't like sexual aggressiveness. She wanted more
romance, though as Mrs. Cairns pointed out, 'the build up of
aggression makes the story.

The younger readers tended to dislike the dominant hero more.
Anne James spoke of them as 'overpowering' and felt that readers
didn't like this, that the relationship should be, 'Mutual. Not
unequal.' The question arises again: is this because there is
increasing equality and the younger readers are a part of this and
therefore expect equality? An alternative explanation may be that
in an unequal society the younger readers' limited experience
within the family and in school has not led them to be aware of
the structural inequality, which I would suggest leads women to
see one path to security and success as being to gain access to,
or even appropriate, the institutionalised power of men.

It is the very 'nastiness' of the hero which will make him a
success in the world. That success will make him a protector for

his partner.

Many of the books project this aggressiveness of the hero into the sexual scenes. Some historical novels especially can have sexual scenes which are near rape. Most women were very definite that they did not like this sort of scene. Janice Radway, too, found in her research of American readers, reading mostly historical novels, that this disturbed them. Jane Gilbert, (single, in the 19-24 age group and unemployed), put it very vividly and summed up the sentiments of most of the women.

> I get indignant about that. If he's coming on
> too strong I'm sitting there saying smack him
> in the head. I don't know how you can put up
> with letting him do that to you. Give him a
> clock round the ears or something - it's only
> a book but it makes me angry for her that she
> should put up with it.

Again the contradiction that men can be 'coming on too strong', not just sexually but demonstrating power in many situations and 'it makes me angry that she should put put up with it'. This is an anger which often cannot even be admitted in everyday life. It results from a conflict which is unresolvable in a patriarchal society. Men exert power over women. In such a society powerful men are women's only reliable source of power. In the safe situation of reading, women allow themselves to feel an anger which is dangerous in 'real' life. Practically it might make their situation as partners, mothers, daughters, untenable, and it is so far from the ideal of the well-socialised caring, nurturing female it could give rise to great psychological stress.

Mrs. Hayley had exactly the same reaction in that she was

reading a book at the moment where the hero was supposed to hate the heroine, he had married her and she hated him but underneath loved him. Mrs. Hayley was thinking how horrible he was. She would not have put up with that behaviour. She was getting cross with the book. When I asked did she think that some women would like that she replied, 'Some men think that some women like that kind of thing but I don't think any woman could like physical violence.'

The authors Radway cites were not among those read by my readers but most agreed with Terry Black, when she said she didn't particularly like too much sex, especially aggressive sex. 'That's in real life, in the newspapers. You want fantasy, a nice romantic story. Puts you off. Spoils the books really, that paragraph or that page. It just doesn't fit in with the rest of the book.'

The books were a mirror of their lives but not just a reflection. They were the opposite of a distorting mirror. Rather than break down and make ugly reality they reflected a perfected image of the distortions of real life. Romantic fiction is that magic mirror of the neo-Platonists, a mirror reflecting distortion and ugliness as beauty. The books made into a fairy tale the reality that for most women, still, secure survival depends on gaining a man. Anne-Marie spoke for many of the schoolgirls and older students when she felt, 'Now people are reverting back to marriage. People of my age group don't want to get married early but they do want to get married.' She saw slightly older girls were 'into just living together. Now it's

started to revert back.' Significantly she felt 'it could be the

Aids scare but I think they want more security. It's a movement.'

On the other hand the aggressiveness which makes the hero a

worldly success and the structure of the nuclear family where

power is vested in the male, who has exclusive sexual rights and

the right to the domestic labour of the female, make the price to

be paid for that survival a very high one. The aggressive,

dominating nature of the hero is an ideal type of the relationship

of men to women as structured by a patriarchal society.

The conflict was apparent when Jane Gilbert declared,

confronting the imaginary critics of romance reading,

> Being a romantic - reading these books doesn't
> mean that you don't really want equality, that
> you don't want what you deserve. Most people
> think that if you read the romance books
> you'll settle for second best. Just so long
> as the little woman's happy.

So many critics of the genre assume that the stance of the

books is that of the readers. In every area of belief and

attitude covered by the books, the readers were not merely taking

on board the ideology of the books nor was it even the case that

the readers' attitudes were already the same as those of the

books.

The contradiction was always of how women can have success

and security in a society where the dice are loaded against them

and also equality as individuals. The readers' feelings about

equality covered a wide spectrum but very few endorsed the view

that marriage and the love of a good man were the entire answer.

They measured the hidden curriculum of the books against the

reality of their own lives and that of the wider society around them. They were often very much aware of inconsistencies.

Sally Hall, who was a research scientist, could recognise that her own desire for a traditional role in marriage was only satisfying in the light of her high educational standards which would give her the potential always for economic independence, 'I'm quite happy with a traditional marriage. More equal but still traditional . . .' but later, 'If you have got an education, you have some possibility of work. You're there of your free choice. I must admit I like the idea I have a choice and then choose not to [work].'

All the readers agreed that the values of romantic fiction, even of the strong romances, were opposed to some extent to the values of the equal rights movement. All felt that marriage involved some sacrifice of the woman's potential, even where their own personal experience was of equality in marriage. Anne-Marie's mother was a bank official with an early retired husband. Nevertheless she was aware of the wider social background. 'My mum works for a bank,' but there are only 'five women in the whole chain, and the men don't get asked at interview, "Are you having a baby soon?"' Mrs. Platt, at the end of a working life, still felt 'I don't think women have the opportunities really. A woman hasn't got the same chances really because if she's married and got a family, she's got more responsibilities. She can't give everything she would like to her job.'

In discussing equality, the conversation frequently came back to the effects of marriage and motherhood on a woman. This echoed

the answers in the surveys, which stressed the responsibility of the woman always for the well-being of the children. The conflict between security and equality was demonstrated in a comment like that of Mrs. Redding, in the typical situation of the middle-aged woman whose children have grown up and after years of being at home feels a lack of confidence. She thought that we are 'probably beginning to have [equality]. We've got more women now in business particularly in London and particularly women in their twenties.' But for herself, 'I don't know. But women my age if you do go out to work you tend to do the menial tasks.' She wondered aloud why she didn't go back and learn about computers, for instance, but felt she was struggling against the constant small demands of a husband and three sons. The women were aware of the disadvantaged position of women in the workplace also. Hilary Bourne, who held a very high position as a nurse, said, 'I see instances of prejudice. I do. But at the same time I do see instances where things are becoming more equal from the feminist point of view.' In her own sphere she saw increasing numbers of women doctors. On the other hand the patronising attitude from the still predominantly male doctors to the still predominantly female nurses continued to irk her. 'I don't care about myself because I can look after myself. When I'm dealing with very junior nurses I really have to think all the time, is this good practice and if it isn't do I want them to see this, and so many of the male ethic is just so hidebound, it's unbelievable.' Mrs. Chamberlain, at a lower level of the hospital hierarchy, as an auxiliary nurse/care attendant, reported the same thing, that

doctors talked down to nurses. Mrs. Hatfield was a highly qualified secretary, who seemed a very competent, composed and able woman. She was also middle-aged. 'I did go after one job in a solicitors'. Took one look at me and said, "I want a dolly bird." Straight out. So I said you can have a dolly bird but she won't type like I can. . . . I think it's insulting.' Terry Black who was a secretary, started off stating her belief in increasing equality but things didn't seem to be very equal. 'A lot of circumstances make it difficult for women to work. Top jobs do go to men but women nearly get the top jobs. Men are the bosses.'

Mrs. Chamberlain felt most emphatically that women are not equal in society, and she cited the unfair treatment she had felt in trying to arrange a mortgage on her own. She talked of the case of a supervisor's job which a friend had been promised and was qualified for, which was then 'given to a fellow.' It had apparently been the influence of the Union which had insisted on a van driver only being appointed though this was not part of the supervisor's job. Instances of gross discrimination at work were quoted, though these would be very difficult to prove. Many women were anxious to get into more skilled jobs, often *back* into skilled jobs, and were having to take work well beneath their capabilities. Mrs. Elliott had been a laboratory technician, had done courses to refresh her knowledge and was a cleaner, much to her discontent. She regretted having taken the cleaning job - 'It's the worst thing I have ever done in my life,' as she felt it actually stood in her way when she applied for lab jobs. She

was part of a squad of twenty 'girls' doing contract cleaning.

One was a qualified nursery nurse. One was an accountant. She

said there was a complete spectrum of qualifications. You 'have

to treat it as a joke or get really depressed.' All were doing

the job to fit in with family commitments. She had originally

given up work because of the children and said that, 'I'd lost my

identity. I resented it.'

Some spoke of discrimination in getting started. Mrs.

Hayley's daughter, Julie, wanted to be a painter and decorator but

couldn't get an apprenticeship. They felt this was because she

was a girl. However, it was difficult to prove because the

discrimination was indirect in that she was refused on the grounds

she was not qualified because she had not done woodwork at school

- and the boys had. On the other hand, Mrs. Barrow, a social

worker caring for the elderly, felt that it was the very fact that

women were going out to work at all that was bringing about more

equality in society. 'I think it's that more women work and more

women have their own opinions. I think years ago a woman spoke

when she was spoken to.' However, 'in a lot of jobs, it's not as

good as it should be as regards equality with salaries. With us

it went the other way. We have to take equal - we got equal pay

with the men in the Department but then we had to accept equal

conditions. That was fair enough. When you accept equal pay you

have to accept equal conditions.' But then she went on, 'In some

respects women work harder than the man. In our job you do.'

Peggy Nixon had recently been angered by the fact that she

could not travel alone on the joint passport which she held with

her husband - whereas her husband could. 'He can go away on his own on that [the passport] but I can't. . . . I think that's wrong. It should be either or no.'

This picture of inequality in society is mirrored within the family - that spurious power of the woman who controls the emotional life of the family - and then within the books - as it is always explained that the hero's agression stemmed in some way from the irresistible appeal of the heroine. Terry Black said, 'My Mum's the boss. Men like to think they're the top man. I don't think they are. It's the woman's backing that gets them where they are. I think the women are pushing the men.' It is indeed the 'woman's backing that gets them where they are.' Vivienne Porter believed, contrary to the view that equality was increasing, held by most of the readers, that because of the very movement to equality, men had withdrawn their supportive and protective attitude to women so that now women were expected to work outside the house but they were expected to 'go it alone' in the home. In exchange for some help with nappy changing women had lost the man's presence as decision maker and protector and they were expected to take on those roles as well.

The books reflect a view of the absolute importance of heterosexual love and play down the importance of the heroine's work. But work was important to the readers. They recognised the instrumental importance of earning an independent wage and also the stimulation of being part of an environment other than the home. Time and time again they commented particularly on the affective importance of their work, the value they placed on the

friendships they made, the interest and challenge of work outside the home, the wider horizons it engendered.

The schoolgirls saw their future jobs as extremely important. They had high expectations. They felt that if they were successful in getting into the work they wanted, it would not be given up lightly. Anne-Marie wanted to study English and Drama at University, 'that would be really interesting. Couldn't give that up.' Vivienne was looking forward to working. She would never give up her job and would always want to work, for economic independence and also for her own identity outside the family.

Mrs. Platt said of her work, 'I started to work when Robert went to Grammar School, testing all sorts of meters. I was trained. I really enjoyed it.' Terry Black felt, 'It gets me out. It's a release from home. If I sat at home all day. It's a release from the actual jobs of life.' Even when that work was unskilled or closely related to their domestic tasks, it was still enjoyed. Mrs. Redding talked of her work nursing at night, 'I do this to get me out and meet people.' Mrs. Blackwell had a similar attitude. She was the wife who had had to give up work when her husband was made redundant because of not losing benefits, though her wage would have been small.

Mrs. Warden put the alternative dilemma for women. She said she had felt pressurised into getting a job when her children became old enough and felt that none of her friends had particularly wanted to go out to work although they began to enjoy it once they had started. They were fitting in to the expectations of others. She spoke disparagingly of the low wages

as a school dinner lady but at least everyone stopped asking when
she was going to get a job.

She was a strong example of women doing work which suited
their domestic duties but which were merely an extension of them.
She had attended grammar school and pursued an absorbing hobby as
a genealogist, had wide interests and was intelligent and capable.

All the married women, without exception, placed home and
family first and where there was any conflict home commitments had
to take priority. The necessity to care for children was
absolutely paramount, followed by the needs of husbands; all other
concerns came after. Where there were children in the home our
conversation would always turn to them. Family commitments
dominated choice of work, hobbies, the whole pattern of life.
Even single career women such as the nurse tutor I spoke to were
aware of the conflict between family and work. As she said, if
she did marry 'I would be quite willing to concede that I would
have to give a bit - to give on my job side. I would think it was
something that you'd have to work at.'

Most romantic fiction, by definition, holds out marriage or
the stable heterosexual pairing, as the happy ending, the
essential feature for fulfilment in a woman's life. How far does
this accord with the beliefs and experiences of the women
themselves?

On the whole, with much reservation and qualification, the
women agreed. However the reasons were complex and varied and far
from a simplistic acceptance of the conventional ideology of
romantic love.

Even with all the ideology of equality on the one hand and romantic love on the other, some women still saw marriage in terms of financial security. Mrs. Redding,

> I think it must be very hard for the woman to
> be left. She's always the one left. It's a
> struggle. It's very hard. You think it's
> hard when they're little but when they're
> being educated and going on to further
> education. Well, being on your own in those
> days. No good being on your own then or very
> hard if you are.

Mrs. Ireland pointed out that the escapism of romantic fiction is that the 'heroine escapes from poverty into marriage.'

Many were aware that in a society made for heterosexual couples and their families, it could be lonely if one took another path. As Jane Gilbert said, 'Lately I've been thinking of trying to find Mr. Right if there is any such thing.' She said she was coming up to her twenty-fifth birthday so she was feeling her age!

> Nowadays when they're living together they get
> on all right but as soon as they get married
> the friction starts - I suppose it's the
> confinement: when they're living together
> there's always the option of saying enough is
> enough - separating. If you're married
> there's all the legal hassle. It seems so
> permanent. There's some people might feel
> trapped. Well I think I'd choose marriage.
> At sixty-five or sixty that job's gone - or
> even sooner - but most marriages are for life.
> Be more fulfilling too. If you had a job
> you'd be going to work, coming home at night.
> If you were coming home to nobody - to me it's
> not much of a life. If you had someone to
> come home to then . . . .

In spite of their general belief that marriage was desirable many stressed that women can be happy without marriage, often citing examples of women they knew or relations who led rich and fulfilling lives without being married. Many talked of the

advantages of being single for having a career, of being
'professional women'. So that while on the whole they saw
marriage as the norm, they neverthelesss thought that women could
be happy without being married. They often went on to list what
they saw as the disadvantages of marriage, the restrictions on
pursuing work opportunities and the general pressure of having to
put the needs of the family first. The women were engaging with
the conservative stance of the books and working out within their
reading their sense of what the world has to offer. They
recognised the inequalities of life and the fact that the solution
of the books is practical, yet knew it still involved a high cost.

Sometimes there was a quite marked ambivalence about
children. Mrs. Blackwell, 'You never stop worrying about them.
You go to bed and it is never just you, you are thinking about.
If I couldn't read I'd go mad.' Later she said, 'I do love them
but I think I could have been just as happy without them'.

Just as the women could feel constrained by children so
partners could also limit their lives. Just as in a weather
clock, when the man disappeared, the woman would come out. Time
and time again, where the woman was either married or in a
permanent relationship, when circumstances took the man away, the
woman who had been in the background would emerge and her life and
character would expand. Even quite elderly widows after their
husbands had died would seem to come out of a chrysalis, to make a
new start and find hitherto hidden qualities and strengths. Mrs.
Warden spoke of 'having had a mother and grandmother who were
intellectually superior to husbands and had to take subservient

roles.' Mrs. Masters told of how, when her husband died she

started going out. 'After Ted died . . . . He was the old-

fashioned type. Antedeluvian. I'm not telling you the word of a

lie. He was. He thought I shouldn't go out. He thought a woman

shouldn't go out. I had four children and should be in.' Many

women who were at home or in jobs far below their capabilities

were bursting to get out. Able women were buried in the family.

These limits on the lives of the women were reflected in the

way in which the success implied in both the soft and the strong

novels but particularly the latter appealed to the readers.

As well as working out a scenario where the most practical

solution for most women works successfully, the books are for

women and provide particular satisfactions. One of these was the

sex in the books which , as described in Chapter Five, is sex as

women want it. Most readers felt that sexual scenes were

gradually becoming more explicit. Some enjoyed this. Dorothy

Cairns didn't enjoy Barbara Cartland, 'because she's not saucy

enough.' Mrs. Edwards, at the age of eighty-four, thought it

might be useful to teenagers because they 'might be learning.'

Mrs. Redding thought, 'O.K. because you know it happens. It's

real.' Mrs. Lisa Wells thought the sexual scenes, 'spices them up

a bit. Reflecting modern life.' Mrs. Williams felt that it was

more real. She also didn't like Barbara Cartland because 'it

doesn't ring true. Vestal virgins don't seem realistic.' (This

is a charge Barbara Cartland recognises. She never sets one of

her novels later than the Twenties as this is the last era in

which she feels it realistic to have a virgin as a heroine.) Mrs.

Warden found the scenes funny. Some felt these scenes actually got in the way of the plot. Mrs. Wells felt it was 'boring, impeded the plot.'   One of the librarians reported that, 'I've had people who walked in here and said that was a good book, a really good story, but I skipped over the rude bits . . . but they have thoroughly enjoyed the book and they recommend it to other people but when they're recommending it they will say there are a a few rude bits in it but it's a really good story so they're almost taking it because of the story.'

It may be, of course, that people were just reluctant to admit to enjoying the erotic aspect of the books but most people were surprisingly frank about their own sexuality. One woman in the 55 - 64 age bracket explained that she and her 'boy friend' slept together because at their age they hadn't got time to waste waiting until they were married. Others told me details of family life and while they asked for them to be off the record nevertheless talked without equivocation. However, it has to be remembered that the publishers were convinced that sex sells. I think the distinction lies in the integrating of a romantic sexuality into the story and scenes that the readers felt lacked emotion, were 'just about sex.'

A satisfaction to be found in the books which rendered them particularly potent for women was the importance, discussed in Chapter Five, of dialogue. The action of the story is carried forward in conversation. The climax of the plot is in a 'resolving dialogue.' Many of the women told of how important for them it was to talk, to discuss hopes, fears and problems or just

to relive or rehearse the events of their daily lives. By talking, on the one hand, they make sense of their lives for themselves and, on the other, by communicating with others they build relationships.

For those who were married or in stable relationships with men, the communication or lack of it with their partners was highly significant. Very few of the respondents gave the impression that communication with their partner was wholly satisfactory. As Mrs. Blackwell said towards the end of our interview, when talking of how quiet amd reserved her husband was, 'I've never told him all that I've told you like this. I've never talked to him like this.' Mrs. Platt said how quiet her husband was. 'From the time I first started going with him he always told me he never wore his heart on his sleeve. I wonder how we get on so well together because we're exact opposites.' She talked of how she likes humour in the books and her son also has a good sense of humour but her husband, 'in all the years, never heard him laugh.' And then she said, very wistfully, 'I'd like to hear him have a good chuckle.' She talked of how her two sisters came to see her every week. 'The three of us are just the same. We have a really good laugh.' Peter Woods (1976) has written about the importance of 'having a laugh', for school students. It is obvious that in all walks of life and all ages, 'having a laugh' is also an important way of maintaining emotional bonds. Mrs. Blackwell talked of how she needed her books because she and her husband would sit quietly all evening. Her husband doesn't talk much though they are very happy. They often sit all evening,

stereo set with headphones in one corner, Mills & Boon in the
other. She will ask him if he would like a cup of tea or coffee.
She makes one. Then three hours later she will ask again and say,'
Now it's your turn' and that might be the only conversation but
she is not unhappy about it.

Younger or unmarried women also spoke of how important
talking to family or friends was, 'Oh, yes, I've had one good
friend I've had since I was six. I often say we can't afford to
break friends because we know too much about each other.'

Hilary Bourne talked about leaving the stresses of her job
behind when she came home and talked to her parents, 'It's a
safety valve for me. I want to leave it behind.'

Allied to this point about the frequent difficulty of
communicating with partners was a very strong sense of the
supportive nature of female relations and friends. Again and
again women talked about the strength of the bonds between these
female groupings. Mrs. Blackwell, who had talked of her very
quiet husband, had said how much she valued the group of women
friends with whom she had worked because she could talk to them
about quite intimate matters and they'd all got to know each other
very well and shared troubles and pleasures. She had one
particular friend in whom she obviously confided but the whole
group were supportive of one another. Mothers and daughters were
ofen close. Mrs. Hayley and Mrs. Masters had both filled in
questionnaires and when, not knowing that they were mother and
daughter, I rang, quite at random, and went to see Mrs. Hayley,
the daughter first, the value of their respective contributions

had been the subject of some friendly rivalry and the reason for

my visiting Mrs. Hayley first, a topic of discussion. The

importance of these female friendships in connection with theories

accounting for the popularity of romantic fiction will be

discussed in Chapter Ten.

A paradigm of all that reading the books meant to the women

could be seen in the scene that so many described of the

circumstances in which they read within the family setting.

Television played much less of a role in their interests than

perhaps for the majority of the population. Many of the women,

especially those with families, were predictably very much home-

based and their varied interests were often those which could be

carried on in the home and in company with the rest of their

families while they watched television. They did actively enjoy

some of the programmes but as Terry Black said, ('19 - 24 ' age

group, unmarried, living in a stable relationship and working full

time), the television is,

> usually on all the time. Sometimes you enjoy
> it and actually watch. Some time you just
> talk through it. I'm one of those who likes
> noise. I'm in the kitchen a good two hours of
> a night time when I get in and the first thing
> I do when I walk in the door is put the
> television on. And I'm not even watching.

A Sixth Form student, Anne-Marie, said, 'No. I don't watch

television very much. I watch the odd programme but at the moment

I very much prefer to go up to my room and put the radio on. I do

get a lot of videos.' Mrs. Barrett said, 'I don't like the soaps.

I'd much rather have a good read.'

The scene was a living room where partners and children or

parents watched the television. The women were physically present but with their pile of books. While others watched they were separate in the world of the romantic novel. That scene echoed the structure of the larger society and the structure of the family in that society. It is a structure made by men, for their needs and for those of children. Within that structure, the women make a space for themselves and within that space order a world where the ingredients are the same as the real world but they are re-shaped for the satisfaction of women.

This gives rise to a certain uneasiness on the part of husbands or male members of the family to their reading. Some of the remarks, varying from amused and somewhat contemptuous tolerance to outright hostility, were quoted in Chapter Six. This links not only with the material they were reading but with the very act of reading itself. As Cora Kaplan has pointed out, (1986: 123) 'Private reading is already, in itself, an act of autonomy; in turn it sets up, or enables space for reflective thought.' Radway, in her research, found that her Smithton readers valued reading because of its 'time out' aspect, because it allowed readers to do something which was wholly for themselves, unconnected with their almost permanent task of caring for the emotional and physical needs of others. Her informant, 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.' (Radway, 1984: 91)

I think however that part of their unease did have to do with

the material also. The men seemed to be dismissive, often contemptuous, of 'all this romance stuff' but also embarrassed. Males are socialised in our society to shun all displays of feeling. Also, as Chodorow points out, the establishment of a separate identity for sons entails their distancing themselves from everything that the mother represents: caring, commitment, emotion. Men were disturbed by the women's finding emotional satisfaction in a world which they were not controlling.

Men may feel threatened by their partners reading about ideal romances. One reader felt that her husband did feel this way and was careful to reassure him that her interest in heroes was confined to the books.

There are many contradictions and conflicts in the messages women take from the books. But they are all using the material to work out these dificulties of succeeding or perhaps just surviving in a society where the social structures are loaded against them. They are recognising a brutal truth that society is geared to the heterosexual couple and their family and in spite of the fact that so many people's lives do not conform to this stereotype to be outside this pattern is not easy. The even more brutal truth for women is that to be inside is not easy either - which is why women read and re-read these blueprints for survival.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SECOND SEX: WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Some animals are more equal . . . .
George Orwell

So far I have depicted the readers as very active fashioners
of their lives, using the texts they read, purposive in shaping
their circumstances, showing intelligence and humour as they
talked to me about their situations.

However, human beings are social animals. Everything about
people is made in society. 'The self, as that which can be an
object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises
in social experience,' (Mead, 1971: 147) or as Cooley (1956: 5)
puts it, 'Self and society are twin-born, we know one as
immediately as we know the other . . . .'

The institutionalised patterns of society are experienced by
the individual as objective reality. Though they are made by
individuals - who else? - because they persist in time and are
working throughout the society, they can come to have a character
of their own above and beyond the efforts of individuals and
groups. While society is a human construct it has a force and
meaning beyond this. Perhaps Blau and Schoenherr, (1971: 357) are
taking up an extreme sociological position when they say, 'in our
sociological analysis as well as our political thinking, it is
time that we "push men finally out", to place proper emphasis on
the study of social structure', but the strength of social forces
needs to be recognised.

Both at a social level and at the level of human biography the tension between the individual's making society and society's making the individual is there.

This tension can be observed in all humanistic studies and the arguments continue to rage. Usually it is seen as an impossible disjuncture, 'an interminable tension between the subjectively creative individual human being acting on the world and the objectively given social structure constraining him or her.' (Plummer, 1983: 3) However, there have been various attempts to reconcile the two perspectives, as for instance, Giddens (1979) with his ideas of agency and structure. It seems to me that, however difficult, for any meaningful analysis of a social situation the two views must be held. It is perhaps true that they cannot be synthesised, perhaps cannot even be seen together, as a black and white pattern is seen at one moment as black on a white ground or another moment white on a black ground, but this is due to the limitations of the human eye and mind. It does not belie the fact that the factors are both equally there. Too often a study focuses on a structural approach ignoring that situations are in the end made by people, or an interactionist approach which ignores the weight and constraining force of 'social facts', as Durkheim called them. It seems to me essential in looking at any social phenomenon that one has to shift one's psychological set constantly to see in turn the black on the white ground, the white on the black.

The women I interviewed and surveyed then were active individuals, with every decision they made, however small,

creating the life they lived; in combination with all the social

groups of which they were a part, fashioning the social

institutions of marriage, the family, education, the local

community, the political system, etc.

In turn, however, they were *women*, in a patriarchal,

capitalist society, socialised into the roles they played of wife,

mother, daughter - woman.

> Women produce children; women are mothers and
> wives; women do the cooking, mending, sewing
> and washing; they take care of men and are
> subordinate to male authority; they are
> largely excluded from high status occupations
> and from positions of power. These
> generalizations apply, to some degree, to
> practically every known human society. The
> most basic division of labour appears to be
> founded on sex or gender. There are men's
> jobs and women's jobs in the simplest hunting
> and gathering bands and the most complex
> industrial societies. In terms of the rewards
> of prestige, wealth and power attached to
> gender roles, women almost invariably come off
> worse. (Haralambos, 1980: 369)

At the end of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975 -

1985) there was an international effort to collect 'all available

evidence on the position of women', sponsored by the United

Nations and augmented by research carried out by Oxford

University's Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women. They

concluded,

> instead of defining just one difference
> between men and women, women's ability to bear
> children is used to define their entire lives.
> It is used to create and justify a role for
> women that extends their responsibility for
> caring for children far beyond the nine months
> of pregnancy . . . the role that binds woman
> to domestic work and child-rearing holds fast
> throughout her life . . . .
> There can be few generalisations that hold as
> true throughout the world: unpaid domestic

work is everywhere seen as woman's work,
woman's responsibility. (Taylor, Women: a
world report, 1985: 3)

The World Report details how a woman in a Pakistani village

spends around sixty-three hours a week on domestic work alone.

Even in the developed world a housewife works an average of fifty-

six hours a week and if she has small children that average jumps

nearly 40 per cent. 'Women around the world end up working twice

as many hours as men.' (1985: 5) and they add that the irony is

that 'domestic work is looked down on as not being 'real' work at

all - *because* it is unpaid. The circle is finally closed by men's

refusal to take on work that is both unvalued and unpaid.' (1985:

5). [italics in original]

As the Report says there are various solutions that have been

tried. More flexible working hours, job-sharing, part time work,

kibbutzim, paternity leave. However,

Solutions like these, that depend on the good-
will and commitment of men (at home and in
government) seem unlikely to succeed. This is
because the status quo - with women providing
gratis the major part of the world's domestic
services - suits both husbands and governments
very well. They have a ready-made class of
labourers providing, for nothing other than
board and lodging, a whole spectrum of
services that would otherwise have to be
purchased in the market place. (Taylor, 1985:
6)

Contraception and rising educational standards are helping

women in the developing world. Nevertheless, although they may be

at home for less time, even the present average of two children

(Social Trends 1989: 28) in this country, usually necessitates

some time out of the market place and increasingly the

Government's encouragement of care for the old, the sick, the handicapped, 'within the community' and the closure of hospitals and other institutions means that women are finding a new dimension of domesticity.

The U.N. report states that, 'While women represent 50 per cent of the world population, they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive only one-tenth of the world income and own less than 1 per cent of world property.' (Taylor, 1985: 82)

Here in Britain, of course, we have a movement to equality of the sexes which will not permit this sort of gross imbalance. Legislation against Sex Discrimination and for Equal Opportunities has abolished inequality!

Women form 51.4 per cent of the population. (E.O.C., 1985)

In education, there is a ladder of opportunity from which girls seem to fall with increasing regularity. While girls comprised 52 per cent of the entrants for CSE and 'O' levels and did slightly better overall, gaining 55.39 per cent of CSE passes and 51.41 of the 'O' level passes, by the time 'A' levels loom they are only 47 per cent of the entrants. By undergraduate level they are only 40 per cent. They form 32 per cent of postgraduate students. (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1987: 21) In spite of some efforts to discourage gender stereotyping in school subjects, as the Equal Opportunities Commission point out there is still a girls' preference for, and success in, English, History and languages. The only science subject in which girls achieved the majority of passes is Biology, 64 per cent at CSE and 60 per cent at 'A' level.' (1987: 13) There is a trend mentioned by the

Commission for an increasing proportion of girls to achieve passes

in Science subjects and Mathematics since 1970 except Biology

where the increase has been only at 'A' level. There has been a

slight increase in the proportion of girls taking Technical

Drawing, and a small decrease in the percentage of girls taking

Cookery/Domestic subjects. Research conducted by Sue Sharpe

(1976) on teenage girls suggested that the girls' priorities were

'love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers, more or

less in that order'. (1976: 129) The secondary school curriculum

is still gender-based even though efforts are being made to

counteract this. Girls going into traditionally male jobs know

they have to face prejudice and are therefore understandably

reluctant to do so. In the universities and polytechnics girls

still predominate in the arts while boys predominate in most of

the sciences and engineering, the 'heavy subjects'.

Women are still absent from courses on technology and

engineering. Even computer studies which might have been seen as

an extension of office duties come to be dominated by men. In the

question about education on the surveys, though there was a belief

in equal educational opportunities, consonant wtih the accepted

ideology of equality in this society, nevertheless there were

women who still replied that it was boys who should have the

better education.

This does not necessarily indicate a lack of ambition in the

girls, merely a recognition that becoming the token female in a

woodwork class, on an engineering course or on a construction site

will be a difficult route and there is a vicious circle that the

necessary aggression, self-confidence and willingness to be the butt of attitudes that vary from prejudice to patronage are exactly those qualities that are still seen as the antithesis of femininity.

In Chapter Seven, Mrs. Hailey had talked of the difficulties experienced by her daughter in finding an apprenticeship as a painter and decorator and said that the reason given by employers was that girls had not done subjects at school such as woodwork and metalwork, technical drawing, etc.

By all standards of ability, girls underachieve. It can be seen that the existing workings of the educational system favour gender-based teaching. This leads to girls studying those subjects which do not lead so readily to places in higher education as there is more competition for arts-based courses and the policy at the moment is to favour science and technology. This puts girls at a disadvantage in the jobs market. In turn these practices build into the expectations of teacher and pupil alike. Oakley (1981: 125) reports Coleman's work with American high school students, which suggested that girls underachieve because 'bright' girls 'do less than their best because of the contradictory expectation of academic achievement, which has remained a masculine standard, and femininity, which prescribes deference rather than personal accomplishment.'

Eleanor Maccoby (1966) in her research into intellectual differences between boys and girls found that there are no differences until high school, or if there are, girls are slightly ahead of boys. As Naomi Weisstein (1976: 30) says, 'In light of

social expectations about women, what is surprising is not that
women end up where society expects they will; what is surprising
is that little girls don't get the message that they are supposed
to be stupid until high school; and what is even more remarkable
is that some women resist this message even after high school,
college, and graduate school.'

The girls 'agreed that boys do not like girls to do better
than them in schoolwork. The implication is therefore, if you
want to attract boys, don't start by showing how clever you are.'
(Sharpe,. 1976: 135-6) In Chapter Six, Mrs. Ireland had
commented, 'One daughter had to hide 'A' level to get employment.
Boys needed 'A' level to get job.'

In the survey, most of the respondents were overwhelmingly in
favour of equal educational opportunities, whether this was seen
in terms of natural justice, opportunity for self-fulfilment or
the equal necessity to earn a living, especially in view of the
possibility of being the sole support of children or aged parents
which was often quoted. Mrs. Warden had been to grammar school
but now worked part-time as a school meals supervisor. She spoke
of one of her daughters who was studying for a degree, 'More
hopeful for my daughter.' Her degree 'would make her freer.'
This was a typical reaction.

However, there were still a few women who felt that education
was not important for girls, 'Yes and No. In very isolated cases
girls do want a career but quite a few are married soon after
leaving school and then mums.'

Education is not a sole cause of inequality. The

institutions of society act and react upon one another. Education

both reflects and promotes inequalities. If girls and boys

studied the same subjects and achieved equal results the imbalance

in the position of men and women in the labour market would not

necessarily disappear. The constraints surrounding women's

opportunities in the jobs market would still be there. Kelsall,

Poole and Kuhn (1972), in their study on graduates found that

married women graduates were much less likely than women as a

whole to be in employment. It seems that the more highly

qualified a woman, the less likely she is to find a job which

matches her qualifications. One would imagine that the underlying

factor behind this correlation is the fact that people tend to

marry others in the same class with the same educational

background - assortative mating. Male graduates are likely to be

those who will attain success in careers and high prestige jobs.

These tend to demand geographical mobility. Since the same would

be demanded of the woman graduate her career will be the one to

suffer.

Women were projected to form 42 per cent of the labour force

in 1989. A large proportion of these are part-time and temporary

workers and are concentrated in personal service or clerical

occupations. (E.O.C., 1987)

In 1984 New Earnings Survey showed that for women working

full-time, 41.5 per cent worked in clerical and related occu-

pations and 19 per cent in professional and related occupations in

education, health and welfare. The survey data also showed that

part-time workers are heavily concentrated in catering, cleaning,

hairdressing and other personal service occupations. (EOC, 1988:

20)

Barron and Norris (1976) estimate that women outnumber men by

a ratio of five to one in the low paid sector.

> Women occupy jobs which are lower paid, more
> insecure, less likely to bring promotion than
> men. This generalization holds within
> particular trades, industries and professions,
> and across the range of them, and constitutes
> an important dimension of the segmentation of
> the labour market. These processes are
> separate from, but exacerbated by, a
> horizontal division of labour in which women
> are concentrated in particular, often low-paid
> industries. (Barrett, 1980: 156)

As my own sample showed they are often in caring or

supportive jobs - extensions of their domestic role. Even within

this segregated labour sector, men gain the higher grades.

Mrs. Platt spoke of how she had enjoyed factory work in the

war but had had to leave when the men in the forces came back to

their jobs. Almost every woman whom I interviewed when she talked

about work felt that the labour market favoured men.

The two aspects of the extension of the domestic role into

the market place and the persistence of inequality even in female

dominated careers are well illustrated by the profession of

teaching. In Britain although just over half of all school-

teachers are women, three-quarters of them are concentrated in the

primary school sector. Even here heads and assistant heads tend

to be men. In my interviews with librarians, of the fourteen of

the profession I saw, only three were men, but one of them was the

Principal Librarian of the Borough, one was the Librarian-in-

Charge of a Central Library and one had been placed deliberately

as Librarian-in-Charge of a Branch Library in a very 'tough' area of town which was perceived as a potentially dangerous posting.

The segregation of work which results in a situation where some areas are dominated by men and some, the lower paid, by women plus the fact that overall men dominate the higher status jobs are the factors which lessen the effects of equality legislation.

Women's earnings averaged out at 74.3 per cent of men's earnings in 1986, and as the EOC points out 'There is no indication as yet that the equal value amendment to the Equal Pay Act which came into effect in January, 1984, has had any impact on this earnings gap.' (1987: 38) They go on to say 'The ratio between men's and women's earnings is only partially explained by the fact that men and women are occupationally segregated and that occupations in which women predominate are generally poorly paid . . . the earnings differential between men and women persists within particular occupations, reflecting the tendency for men to be concentrated in the higher paid grades.' (1987: 39)

Women are poorer than men. Not only is there this persistent imbalance between women's and men's earnings - it is significant that women's highest percentage, by 0.5 per cent was in 1981, so there may even be a downturn in the gradual improvement, but other factors contribute. As the EOC states, 'Most women spend a period of time out of the labour market (because of childbearing) followed by re-entry into part-time employment, frequently accompanied by occupational downgrading. . . . part-time jobs are almost entirely the province of women, and offer low pay, poor employment conditions and very limited training and promotion

prospects.' (1987: 38) When weekly rather than hourly rates are compared the difference is even greater, reflecting men's opportunity to work longer hours, particularly the chance of overtime which is rare in women's jobs.

The myth persists in Britain of the 'family wage', the idea that most men are the breadwinners and most women's wages only supplementary. In spite of the fact that there are so many single parent households, the majority headed by women, there is still an attitude that a woman's wage is one which will be used to augment a partner's who will be the main breadwinner, so that wages which are completely inadequate to sustain life are permitted in the traditionally female sectors of employment.

Nearly 90 per cent of lone parents are women (EOC, 1987: 7) and more than 70 per cent of divorced mothers end up living on social security with their children. 'Women and children lose an average of half their income after divorce. Men lose out too, but far less, and they make it up again after a few years.' (Toynbee, 1989: 33)

'The impact of divorce and separation on women is considerable in terms of housing, for half of them live in local authority rented accommodation. Whereas a third of divorced or separated men continue to live in a house with a mortagage, only a quarter of divorced women do so.' (EOC, 1987: 44) The EOC suggests that the car is the most important means of transport to work, but whereas 59 per cent of men travel by car, only 38 per cent of women do so.

Although my study showed that women do have a great interest

in public life, their lesser interest in formal politics reflects
perhaps a practical awareness of the lack of welcome for them
there. Of the 650 members of the British House of Commons only
forty-three are women. In a table (latest figures, 1987) which
lists the proportion of women elected to the various Western
European parliaments we come a comfortable last. (EOC, 1987:
54,58) Of the twenty-two members of the cabinet, one is a woman.
Since she is the one who can make the apppointments, the lack of
female representation is an intriguing fact. The imbalance is
repeated in local councils, (although not so markedly), on public
bodies, in the boardrooms, in the trades union. As the EOC point
out, though representation of women in unions has improved during
the 1980's, 'In no union is the proportion of women on the
national executive committtee, TUC delegation or among full-time
officials anywhere near the proportion of women among the
members.' (1987: 58) Many of the women whom I interviewed were
aware of, and resented, the difficulties of getting to the
decision makers in society.

Oakley believes that a major reason for the subordination of
women in the labour market is the institutionalization of the
mother/housewife role as the primary role for all women. This
emphasisis makes paid employment a secondary consideration. In
addition a strong commitment to, and involvement in, work is
largely incompatible with the mother/housewife role. Many of my
interviewees when I asked about equality in society and the
importance of work specifically said that they felt it was too
difficult to be successful in a work context unless one were

unmarried.

There are several factors involved in women's difficulties in the labour market which flow from the essential nature of this first and most significant role of women as housewives and mothers. The emphasis placed on this facet of women's lives becomes institutionalised so that even young women prior to marriage and women who remain single or those women divorced or widowed find a society in which the work a woman does is considered a peripheral interest in her life.

Even more constraining is the fact that this is also a normative attitude, that work *should* be a peripheral interest in her life.

Women's careers are interrupted by childbirth. Most women move out of the labour market when they have children, even for a short time. The maternity rights legislation, though designed to counteract this, can even work to their disadvantage with employers, when recruiting or promoting, passing over women whom they consider might be planning to have children. Anne-Marie commented on the prevalence of enquiring what women were intending in this most private area of their lives as did Hilary Bourne, the nurse tutor.

Again, because of the emphasis on the primary role for women as supportive of a man, they are less geographically mobile than men. It is expected that wives will move house as a husband moves jobs but it is rare for a husband to do the same. In my forty interviews, there was only the woman bank executive in whose family this had happened. I suspect it is a very rare occurrence.

It was significant that this was a high status job. Very often in order to gain promotion, to move through the ranks of a career, it is important to go where the next step is. Women are rarely able to follow a natural progression in career moves in this way.

Because of the interruption to their work from child bearing and rearing or from care for the elderly or chronically sick, women form a large reserve pool of labour. Especially in times of high unemployment many women who are interested in working are not even on the register of the unemployed. I was struck by the number of women who ticked the section, 'unemployed and looking for work' in the survey, often women with quite small children. For many of the jobs in which these women are interested, often part-time or near to their homes to fit in with school times or nurseries, there are far more people interested in working than in suitable jobs available, which leads to low wages and poor conditions. Many of the readers, though qualified for other work, were doing unqualified nursing or were school dinner supervisors. Some were doing night work (usually in elderly people's residential homes) because this was the only way in which they could work while their husbands were baby sitting.

Part-time workers have very few rights, and are not likely to be promoted. Research now being done at Liverpool University on part-time work suggests that conditions can be quite Dickensian. As eighty per cent of part-time workers are women this becomes a woman's issue. In order to qualify for rights the employee must, at present, work sixteen or more hours per week, or eight hours or more if she or he has been with the same employer for at least

five years though it has been suggested that these thresholds

should be raised to twenty and twelve hours respectively. In

1985, 35 per cent of part-timers were working less than sixteen

hours. As the researchers point out, 'Almost all part-timers

working these hours are women with children or other family

responsibilities. If there is crisis in the family such as ill

health or a problem finding a childminder, the part-timer may have

to give up her job temporarily, and this is likely to break

continuity of employment.' (Jacobs, 1988: 6) Most part-timers are

not eligible for sick pay, pension schemes, accident insurance,

maternity leave, statutory sick pay and statutory maternity pay.

Trade unionists in the past have not espoused either the

cause of women or the cause of part-time workers. The demographic

changes which are leading to fewer young people entering the

working population may lead the trade unions to court women a

little more. However while hourly rates of pay are guaranteed

under the Equal Pay Act 1970 implemented in 1975,

> The discrimination against part-timers is far
> more subtle. Part-timers rarely receive
> overtime payments for hours worked in excess
> of their normal working hours, yet, many are
> frequently called upon to work extra hours.
> This flexibility is often stated by the
> employer to be an advantage of part-time
> workers. Despite the fact that many part-
> timers work unsocial hours they receive no
> supplement for doing so, nor shift premiums,
> and it is extremely rare for part-timers to be
> given merit awards.' (Jacobs, 1989: 7)

There is an increasing desire to improve the position of

women - and other minority groups - manifested by the setting up

of the Equal Opportunities Commission, the passing of legislation

against Sex Discrimination, the Equal Pay Act and a general drive by feminist groups. The legislation towards equality does contribute and especially it enshrines in the official policy of society an acceptance of equality even if objective facts lag behind.

Factors such as the greater control over their own fertility experienced by women in the last thirty years or so has meant that women are less tied by childbirth and child rearing. Their increasing participation in the work force, albeit in lower-paid and lower-status jobs means an increasing independence. As Mrs. Redmond said, 'Now in marriage women's wage counts. Years ago a wife's wage wasn't important.' Mrs. Barrow thought, 'If you go to work men treat you as equal. . . . I think there's more equality nowadays.' Barbara Rylands was sure that the fact that women went out to work was the factor which encouraged equality between husband and wife. 'I think so. Because the man can't turn round and say, well, I'm the breadwinner.'

However it may even be that some of these changes have unexpected 'side-effects'. The increasing reliability of birth control has led to more pressure on women to agree to sex, though perhaps the advent of Aids will change this. In previous years, fear of pregnancy could be a useful alibi. Since girls are socialised into being polite and considering the feelings of others, they find it difficult to say 'No', even when it comes to the possession of their own bodies. Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) has indicated the difference in women's sexuality which demands security and a stable affective relationship as a setting, so that

while freedom from fear of an unwanted pregnancy has been an
enormously enabling revolution for women, the freedom to engage in
sex without commitment is not necessarily such an advantage.

Women's increased participation in the work force has led in
many instances to a freedom to take on two full-time jobs rather
than one since research shows that domestic work is rarely shared
equally and even where men do help, this help is not particularly
extensive. As Julia Brannen and Peter Moss (1987: 126) found in
their research, 'lip service is paid to an egalitarian ideology
but women continue to bear the bulk of the responsibility for
children, for maintaining the child-care arrangements, and for the
housework.'

As Deirdre English (1984: 100) has suggested,

> In this sense, men have reaped more
> than their share of benefits from women's
> liberation. If women hold jobs, no matter how
> poorly paid, men may more easily renounce any
> responsibility for the economic support of
> women and children. Thus woman's meagre new
> economic independence, and her greater sexual
> freedom outside the bounds of marriage, have
> allowed men to garner great new freedoms.
> . . . If a woman gets pregnant, the man who
> twenty years ago might have married her may
> feel today that he is gallant if he splits the
> cost of an abortion.

Sex Discrimination legislation has led not only to women
theoretically being able to enter any profession but also men. So
that where once an employer could specify that he wanted a woman
employee he is no longer able to do so. When men enter women's
traditional areas of work they quickly gain promotion and come to
dominate the decision-making bodies. The domination of men in the
teaching profession has been mentioned and in negotiating bodies

and educational departments of LEA's. But the same thing happens in nursing, hairdressing and other traditionally female dominated professions.

Again, Sex Discrimination legislation and an increasing attitude on the part of the women that they should be equal has led to women being represented on hitherto male-dominated committees; television programmes present the 'token woman' on chat show panels and other window-dressing occurs. This does not always result in action but may rather be that 'repressive tolerance' of which Marcuse spoke, where a certain lip-service to the equality of women is paraded but attitudes are harder to shift. To take extreme examples, too often in rape cases women are outraged by the attitude of an elderly judge that the woman 'asked for it', by the fact that, for instance, as Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer (1987) mention in their book <u>The Lust to Kill</u>, while Peter Sutlcliffe was killing prostitutes that was acceptable, it was when he killed an 'ordinary' woman that the police effort and the media interest intensified. The contempt for, and dislike of, women can be frightening. Oakley (1972: 190) quotes a gynaecologist, a man whose profession it is to care for women, Edmund Overstreet, 'When you come right down to it, perhaps women just live too long. Maybe when they get through having babies they have outlived their usefulness - especially now that they outlive men by so many years.' This sense of women as another species seems akin to the way white South Africans can speak of the black population.

Various theorists have attempted to account for the fact that

women are so frequently disadvantaged in societies and to account
for the fact that they rarely achieve a real equality. It may be
that it would be useful to see women, in spite of their numbers,
as a minority group. Louis Wirth (1964: 245) defined a minority
group as 'any group of people who because of their physical or
cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the
society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment,
and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective
discrimination.' The situation of women can be compared to other
groups such as ethnic minorities, the handicapped, racial or
religious minorities. Feminists often cite the comparison between
the treatment of other races and of women. Comparing women to
such a highly visible group as a minority stigmatised by racial
characteristics serves to de-naturalise the subordination of
women. One of the strongest barriers to the effort to see women
as a disadvantaged group is the still continuing feeling that,
however it may be veiled these days, women are *naturally* inferior.
They may need time out during the processes of pregnancy,
parturition and lactation; their muscles are weaker; more
particularly, since they are the 'natural' carers for children, a
job will be secondary. This of course ignores the question that
there are a whole range of physical differences between men and
women. Many women can be taller, heavier, fitter and more
muscular than many men. It is meaningless to single out an
average in order to account for a whole way of treating a group.
While women may need time out when they have children, this time
is getting shorter and shorter as birth rates fall. Of course,

there is no immutable law that suggests that the care of children necessitates the presence of the mother always.

Like race, gender is difficult to hide. It is perhaps easier for some coloureds to pass as white than for women to pass as men. Helen Mayer Hacker (1972) in 'Women as a Minority Group' has explored this idea and suggests both women and black people have 'ascribed attitudes'. Just as blacks have been stereotyped as emotional, primitive, childlike, and she might have added, more vivid in life styles and sexually dangerous, so women have been seen as irrational, emotional, illogical, trivial. Hacker also points out that both groups have been seen as inferior and furthermore contented with their inferiority because of the characteristics that have been ascribed to them. Both groups have in the past adopted deferential behaviour to the dominant white male group, seeking to gain what they want through manipulative behaviour. With the rise of the Black Power movement in the seventies and also the feminist movements and anti-apartheid movements this has changed overt attitudes but from the interviews I did with readers it was certainly a much-used strategy in day-to-day behaviour in the home. Mrs. Redmond talked of how in her marriage her husband makes the decisions, 'And I allow it to happen.' Both groups are discriminated against, in spite of equality legislation, in covert ways still. Black people also seldom occupy positions of power and responsibility, hold little of the wealth of the country. I think that looking at women as a minority group illuminates the situation and the very expression, 'minority', reinforces the irony that over half of the population

is in this disadvantaged position - again the similarity to the South African position.

An alternative is to view women as a class in Marxist terms and to see the subordination of women as stemming from their position in the economic structure. As statistics relating to women and work show, there are few women capitalists in the labour market and they occupy the most exploited areas of the work force. There has been most debate about the position of women in relation to their domestic labour as housewives and mothers but their direct class position as workers is often neglected, perhaps because it is not so problematic.

The domestic labour debate has been much concerned with the way in which women as housewives and mothers fit into a Marxist schema. A seminal paper by Margaret Benston argued that 'women as a group do indeed have a definite relation to the means of production and this is different to that of men.' (1977: 216) The argument as to the precise meaning of Marxist categories of 'productive' and 'unproductive' labour or whether women as a whole are a 'class' in Marxist terms should not veil the fact that women are essential to capitalist production in its present phase. They physically reproduce the labour of the future, they maintain the labourers of the future and of today by their domestic labours, and by their emotional and social work in maintaining the psychological health of their families they contribute to the smooth running of the society.

But the point is that women are a subordinate group even where capitalism does not reign supreme. Michèle Barrett points

to 'women's subordination to men in the pre-capitalist period, in
socialist societies and within the diffent classes of contemporary
capitalism.' (Barrett, 1980: 249) Anthropological evidence is
very varied and anthropologists argue about the significance of
their findings. Many have pointed to women's spirited and
communal opposition to male culture but I think this begs the
question of how far the structures of the society and perhaps even
more important the culture of the society in the sense of ways of
thinking and believing are arranged. It is perhaps an indication
of how recent is the seeing of female subordination as anything
other than natural that when the literature is searched to find
how other societies have weighed the equality of the sexes one
finds that anthropologists have passed over this question.
Ernestine Friedl (1975) points out that male dominance exists to
some degree in all societies. Many nineteenth century
anthropologists believed that there had been societies in which
women had been superior. Marx and Engels drew on this thinking in
their ideas of women and the family. However, as Friedl (1975: 4)
says,' Since the 1930s there has been general agreement among
anthropologists that evidence for matriarchy, past or present, is
lacking. We now know that even in societies with matrilineal
descent-reckoning, . . . it is the men who hold the most prized
offices and exercise basic control over resources.' She goes on
to say, 'that a degree of male dominance exists in all known
societies, if we define male dominance as a situation in which men
have highly preferential access, although not always exclusive
rights, to those activities to which the society accords the

greatest value, and the exercise of which permits a measure of control over others.' (1975: 7)

It is true that gender roles are not inevitable, that particular tasks are not universally assigned exclusively to one sex or the other. However the work of women is similar in most societies and, crucially, that work is usually given less prestige than the work of men and in general the men have more power and authority and usually have power and authority over the women.

For whatever reasons it seems that across the world women are usually the subordinate sex, even in non-class societies.

Writers such as Shulamith Firestone have pointed out that capitalism profits from women's role, firstly as reproducers of labour, as carers for those who labour and for the future labourers, and secondly, increasingly, as labour themselves and indeed as a form of labour particularly important for the working of capital. They form a pool of labour at the bottom of the work hierarchy, stemming from their interrupted working careers. As one of my interviewees pointed out they do the jobs that are menial and unpleasant which she did not think any man would do. Women do not join trade unions, they are not as likely to go on strike or play a militant role. After all they have to go home to make the dinner! Indeed historically, neither the Trade Unions nor the Labour Party have been at all welcoming of, or accom- modating to, women. The sexist divisions, in both, militate against efforts to improve the conditions of women or to enlist women in the cause of trade unionism or socialism.

Firestone and other radical feminists have suggested that

women's subordination, though exacerbated by the class system, does not lie in that system. 'Unlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality; men and women were created different and not equally privileged'. (Firestone, 1970: 8) The subjection of women pre-dates the capitalist system. It persists throughout the world and has existed in varying degrees throughout history. Until recently women's lives were dominated by unregulated child bearing which led to dependence for survival on men. In almost all social groupings there can be observed a mother/child interdependency. Since, of all the animals the human infant is dependant for the longest period, this again leads to a vulnerable situation for the mother and child. It is Firestone's contention that these differences led to the first division of labour based on sex, 'which is at the origins of all further divisions into economic and cultural classes.' (Firestone, 1970: 9)

Certainly, if women's subordination stems from the capitalist system one would expect from a Marxist perspective that where socialism is the state system then women would be equal. However in socialist or communist countries this has not been the case. But perhaps, as the defenders of the theory suggest, true socialism like any other Utopia has not yet been attained.

It seems to me that the vulnerability of the woman/child dyad at childbirth and shortly after lies at the heart of patriarchy. However it is the distinctive characteristic of the human animal that his/her nature is plastic. It has proved very difficult for psychologists to isolate absolute instincts. Man's behaviour is

learned behaviour. The behaviour which builds on gender difference takes many and varied forms but is almost always a power relationship. The inferior status of women is a cultural fact.

In relation to the particular aspects of this study of romantic fiction one can also look at the position of women as a sub-culture having similar values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and lifestyles, especially in relation to a dominant culture. Gérard Klein saw the reading of particular genres as the work of a particular sub-culture and this is appplicable to the reading of romantic fiction. At an empirical level, the women to whom I talked did manifestly share views and ideas and bore out Lillian Robinson's contention that gender cuts across class and race barriers.

However, many socialist feminist critics argue that the divisions between middle class and working class women and divisions between black and white women should not be under-rated and in some cases suggest that these are paramount. My study lacked differences in colour. There are few people of other races in the Wirral but as was demonstrated in Chapter Six the sample came from all classes and across the age groups. It is difficult to operationalise a hypothesis as to whether gender, race or class is the most salient factor in a woman's life and probably the impassioned arguments that have operated in women's groups owe a lot more to subjective feelings than to empirical evidence. It can only be reiterated that in the survey and the interviews which I conducted the common ground was very strong. These women,

though separated often by extremes of income, education, age, yet shared a very common life style and many ideas. For all of them the common factor was the paramount importance of their roles or future roles as wives, mothers, carers. The lives of single, divorced and widowed women, with or without children, were also often centred on the home, with commitments to care - for elderly parents or relations or even other members of the community.

It does seem to me that an explanation which has its roots in the biological goes further to explain the widespread and historical suppression of women. An explanation purely in Marxist terms, however varied to explain the indirect role of women as a group to the relations of production, tends to be more relevant to a capitalist society. Engels in The Origin of the Family saw the modern nuclear family emerge with the beginnings of the private ownership of the forces of production and the advent of the state. He believed that marriage and the family developed to protect the inheritance of private property, to ensure the legitimacy of the heir. Engels thought that the family 'is based on the supremacy of the man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity; such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into their father's property as his natural heirs.' However, in societies where there is more communal property women rarely occupy positions of power and status. Friedl has suggested that men first gain power in small-scale horticultural societies where clearing the land is primarily a male responsibility as is the defence of the cultivated area. She believes this is because wars are usual as

groups compete for land and men tend to do these tasks because a society can afford to lose men but will not survive if too many women are lost.

In all these explanations the biological is only the starting point. In each society varying institutional arrangements perpetuate the initial differences. However, the original convenience of arrangements gives power to the males. There are few groups in society who willingly abrogate power, after all, power corrupts . . .

Oakley (1972) has argued that the mere fact that women become impregnated, give birth, lactate, is not the reason for their inequality because in many primitive societies these processes are hardly restrictive for the woman's life. However, though parturition may be often easier in societies where women are more physically active, a woman who is eight months pregnant is less strong and free than her non-pregnant self. In these societies, women can be vulnerable during pregnancy and childbirth. Oakley herself (1986: 252) refers to Elenore Smith Bowen's description of how, during her anthropological work in West Africa, she had to watch a woman who had become a friend die in childbirth. Unless a child is taken away from a mother immediately there will be some degree of imprinting. Even in the societies quoted by Oakley where children can be fed by other women and there is much communal care of children a mother does know her own child and feels some responsibility for it, is less likely to leave it than is the father.

It may also be that the incipient alliance of women and

children has to be controlled by the men whom it may threaten and therefore laws are enacted, and certain norms of behaviour and values are encouraged, to ensure his control.

It would seem that as Firestone says, sex is the first and most persistent class. It has its roots in the vulnerability of women because of their role in child bearing though this can vary in degree in different societies, that children and women become dependent to some extent on men but that then this becomes a cultural institution. In the same way as economic classes, in return for material protection for the necessaries of life, domestic labour and emotional nurturing of both men and children is extracted .

Capitalism interacts with this process, intensifying and prolonging it. The family is useful to capitalism as a system since the owners of production do not have to pay for the production of more labour or their upkeep. Benston (1977: 224) states that 'the amount of unpaid labor performed by women is very large and very profitable to those who own the means of production. To pay women for their work, even at minimum wage scales would involve a massive redistribution of wealth. At present the support of the family is a hidden tax on the wage-earner - his wage buys the labor power of two people,' and goes on to point out that 'as an economic unit, the nuclear family is a valuable stabilizing force in capitalist society. Since the production which is done in the home is paid for by the husband-father's earnings, his ability to withhold labour from the market is much reduced.' (Benston, 1977: 222)

It is possibly irrelevant what reason or first cause lies behind the subjection of women; whether biological, psychological or social. Equality of opportunity is a value in our society as an ideal even if not as a practice. But women are disadvantaged. These inequalities are not just in terms of actual income and wealth, in lack of participation in the decision- making process or in unequal labour in the home. These objective circumstances become institutionalised into pervasive attitudes and practices that exacerbate inequalities both in the public and in the private sphere.

Because women get lower wages they are rarely able to keep a family without falling into the poverty trap. Women who are heading single parent families are amongst the new poor. Because men have power they are able to monopolise economic advantage. There is no outcry about women's wages, the Unions are not so active, the protests are less. It is interesting in this sphere how few books on the sociology of work pay attention to the position of women.

Freud has said that the mark of the mature adult is the ability to work and to love. Marx pointed to the importance of work and to being in control of the product of one's labours. The result of a bad work situation was alienation. Yet it is taken for granted that it is not crucial for women, (certainly once they are married) to have interesting and rewarding work. The importance of affective relationships is stressed and the more individual satisfactions which come from productive thinking or labour, autonomy, private achievement are ignored. It is taken

for granted that the demands of the domestic roles will be paramount. Not only do men have this attitude but from early in their educational career girls are socialised by their education and also by the role models they see about them to have the same attitude. Viola Klein's (1965) study of women workers found that overwhelmingly women saw their work as secondary to their homes, that it was a source of extra income and of meeting people but not of intrinsic worth to them, not salient of itself. As the U.N. World Report (1985: 75) says of conditions across the world 'From their earliest years in school girls tend to be channelled towards subjects that are likely to be of more use to them in the kitchen and the living-room than in the outside world. They learn art, literature, domestic science and dressmaking while the boys are struggling with knotty mathematics problems, spending hours in physics and chemistry labs, or covered with sawdust in the woodwork department.'

However it is not the overt inequality that is now an issue. It is the hidden agenda by which girls come to choose, seemingly for themselves, the 'softer subjects', to drop out from education earlier. It is a vicious circle, whereby girls realistically are aware that their jobs will be less important than their marriage, so pursue a course which leads to getting work which is not valuable or paid enough to seem attractive compared to being at home with children and later working in a part-time or temporary non-structured job. Sharpe (1971: 130) argues that girls 'are still schooled with the marriage market in mind, although this might be not be acknowledged consciously.'

In the private sphere many of the women I met were well aware that present ideologies suggest that if women are working full time then, theoretically, housework also should be shared. But in my research the traditional marriage was alive and well and existing in the Wirral. Even where wives said their husbands and sons did help, this was not seen by them as a duty but as help to the womenfolk whose responsibility the care of home and children was. And indeed much research (e.g. Social Trends 19: 20) has shown this to be general. The traditional duties in the home are still shouldered by women, but now with the added work of paid employment. In my questions about how far my respondents felt women had gained more equality in the private sphere it was natural that women used their own experience as examples. Many said that there was now equality in the home but demonstrated this by, for instance, saying that a husband cooked Sunday dinner. His wife worked full time but presumably cooked the other six dinners.

There was one aspect that was difficult to label but where I felt that many women who were married or daughters living in the parental home were constrained and inhibited in their decisions by the man of the house. Outright dominance was presumably too Victorian but many women mentioned that although husbands did not go so far as to forbid certain things nevertheless wives were aware of their displeasure and tried to avoid this. Husbands did not care for them to go out too often in the evening. Taking a job which interfered with their duties in the house or being at home for children was not approved. Some held jobs and knew that their husbands did not approve. Mrs. Redmond told of how her

husband had not wanted her to go out to work and they had had a 'bad patch' because of this. 'It hit his ego. "Don't I earn enough. Why do you want to go to work?"' She had insisted because she had felt that if she left going out to work any longer she would only have been able to do a cleaning job. 'Not that there's anything wrong with that.' She felt that the longer she was out of the work scene the less relevant her previous work experience would be. It seemed to me that in many of the homes I visited where the respondent was married at the time, the husband wielded a great deal of authority and the wife's actions were heavily circumscribed by his attitudes.

For a long time researchers on marriage tended to treat the married couple as one and took a functionalist approach seeing the essential nature of the family for society, listing the benefits of the affective relationships within the family as a counter-vailing influence to the instrumental relationships of the market place, seeing the essential nature of both the practical side of child care and the socialisation process which took place within the family. They were mostly men.

Jessie Bernard (1976) was one of the first to see that there were two people in a marriage and suggested the concept of the husband's marriage and the wife's marriage. She brought together the various research findings which implied that actually the two marriages were very different. As she introduces her book, 'There are two marriages, then, in every marital union, his and hers. And his, as we shall see . . . is better than hers.' (Bernard, 1976: 29) She goes on to examine a range of evidence that

suggests that marriage is very good for men and not at all good

for women. Although the physical health of married men is no

better than that of never married men until middle age, after this

they do better. Their mental health is far better. They live

longer than unmarried men. They are happier. They have more

successful careers, higher incomes and higher status occupations.

Compared to unmarried women, married women have much higher stress

levels, they are more often unhappy, they are less physically

healthy. As has been shown by the EOC they do less well in the

labour market. They commit more crime. Perhaps what is most

striking is the process described by Bernard as 'dwindling' into

marriage, which 'involves a redefinition of the self and an active

reshaping of the personality to conform to the wishes or needs or

demands of husbands.' (1976: 54) She quotes Alice Rossi, 'the

possibility must be faced . . . that women lose ground in personal

development and self-esteem during the early and middle years of

adulthood, whereas men gain ground in these respects during the

same years.'(1976: 55)

Explanations for the disadvantaged position of women have

been advanced through three main approaches.

A liberal, individualist explanation sees that as a

historical process various individuals and groups can fall behind

in their rights. They see the remedy for this lying in

legislation and political action to ensure that all groups and

individuals have equal rights as individuals and as citizens.

For socialist feminists the reasons for the disadvantages of

women lie rather in the whole workings of the economic system. According to Engels, (1968: 488), 'The overthrow of mother right was the *world-historic defeat of the female sex*. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children.' For Engels, women would have equal rates in the socialist state. Men and women equally are alienated by the capitalist state; the man from the product of his labour, women by their role as producers of, and carers for, labour and future labour.

For radical feminists the system of patriarchy antedates, infiltrates and can succeed capitalism. The disadvantages experienced by women as a group are due to the power inherent in the status of being male, however that situation first arose. Here their analysis echoes strongly the analysis of minority groups. There is an institutionalised disadvantage inherent in the very status of women, by virtue of that fact alone. In present-day society this disadvantage is compounded by the capitalist system but it stems from the power of every man of whatever class especially within the family. Since the imbalance of power is so entrenched, building upon biological differences though cultural in realisation, the remedies are also difficult. They range from a fairly mild increase in institutionalised child care and equal domestic duties to the break up of the family which is taken to enslave women, to brave new world techniques which will include, according to Firestone (1970: 233), 'The freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every

means available, and the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women' using 'the more distant solutions based on the potentials of modern embryology'.

Whatever theoretical stance is taken it is understood that within the family the male wields power. This derives in part from physical strength. The time when teenage sons become as physically powerful as their fathers is a difficult time in a family. There is usually economic strength, though in a working class household there is a parallel economic challenge when teenage sons equal the father's income. Traditionally the head of the household has been in control of the finances of the household. The struggle for women to have some control over their income has resulted only now in the change from a situation where a husband had to submit his wife's income tax returns. Attitudes, laws, practices about sexuality itself have reflected the thinking of males.

The whole arena of heterosexuality, the ground on which the structure of gender-based divisions, the structure of the family, child care, the sexual division of labour etc., is erected, is a power structure. This is seen at its saddest and most oppressive in cases of rape . As Oakley (1981: 261) says 'But rape and the social attitudes that surround it illustrate the extreme outcome of a system of gender divisions in which the aggressive is set against the passive, the predator against the prey and the powerful against the defenceless.' As she points out 'rape is an extreme expression of a personal relation between men and women

that is basically condoned by law.'

It is significant that in spite of persistent efforts to change the law a husband can still not be prosecuted for rape. The unspoken contract in marriage is still exclusive sexual rights in the women against exclusive financial protection from the man. The bargain is the underlying theme in the 'soft' romantic novel which undercuts the love story. This bargain is emphasised in the 'strong' romance where by virtue of her economic strength the heroine usually has more power over her own sexuality. As her economic power grows so too does her power sexually.

It seems that across the classes, geographical regions, ethnic backgrounds, to be born female constitutes an objective disadvantage. The subject of how far these objective disadvantages become part of the 'world taken for granted ' discussed by the phenomenologists, how far become 'naturalised' and inevitable, commonsense ways of acting, is the subject of Chapter Nine.

CHAPTER NINE

IDEOLOGY

*It is not the consciousness of women that
determines their being, but, on the contrary,
their social being that determines their
consciousness.*
                                    Judith Marx

Romantic fiction utilises the ideology of romantic love to

set out the stories discussed in Chapter Five. The main theme

takes the ideal of modern companionate marriage, that somewhere

for every individual there is another who is the perfect

complement, who will understand all, forgive all, accept all.

Althusser has suggested that ideology acts by

'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects. 'All ideology

hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects.'

(1971: 164)

It is in the field of mass market romantic fiction that the

ideology of love/marriage and the family interpellates women most

directly and obviously. If there is an ideology of love, here it

is.

However, Gramsci's concept of hegemony does indicate the

problematic nature of ideology. As Hall (1977: 346) says of the

work of the media in 'classifying out the world' within the

discourses of the dominating ideologies,

> This is neither simply, nor conscious, 'work':
> it is *contradictory work* - in part because of
> the internal contradictions between those
> different ideologies which constitute the
> dominant terrain, but even more because these
> ideologies struggle and contend for dominance

> in the field of class practices and class
> struggle. Hence there is no way in which the
> 'work' can be carried through without, to a
> considerable degree, also reproducing the
> contradictions which structure its field.
> Thus we must say that the work of 'ideological
> reproduction' which they perform is by
> definition work in which counter-acting
> tendencies - Gramsci's 'unstable equilibria'
> will constantly be manifested.

Women, as the dominated sex-class, to use Firestone's term,

are subject to the ideas of the ruling sex-class.

Women as a class are certainly 'hailed' or 'interpellated' as

subjects in the ideology of love/marriage/domesticity/caring.

Women are positioned within the patriarchal ideology.

The naturalness of women's roles becomes, as Marcuse (1964:

89) has described, one-dimensional, 'the triumph of society over

the contradictions which it contains'. Feminists have pointed to

the way in which the law, politics, the family, language even,

construct women as subjects within a patriarchal discourse.

So that as described in Chapter Eight, it is thought natural

and necessary that girls need to learn home economics; that they

naturally take to subjects in the arts which deal with emotions

and relationships; that their interests lie with people, rather

than with abstract ideas; that the demands of the timetable mean

that they cannot combine all the aspects of education and of life.

Because women give birth and, naturally, wish to care for the

children whom they love, they must, and sometimes, for very

practical reasons do, prefer part-time working and temporary jobs

which fit in with their families. They are thought not to want

and sometimes don't want careers. Mrs. Warden, for instance, had

spoken of how she did not want a job. But the overwhelming
majority did want interesting work and even if their own
circumstances made it difficult for them, the principle of
interesting work for women was firmly held. Middle-aged mothers
like Mrs. Redding when asked was a career important to her, said,
'No. I think it's second place. For younger women I think they
are, these days. I think if I'd had daughters I'd certainly be
[urging the importance of a career] Yes. I think so.'
Explaining why a career had not been important in her own life,
she said, 'Sometimes in your life you've got to be tied with
children. Really, I think so. I don't see how it can be any
other way.' Mrs. Prince, a pensioner said that her 'eight years
of work made me feel worth while.'

Because women bear children it is accepted that they are
naturally caring and want to be at home with them. They do not
need any particular support in this venture because caring for
children comes *naturally* to them. They feel the ultimate
responsibility for domestic chores is theirs.

As the children grow up, the role models of the father with
responsibility as breadwinner and the mother as home-maker are
part of their socialisation. And in spite of the fact that there
are many exceptions to these models, they are the ones promulgated
by every social institution - religion, education, politics, the
media. Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses declare their
ideologies both in the sense that Marx discussed, of a set of
ideas which serves the interests of men as a ruling class and of
capitalism in general - for women a false consciousness - and also

as part of that all-pervading common sense described by
commentators like Gramsci (1981) and by Berger and Luckman (1966).

Underscoring this ideology of the roles and natural
attributes of women is that of love, of heterosexual partners and
of children.

To see love as an ideology is not to be cynical about the
desire of human beings to find a companion with whom an individual
can realise his or her full potential for selfhood. Erich Fromm
(1975: 24) has written

> Love is an active power in man; a power which
> breaks through the walls which separate man
> from his fellow men, which unites him with
> others; love makes him overcome the sense of
> isolation and separateness, yet it permits him
> to be himself, to retain his integrity. In
> love the paradox occurs that two beings become
> one and yet remain two.

Berger and Kellner (1971: 23) have written of the importance
of the loving relationship, especially marriage, and the different
functions which it fulfils.

> We would contend that marriage occupies a
> privileged status among the significant
> validating relationships for adults in our
> society. Put slightly differently: marriage
> is a crucial nomic instrumentality in our
> society.

They talk of

> The crystallization of a so-called private
> sphere of existence, more and more segregated
> from the immediate controls of the public
> institutions (especially the economic and
> political ones), and yet defined and utilized
> as the main social area for the individual's
> self-realization . . . . It is on the basis
> of marriage that, for most adults in our
> society, existence in the private sphere is
> built up.

However, in view of Bernard's (1976) research on the

husband's marriage and the wife's marriage, it is somewhat wryly

that one reads Berger and Keller's encomium for marriage:

> It is here that the individual will seek
> power, intelligibility and, quite literally, a
> name - the apparent power to fashion a world,
> however Lilliputian, that will reflect his own
> being; a world that, seemingly having been
> shaped by himself and thus unlike those other
> worlds that insist on shaping him, is
> translucently intelligible to him (or so he
> thinks); a world in which, consequently, he is
> *somebody* - perhaps even, within its charmed
> circle, a lord and master.

Just so!

Many of the women I talked to stressed the importance of the

ideal love while recognising that in day-to-day living the ideal

can wilt. As Anna Delaney said simply, after discussing the

difficulties of an unhappy marriage, but 'we all need love, don't

we, we can't survive without it.'

The desire for, and love of, children and the love between

partners are strong and primitive emotions. At the least the

outside world can be alienating and the warmth of caring and

permanent relationships cannot be over-rated. It is probably in

this sphere that the popular media picture of feminists as against

men alienates many women. Many readers specifically repudiated

feminism while at the same time espousing many of its ideals of

equality. As Sally Hall said, 'I suppose I'm a romantic really.

I'm all for equality at work but basically I like to think I'm

going to get married and have children.'

When feminists like Firestone (1970: 273) suggest that

independence is by way of artificial means of procreation, 'We

will soon have the means to create life independently of sex,'

women shrink from this 1984 picture.

And as to what seems like a natural desire for children -

> There is no denying that people now feel a
> genuine desire to have children. But we don't
> know how much of this is the product of an
> authentic liking for children, and how much is
> a displacement of other needs. . . . Perhaps
> all this time society has persuaded the
> individual to have children only by imposing
> on parenthood ego concerns that had no proper
> outlet. (Firestone, 1970: 259,260)

It may be that desire for children is socially learned and

until the experiment has been tried we do indeed have no means of

knowing but until then women experiencing a felt enrichment of

their lives from the presence of children in them will continue to

experience conflict between the drive for the security of

affective relationships and the freedom of self-actualization,

that conflict which is the existential condition.

However it is not the drive for Fromm's ideal relationships

of union with integrity, which informs the ideology of love but

the emphasis on the woman's role as supporter and nurturer. The

views of love recounted by Fromm and Berger and Kellner and by the

women I interviewed are not necessarily part of the ideology of

love and marriage which interpellates women into their inferior

and supportive role. The constellation of ideas about love which

form the ideology of love has the characteristics of ideology in

that it is in the interests of a ruling class and it exerts a

hegemony over the subordinate class which is backed by both power

and leadership. It is part of the repressive state apparatus,

(those institutions, according to Althusser such as government,

administration, the army, police, the courts, which are ultimately
backed by force) *and* part of the ideological state appparatus.

Fromm suggests that 'mature love is union under the condition
of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality.' The ideology
of love 'hails' women as the supporters, the carers, the
individual who submerges her individuality into caring, who finds
fulfilment in the fulfilment of others, in an asymmetric
relationship in which those others do not find fulfilment in the
same way. 'Romanticism is a cultural tool of male power to keep
woman from knowing her condition.' (Firestone, p. 166 1970) She is
the complement, the 'seen' in John Berger's phrase, the 'other',
even the passive in relation to the active.

The most obvious site for the enunciation of ideologies is
that of the mass media. By definition they reach into the lives
of most people. They pervade every aspect of social life.

Ideas about the scope of the influence of the mass media have
swung wildly in its relatively short history (for a summary see
McQuail, 1977: 71-74), from beliefs that the media are responsible
for significant shifts in people's behaviour to beliefs that they
are mere peripheral entertainment, the newspaper that wraps
tomorrow's chips, the box in the corner in front of which people
talk, eat, make love, Much of the latest research, as Lee
Loevinger (1981: 246) suggests in regard to television, tends to
show the mass media are neither of these extremes. The media let
us 'share daily a common reflection of society and helps us see a
similar vision of our relationship to society, it builds a common

culture to unite our country.'

It would seem that the mass media set agendas. They provide role models. They familiarise us with situations which we might not meet in our own lives. They desensitise us to situations which might otherwise be alienating, frightening or distasteful. They frame situations. They pose as acceptable certain ways of looking at the world and exclude others.

Since the mass media are part of society - indeed the articulation of society, the picture they present cannot be naïve.

Stuart Hall (1977: 346) has pointed to their role in the hegemony.

> The media serve . . . ceaselessly to perform
> the critical ideological work of 'classifying
> out the world' within the discourses of the
> dominant ideologies . . . . We can speak,
> then, only of the *tendency* of the media - but
> it is a systematic tendency, not an incidental
> feature - to reproduce the ideological field
> of a society in such a way as to reproduce,
> also, its structure of domination.

The media, therefore, are the sites on which ideology interpellates its subjects most clearly and loudly.

The OED explains the etymology of 'interpellation': '(In European etc. parliaments) interrupt order of the day by demanding explanation from (Minister concerned)' This concept then carries a strong sense of accosting the individual and of placing him/her firmly in a very determined place within the discourse.

At the individual level, the level of the subject, to be hailed, while making it difficult to avoid answering, does not mean that one has to answer. And the less commitment the individual has to the conventions, the norms and values of the

discourse, the more it is likely that the interpellated subject can ignore, oppose or subvert the discourse.

When a 'minority group' suffers oppression, when power is in other hands and the group are particularly oppressed, guerrilla tactics, subversive behaviour, manipulation, are the most used tactics against the more powerful majority. The narrative in romantic fiction seems an obvious purveyor of the ideology of love but it is part of the sub-culture of this 'minority' so it is not surprising that it carries several other competing discourses.

At a most basic level the very act of reading is contrary to the ideology of love. The private act of reading is contrary to the ideology which suggests that happiness is to be found in communion with family. It is contrary to the ideology which suggests that women should always be open, receptive and sensitive to the needs of others, both practical and emotional. Reading is centred in the self, a journey away from others. Janice Radway has cited her readers as being very conscious - and to some extent guilty - about this, though still continuing to read in the face of disapproval.

> Romance reading . . . 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. (1984: 83)

My readers also were vividly aware that reading was an activity quite contrary to their partner/wife, mother, daughter roles. Comments ranged from an explicit, 'My husband doesn't like

me to read. He feels I should watch television as he does.' 'My dad doesn't approve of them and complains if Mum or I read then when he is there,' to a defiant, 'The books I read are my own concern' or an acknowledgment, 'my husband is extremely tolerant of my reading habits.'

As described in Chapter Five, beneath the manifest narrative is a latent discourse which undercuts the ideology of love and acknowledges the message of the patriarchal society. It spells out the power of the male in every way and equally stresses the powerlessness of the female in every metaphor of age, physical strength, economic success and intelligence. The love is not between equals.

> 'Maybe he just isn't the one for you.' Jenny
> bit thoughtfully into her toast. 'He is a bit
> overpowering, and maybe a little too old and
> experienced.' (Mortimer, 1980: 37)

But of course he is the one for her. Just as every hero is overpowering, older and more experienced - and frightening.

The latent narrative suggests that in a harsh environment the protection of the male is the solution. The books are not the silly fantasies of 'true love' they are often labelled. They are much more realistic than that. They spell out in an extended exploration of the Cinderella story, the essential characteristics of the relationships between the sexes. And the happy ending of marriage does guarantee an indirect access to the male world and the protection of one of the favoured members of society. It is indeed a solution to the problem. It is just that, if the statistics concerning marriage and, for instance, Bernard's

findings are taken into account, the price to be paid for that solution becomes even higher after marriage.

The stories themselves carry this subversive message but also, as I found from the interviews, the readers are not merely placed as subjects within the discourse of the books. The concept of hegemony suggests that pervasive as ideologies can be, part of the world-taken-for-granted, yet ideology is never a given. There is always resistance, struggle, countervailing influences. Women, as they read, are social beings at the intersection of many influences. They read and enjoy the books but the experience of reading means that they shift and change constantly in their position as interpellated subject and the degree to which they collaborate with that interpellation. As was shown in Chapter Six they read for many reasons and gain many different pleasures from the text.

They are aware of objections to the books. It was significant how, when recounting partners' or sons' objections to the books they laughed at the accusation that the stories were sentimental rubbish. After all the readers, as they said, knew that. They knew the stories did not reflect real love - but they do reflect real success and security. The books are about wealth and income, about upward class mobility, about access to power through a man in the soft romances and directly in the strong romances.

A further subversive strand in the romances was the eroticism. Many enjoyed the sex in the books. As Snitow has shown, this is sex as women like it and as Alison Light said,

perhaps the best sex they get. Snitow (1984: 274) has said of

Harlequin books,

> Though one may dislike the circuitous form of
> sexual expression in Harlequin heroines, a
> strength of the books is that they insist that
> good sex for women requires an emotional and
> social context that can free them from
> constraint.

They were often aware that an overt and lively interest in

sex was not part - still - of the accepted image of women and were

at great pains to hide the sexual content of the novels from

partners. I found it interesting, when colleagues or friends

talked to me of my research, how convinced they all were of the

Barbara Cartland image - the bedroom door being very closed on the

sexual relationship - and how far that is from the majority of

popular romantic fiction today. As Carol Thurston (1987: 141)

remarks, 'If there is any single label that fits these romances

today it is female sexual fantasy, and they are available in

essentially every supermarket in the land.' She talks of 'the

quantum leap the romance novel has taken into the what, who, and

how of sexual content,' and the 'hundreds of articulate readers,

who for the most part are well aware of the role this erotic

fiction plays in both their real and fantasy lives.'

Kate Millett has written bitterly of the effects of

patriarchy,

> Oppression creates a psychology in the
> oppressed. Marxism, though adroit at
> analyzing the economic and political situation
> of such persons has often neglected, perhaps
> out of nervous dismay, to notice how
> thoroughly the oppressed are corrupted by
> their situation, how deeply they envy and
> admire their masters, how utterly they are
> polluted by their ideas and values, how even

> their attitude toward themselves is dictated
> by those who own them. (Millett, 1972: 350)

However, I found this deterministic picture simply not borne out by empirical evidence. Women's practical experience of the inequalities in society at large and in the more private sphere of family and home - though they were well aware at the level of practice that the private *is* the political - led them to to a complex and changing relationship with the texts. They enjoyed the story, lived the narrative yet, at the same time, could distance themselves. The overt ideology of the romance discourse was recognised as a pleasant happiness-inducing device.

However, they saw that the solution offered within the latent discourse was also problematic. Marriage as an answer to the problems of a patriarchal society is a flight into the very problems which it purports to answer. Romantic fiction as escape has always been the paradox of escape into the very relationships which are the readers' real-life problems.

Berger and Luckman (1966:192) have talked of the complex structure of modern societies in which each individual has many roles to play. Especially if these roles are entered into in adult life, as a result of secondary socialisation, they may not be accompanied by 'affectively charged identification with significant others.' They talk of 'manipulative man,'(sic)

> The individual internalizes the new reality,
> but instead of its being *his* reality, it is a
> reality to be used by him for specific
> purposes. In so far as this involves the
> performance of certain roles, he retains
> subjective detachment vis-a-vis them - he
> 'puts them on' deliberately and purposefully.
> If this phenomenon becomes widely distributed,
> the institutional order as a whole begins to

> take on the character of a network of
> reciprocal manipulations. . . . It follows
> that one's own institutionalized conduct may
> be apprehended as a 'a role' from which one
> may detach oneself in one's own consciousness,
> and which one may 'act out' with manipulative
> control. . . . The situation, then, has a
> much more far-reaching consequence than the
> possibility of individuals playing at being
> what they are *not* supposed to be. They also
> play at what they *are* supposed to be.

I would suggest that the roles prescribed by the ideology of

gender are so strongly structured, so gender-related and

neglectful of other qualities, so constructed by others, that the

condition of role manipulation suggested by Berger and Luckman as

a worrying possibility for the future of society could be the norm

for many - most? - women.

While not as manipulative as described by Berger and Luckman,

women do 'internalise the reality of their roles' and 'it is not

their reality.' In my interviews I found that women could and did

retain 'subjective detachment' towards those roles. They could

and did detach themselves within their own consciousness. They

did, to some extent, play at what they were meant to be.

Perhaps rather nearer to the detachment from their roles

which I found was the existential concept of 'bad faith' or

inauthentic existence. As John Macquarrie (1972: 52) has

described the authentic/inauthentic paradigms, the individual,

> is existing as this unique existent, standing
> out from the world of objects and going out
> from any given state of himself; or he is not
> himself, he is being absorbed into the world
> of objects *as just another object*, he decides
> nothing for himself but everything is decided
> for him by external factors.

The exact shade of meaning which accompanies authentic or

inauthentic existence is complex and leads to philosophical

contradictions which individual existential philosophers resolve

in different ways. To live in 'bad faith' or an inauthentic

existence certainly includes that 'everything is decided for [one]

by external factors.' I would like to discard the pejorative

meaning used in the term 'bad faith' and suggest that patriarchal

society sets up social roles for women which are not of their

making. Sometimes these roles 'fit' their occupants and the norms

and values are adopted as their own. Sometimes, other competing

systems of belief serve to distance women from their roles. Ideas

of equality, liberal individualism and feminism serve as competing

ideologies to those of patriarchy. The result is that women live

many aspects of their lives in 'bad faith' in the sense that they

can be detached from their existence. (One recalls that often

repeated plot, mentioned in Chapter Five, which entails the

heroine having to pretend to be someone else or to claim some

quality or status that is not really hers.) The sense of irony

and humour with which so many women both saw their lives and which

they believed so necessary to live those lives was apparent in the

surveys and interviews. Perhaps that detachment and the sense of

fun with which they lived are an attractive leaven in contrast to

the earnestness of authentic existence!

> Existence is authentic to the extent that the
> existent has taken possession of himself and,
> shall we say, has molded himself in his own
> image. Inauthentic existence, on the other
> hand, is molded by external influences,
> whether these be circumstances, moral codes,
> political or ecclesiastical authorities or
> whatever.' (Macquarrie, 1972: 162)

The existentialists' struggle for this sort of definition of the self is, of course difficult to reconcile with Cooley's idea that the self is a social product anyway. We are once again with that paradox that just as on a social level we experience society as objective reality though made by men and women, so at the individual level we experience an inner reality which is consistent and persistent though sociologists would argue that that self is largely socially constructed. Whatever the concepts used to explain the situation, it seems to me that the relation-ship of women to their many roles is extremely complex and changeable and that the ideology inherent in the roles exercises a hegemony which is sometimes very strong and at others treated with a great deal of irony and resistance.

As the women who read romantic fiction talked to me, there seemed to be a hierarchy of roles.

The most internalised was that of mother. Though this is not to say it did not carry conflict and ambiguity. All the women treated the idea of the reponsibility of the mother, whether they had children or not, as absolute. The conflict experienced when a mother could not fulfil what she believed was the proper role was extreme. 'I myself had to go to work when my children were small because my first husband died. I used to hate leaving them.' In the direct questions about role reversal or mothers going out to work the responsibility of the mother to her children was taken as given. 'Women should stay at home with children until the children reach school age unless they have to work because of shortage of money.' 'I agree with it [mothers going out to work]

providing the children are not neglected. I prefer it if the mother can be home first.' In the interviews, the importance of children pervaded the whole conversation. Even where I was interviewing students their role as future mothers was often mentioned. In conversation with women who had children questions which had little to do with children would be answered in relation to them. Often middle-aged women when asked about the importance of jobs or increasing equality would illustrate their ideas by reference to their children. I would have to make a point of bringing the conversation back from what their children thought to what they themselves thought. The salience of children was all important. As a student said, 'the most important thing [was] to have children, care for them and be a good mother. Very important.' She sees children who have been damaged by being neglected, by not being given proper motherly care and she wants to have children and give them that care. At the other end of the age scale, Mrs. Platt talked of the day her son got his degree, 'I had Robert and I got him through what he wanted to do. That's the biggest side of life. When I saw him take his first degree.' The responsibility felt by women for their children's welfare, physical and psychological, the concern they felt that they had brought them up, were bringing them up or would bring up future children well was a source of great anxiety, often shared at length with me though I was a stranger. This was one of the areas where many women specifically said they had felt relief in airing their worries.

The role of wife was the most varied in being distanced. At

first I found it difficult to see any particular correlation

between any social characteristic, such as age or class, with the

degree of distance and began to feel that perhaps it was a

personal and individual matter and depended on the particular

relationship between a particular husband and wife. However then

I realised that there was a consistent factor. There was a

relationship between how married, so to speak, the woman was and

how distanced she was. Those who had never been married or those

who had been widowed or divorced for some time were internalising

the wifely role most. The longer women had been married the more

distanced they were from the role. Helen Vaughan, young and

unmarried, said, 'Yes, I suppose it's really what every woman

wants - a permanent relationship, to have a relationship that's

permanent.' Ann-Marie, still at school, 'It would be nice to love

and be loved. That's really great if you can find it.' Mrs.

Ireland, married with five more or less grown-up children, felt

that 'women need a relationship. On the other hand those not

married have less stress. Stress comes from the family. Those

not married not stressed. You hear so much of the married going

to doctors for help with stress.' Women were well aware that the

disadvantages for women in marriage were operating and often had a

quite clear-eyed knowledge that the old bargain between the sexes

still operated - domestic labour for ultimate responsibility for

breadwinning - though the new expectations that a wife should now

also contribute financially was recognised. It would seem that

the 'cognitive dissonance' the women were experiencing between the

ideology of love and the 'wife's marriage' was being coped with by

distancing.

The housewife role was least internalised. Whether it is the influence of feminism or the ideal of equality and the experience of unremitting housework which has made housewives reject the model particularly pushed by the media in the Fifties of the housewives' role in creating a haven of hygiene, comfort, good food, physical and psychological warmth, I could not discern but there were few who accepted the ideology of the homemaker completely. Mrs. Hayley, who was a widow, spoke about the freedom she felt to turn to her children and say she didn't feel like making an evening meal and 'this you couldn't do if you had a husband.'

Some commentators have pointed to the fact that women reading or viewing media carrying ideological messages can and do demythologise the material and they have used this as evidence that there is no such thing as ideology or that the material is in fact oppositional. Elizabeth Frazer (1987) feels that because the girls she researched were able to deconstruct the ideology of 'Jackie' magazine, then the concept is of no value. 'The whole issue of why, if the "ideology" is as powerful as the girls in this group argue, it has been possible for them to transcend or resist it was a live one between me and them, and was never satisfactorily resolved.' (1987: 417) Lesley Rabine (1985: 260) suggests that 'The genius of the Harlequin Romances is to combine the struggle for the recognition of feminine selfhood and the struggle to make the work world a home for that self.' However the fact that women can recognise the ideological message does not

mean that women are therefore opposing the message. The girls who read 'Jackie', the girls who resisted male aggression in the classroom, the women who read romantic novels with feisty, working heroines, will get married, perform most of the domestic duties, emotionally service husband and children, take lower paid jobs. As Denise Riley (1985: 136) has written, 'An ideology is not reassuringly without "effects" simply because it isn't wholeheartedly subscribed to.'

I would suggest that this process of being at least partially aware of an ideology but nevertheless allowing oneself to be hailed, recorded by McRobbie, Sue Sharpe and others is exactly the same as that which was operating as my respondents read romantic fiction. The only way in which they can come to terms with survival in a patriarchal society is by 'going along' with the ideology. Their relationship to the ideology is complex. In an exactly parallel way to the act of reading in which they are engaging, they slide, in Gerald Prince's terms, from narratee to reader. As they read their own lives, they move from narratee to reader. In Althusser's concept they allow themselves sometimes to be 'hailed' but sometimes they refuse to answer, in spite of the compelling nature of interpellation. Part of their lives at times, they do indeed live in 'bad faith', though not in the pejorative existentialist sense but with an irony and detachment not surprising in a class whose members are disadvantaged but not always conscious of their position in society; in a class which is surely in itself but not for itself.

It has to be remembered that the psychological cost of

opposing the good wife/good mother/good homemaker ideology, which goes to make the image of woman in general, is very high. The social sanctions are very real and lie in the inequalities discussed in Chapter Eight. Women who resist these labels consistently will, on the whole, end up poor in instrumental terms and isolated in affective terms. Women may know that they have a right to equality but if, as happens with ideology, men see it as common sense that their rights are paramount, the psychological cost of resisting this attitude constantly and in many reiterated instances is just too high and indeed will, as they realise, put great strain on the relationship, whether with partners, fathers, brothers etc. Since women are - naturally! - more sensitive to the nuances of emotional relationships they will find this situation stressful and put up with a great deal to keep the peace.

Mrs. Barrett talked of her husband who had eventually left home after having had an affair with a neighbour for years, 'I lived on my nerves. I think towards the end - *yet I couldn't say he was a bad husband* but when you've been ignored for seventeen years. He told me seventeen years ago he didn't want me.' (My italics) Mrs. Daniels said that whatever happened between husband and wife, it was essential that 'women should ensure he feels head of the household.' Anna Delaney, when asked what she would do if there were a difference of opinion with her husband, 'It wouldn't be a fight to me. I would rather give in gracefully. I can't do with tension.'

It was noticeable also that the people who publish, edit, and write romantic fiction had a varying relationships to the ideology carried by the books.

The men who publish the books, especially the soft romances, I did feel, in spite of denials, had a patronising attitude to their readers. They are women's books and I felt that it was merely a marketing exercise indeed analogous to the selling of soap as Harlequin started the trend mentioned in Chapter Two. It is only a subjective impression but I did gather a feeling of giving a not very highly rated consumer what she wanted.

Editors were leading relatively 'feminist' lives, with independent and well-paid work and in their replies, they disassociated themselves from the readers while at the same time defending the readers' right to read what they wished. But they did not see the readers as women like themselves. 'I do occasionally think of people, like, I don't know, the average reader and I do bear them in mind. My mother or something. And I just talk to as many people as I can.'

Perhaps it was true that the authors, as the publishers insisted, had the best of both worlds. Perhaps because by this view authors were a sort of meritocracy amongst women, upwardly mobile from oppression to fearless feminist, and also obviously because they were utilising it, on the whole they did not oppose the ideology of the romance. Just as those who used to climb the ladder of class by way of education espoused the selection process which had supported them, so romantic authors espouse the ideology which has allowed them to progress.

Many of the authors who answered the questionnaire
subscribed to feminist views as well and felt that these could be
incorporated in the romance formula. By making the heroines more
spirited and giving them speeches in which they claimed more
equality they felt the values of independence could be joined to
those of romance.

> Heroines of romantic fiction have to an extent
> moved with the times in that they are gutsier.

> In a good marriage (like my own) there will
> have always been equality anyway for most of
> the time. Where friction does arise because
> of career or political difference between
> partners, it must add meat to a novel, as it
> adds spice to the marriage in real life.

> I do not believe 'romance' necesarily runs
> counter to these values (equality, feminism,
> etc.) at all, as long as the equality within
> the depicted relationship is clear.

> With the increase in fem. lib., income etc. a
> new woman has emerged - financially
> independent, for a start.

On the other hand, some of the authors specifically rejected
the values of feminism.

> I tend to follow the traditional view and I
> think many women like the 'Happy Ever After'
> syndrome. Personally I am anti-'Women's Lib.'

And of course the attitude of cheerfully ironic bad faith
operated with some of the authors even more explicitly than with
the readers.

Perhaps I'd better quote this contribution anonymously. My
'English Romance Writer' sent me the profile she had written for
her American readers, which tells them that she married 'my own
special handsome hero in 1981,' that she has 'a lust for life and,

being a Libran, adore[s] all things sensual and beautiful,' tells

of her previous 'turbulent, battlefield of a marriage.' As she

says, this is basically all true but she also sent me three

single-spaced, closely typed, foolscap pages of theories why

romantic fiction pleases so many women.

> The kids are at school, the husband is
> preoccupied with work. He has reverted to
> going out drinking with the 'boys', fishing or
> watching football on the telly. He no longer
> bothers to look smart, is developing a gut and
> going thin on top. What is there left for the
> woman? . . . Her man expects sex when he's in
> the mood, but it's pretty low-grade stuff. He
> comes in drunk, perhaps, breathing beery fumes
> over her, thinking he's the world's greatest
> lover but suffering from brewer's droop. Can
> you wonder that she dreams of a handsome hero?
> With regard to the sexual aspect, most men
> haven't a clue what turns women on. Our
> Handsome Hero always knows! His love-making
> is slow and seductive. The setting is right -
> a full moon, a beautiful bedroom, a tropical
> beach. He is experienced, knows how to play
> on a woman's body like a finely tuned
> instrument. What he says to her is very
> important. He's a man she admires - usually a
> hard, tough being who is ruthless with his
> enemies but has a sensitive streak underneath
> that only she can reach. She, of course,
> tames him in the end.
> The ordinary real man looks upon the woman as
> an extension of himself during the sex act.
> He doesn't know or doesn't bother to find out
> what she wants. He thinks because he's
> enjoying crushing her into the mattress and
> pumping away, that she is experiencing the
> same feelings. I know several women who
> either watch the telly over the man's
> shoulder, wishing he'd hurry up and finish, or
> do the next day's shopping in their heads,
> reaching the row of tinned peas in the
> supermarket before he's done! Or - and this
> is where we romantic fiction authors come in
> and long may it continue for it earns our
> daily bread - she's pretending that he is the
> Handsome Hero she's been reading about. This
> makes it bearable, if not phsyically
> satisfying at the time. She can also use the
> same method for erotic fantasies when her

husband has gone to the pub.

As my English Writer says, 'Sure, I'm a Great Romantic, but it's said that the Greatest Romantics become the greatest cynics.' I'm not sure all my other informants have quite that degree of detachment from the ideology of love but there would be a certain amount of amused recognition. Many of the points she makes so forcefully came out in my research - the necessity for sex to take place in the context of emotion, the importance of communication, the importance of the aggressive, successful male whose caring is reserved for the heroine.

Nevertheless, the media are agenda setting, so that while the hegemony could be, and was, resisted, reading romantic fiction suggests that women's lives are framed in marriage. Both the manifest love story and the latent rational survival plan are cast within the discourse of patriarchy. They give only one answer and while the readers are aware that reality in no way matches the books, the stories do not suggest alternatives. The books exclude everything but the couple and their developing relationship so that questions of class, family relationships, children, race, work, are excluded and, therefore implicitly irrelevant to the lives of women. A particularly important point is that, since everything but the heterosexual relationship is excluded, the effect on that relationship of the excluded factors is also mystified.

Since, as Chapter Eight demonstrated, inequality seems to occur in all ages and in all cultures it may be that bad faith or

detachment from lived roles is a rational response.

Popular romantic fiction is the carrier of the patriarchal ideology at its most overt. I found that the response of the interpellated subject is complex and ever changing.

CHAPTER TEN

SUCH STUFF

We are such stuff as dreams are made on.
                              William Shakespeare

Do you think I can listen all day to such
  stuff?
Be off, or I'll kick you downstairs.
                              Lewis Carroll

A librarian talked to me about the way in which readers would come to her desk with ten or more romances to take out. 'I don't know why they bother,' she said. 'They're only like the stories you tell yourself at bedtime to make you fall off to sleep.'

Romantic fiction is the day dream *par excellence* - or *non pareil* as the Regency romances would have it. This is one of the most direct uses of the books, to induce a happy and relaxed frame of mind. In order to do this, they have to present the most pleasant and utopian of circumstances, devoid of any threat, all problems solved.

Practically, it is time out, relaxing in itself for the woman who has many roles to fill, the majority stressful. Reading is an activity which gives space.

As the readers told me, the books are mood-changing.

Most of the readers gave as their first reason for reading the books, the obvious explanation that they were escapist.

> Because I get involved in the story once
> reading it and they are nice to read.

> To dream and read about the life of other
> people.

Because it takes me out of myself.

But this begs the question as to why it is this narrative form which provides woman's favourite form of escapism. Why is it this simple formula of the love story which can provide the escapist dream for so many women?

It seemed to me that the most plausible explanation, the one that was borne out by the women in the surveys and interviews, was that women recognised the inequality of their position. They also recognised the solution offered by society and they used these real facts to construct a playful fantasy in which the problems of their lives were resolved in a utopian way. They are not sentimental yearnings after 'true romance,' revenge fantasies or that desire for the nurturing hero/mother but practical survival 'dream-plans' which rarely do, but could, happen

It seemed from the women I surveyed and interviewed that they were using the books to meet their social circmstances as the class, minority group, sub-culture of women. Within the books women took the circumstances of their lives within society and created a successful scenario.

The books do suggest a daydream. But it is an active reworking of the possibilities of women's lives.

> Research and further theoretical analysis
> suggest that Freud's emphasis on the daydream
> as a representation of unfulfilled wishes or
> conflict and as a more childlike kind of
> thought may be too narrow a view. Rather the
> material we have reviewed suggests that
> daydreaming may be one of the highest of human
> capacities. It gives the human being a power
> of time, a capacity to surmount the
> limitations of space and limited daily
> experience to move into the magical realms of
> the possible . . . . It represents a new

and intriguing stimulus field or environment
which is an alternative to the external
physical or social environment in which we
dwell. (Singer, 1975: 254)

It is couched in the patriarchal ideology which means there
is no conflict with the dominant ideology, the daydream is within
the parameters of the only adventure route accceptable for most
women. It is ironic that the overt message it bears is supportive
of patriarchy and yet individual men were reported by the readers
to feel so threatened by it. And indeed because the ideology is
so overstated it may be that even at this level it holds within it
the seeds of its own disruption. It is women who sue most often
for divorce. According to writers like Bernard it is women who
gain least from marriage. Is the disparity between the ideology
and the reality just too great to be contained?

Beneath the ideology of love however is the mythic element
detailed in Chapter Five.

There is an intriguing paradox. The ideology of love, while
seemingly constraining, so conflicts with reality that it may
provoke its own disruption, while the myth of survival that lies
beneath the stories, seemingly oppositional, or at least
subversive, by suggesting a way of coping, of surviving within
patriarchy, may actually be ameliorative and therefore supportive
of patriarchy. At every deeper exploration of these so simple
stories the possible readings multiply.

Romantic fiction is carefully constructed to meet head on the
bases of disadvantage under which women live and construct a story
in which these disadvantages are answered and reconstructed into a

success story.

One of the problems about discussing romantic fiction as a genre is the difficulty which many commentators recognise, that the genre of romantic fiction includes some very different types of narrative. The explanations advanced very often do not fit all the different sub-genres and in fact the different sub-genres are presumed to be meeting different needs. Modleski, for instance, has two different sections on Harlequin and on Gothics. Speaking of her work on Gothics, Harlequins and soap operas, she says, (1982: 32) 'While the three forms under consideration are by no means entirely dissimilar, each seems to satisfy particular psychological needs, and each is importantly different from the others in its narrative form.' Yet it is interesting that my readers, while often preferring, say, historicals, or the strong romances about successful women or even the near pornography of the sub-genre more or less started by Lace and including the Jackie Collins 'oeuvre', saw them all as 'romances', rather to my surprise, I must admit. Many women read several types of romances. For instance typical answers to the question in the survey, 'Could you give the names and/or authors of three romantic fiction novels you have read recently?' included, as well as the usual Mills & Boon, Catherine Cookson and other standards, some very diverse answers.

> The Mysteries of Udolpho, Mrs. Radcliffe;
> Wuthering Heights (again!), Emily Bronte.
>
> Jackie Collins, Lucky; Judith Gould, Sins;
> Danielle Steel, Family Circle.

Danielle Steel, Barbara Cartland, Maeve
Binchy.

Penny Jordan, If Love is Blind: Room with
a View, E. M. Forster; Octavia, Jilly Cooper.

Poldark Series; Camille, Alexandre Dumas.

Time and time again the readers would move from discusssing

Mills & Boon to discussing Shirley Conran in the same breath.

Far from the sub-genres listed under 'romantic fiction' being

different it seemed that women readers saw them in some way as

being the same. This was very difficult to analyse as, at an

obvious level, a Mills & Boon romance is sending a very different

message from Shirley Conran's Lace, a Georgette Heyer Regency is

very different from Catherine Cookson, Barbara Cartland has little

in common with Jackie Collins. Yet the readers consistently

seemed to put them together according to some unspoken criterion.

Certainly it is difficult to bring a constant psychoanalytic

theme to bear upon all these different romances. It would seem

commonsense that women are getting different satisfactions out of

identifying with an innocent young heroine falling in love and a

successful woman making a career out of sexual satisfaction or any

other business yet the readers placed them together.

However, the difficulty vanishes when the attraction of the

books is seen as an antidote for social rather than psychological

problems. After all, if, as a result of their experiencing of the

oedipal situation all women yearn to be nurtured, what is the

attraction of the strong woman romances or the sex blockbusters in

which women meet little nurturing?. All the books are success

stories. In a world which is inimical to women, in which inequalities can lead to actual unhappiness and distress, they just suggest a different, successful ordering of the options that women are offered.

Moreover, as Carol Thurston has pointed out, critics do not usually explain the boom in romantic fiction which started in the Seventies. As Rabine (1985: 250) says commentators 'have not talked about why these romances have gained their phenomenal popularity just in the past ten to fifteen years.' Rabine suggests that the reason is that Harlequins began to help women reconcile their work and private selves and Thurston puts forward the increasing popularity of erotic romances as a response to women's liberation in the sexual area. However, again the explanation particularly fits if we look at the books as presenting this utopia wherein the oppressive circumstances of women are met. When political scientists study revolutions they have to explain the fact that in societies where the mass of people are in abject misery there is rarely revolt. They have coined the phrase the 'revolution of rising expectations' to denote the fact that it is very often when people begin to experience some relief from harsh conditions that revolutions occur. Could the fact that this was the period in which some real advances in equality for women were made be the factor which led women to want even more, both in real life and in their leisure fantasies?

The very disadvantages detailed in Chapter Eight are met and answered within the books.

Commentators quoted, from United Nations researchers to localised studies of British women in their homes, point to the one defining fact of women's existence, that they are the bearers of children. This fact is the basis on which their lives are built and the starting point for the inequalities noted throughout the world and throughout history. In the books the heroine rarely has children. In the soft romances they are absent unless at the end of the book the promise of children is a part of the future marriage. In the strong romances or the sexual blockbusters, there can be children but they are incidental, often merely the dynasty-founding which is apparently part of the success story so obviously transposed from the stereotype of the successful man. Within the pages of romantic fiction readers do not mother. In the same way as they need to be orphans so they need to be non-mothers - free of all ties.

The World Report noted the heavy burden of domestic work shouldered overwhelmingly by women. Even in seemingly equal marriages the wife still bears the majority of the responsibility for domestic chores. In the books there is never any of this responsibility. The only domestic duty usually mentioned is that most creative one of cookery. In romantic fiction, homes are always beautiful, warm, welcoming and the housework done to a standard that the advertisements merely aspire to. It is striking in an age when domestic servants are rare how many books feature servants. Even in contemporary romances the hero seems often to be the proud possessor of a quite substantial domestic staff or the action takes place in hotels, usually also owned by the hero.

In the books housework is performed by others.

As the U.N. report noted, women received only one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one per cent of world property. This may be so for the heroine at the beginning of the book. By the end of the story she is co-owner (in the soft romances) or independent owner (in the strong novels) of a vastly increased stake in the world's wealth. Very often not only do women have less money than do men but as single parents they have the responsibility for the welfare of children, on less money. In the books they escape this worry. They are not poor.

The inequalities in regard to education and job opportunities were also noted. In the books education is not stressed. The books are not about self-fulfilment but success, and education as a route to success is perhaps too uncertain. However, the range of jobs now ascribed to the heroine are many and various. For a long time they were secretaries or nurses - supportive roles. Since the rise of feminism the books have made a token bow to equality by trying to provide more glamorous jobs. However, though glamorous and often extremely unusual, they are marginal. They are in fields like art or the theatre where success is not seen as based on a continuing programme of work or a long commitment to learning but to individual flair and inspiration and often to chance and luck. Again, in a somewhat unrealistic flouting of the sector effect of gender difference in jobs, they have portrayed women engineers or deep sea divers. The awareness of the difficulties experienced by women who do venture into men-only jobs is raised by depicting this prejudice as part of the

hostility of the hero subsequently allayed in the final love scene
- when the heroine perhaps decides to give up the job after all.

In Chapter Eight the drawbacks of the frequent part-time
working undertaken by women were listed. In part-time work there
is little chance of promotion or success within the work
situation. In the books the heroine is always extremely
successful at her job and promotion is always in the offing - even
if to be finally refused.

Women were seen as less successful than men in work because
they are not able to be as geographically mobile as men. Their
lives are tied to partners and children. They tend to move home
when the head of the household moves his job. In the books there
is a great stress on geographical mobility. At the slam of a door
or raised voice the heroine takes a plane half way round the
world. At a pang of re-awakened love she will leave the Greek
islands and return to a cottage in Cornwall. The jobs she has
take her to isolated farmhouses, South Sea islands, America,
Australia, the South of France. It is the antithesis of a life
which is physically circumscribed by the demands of family. Also
the norms of what is safe and proper for women dictate that girls
are not so free to travel about as men. It has become more and
more a characteristic of women that either they themselves are
afraid to be in strange places or to be even outside their own
homes during the hours of darkness or their male partners or
parents are afraid for them. This seems to be an increasing trend
whereby the lives of women are becoming more and more
circumscribed. Often under the guise of male protectiveness women

are not allowed out. In the books they are free, fearless, adventurous and can go where they will.

More women than men sue for divorce. As detailed in Chapter Eight, it seems that marriage does not suit women. As Bernard (1976: 307) has stated, she 'did not start out with the conviction that marriage was bad for wives. Nor did I expect this book to turn out to be a pamphlet on the destructiveness for women of marriage, with its "structured strain".' She has talked of how women 'dwindle into marriage', of how, contrary to Berger and Luckman's description of marriage as the one relationship which builds up the self of *people*, it does indeed actually build up the self of *men*. In the books, the promise is that marriage will work for women.

The imbalance in the sharing of the load, so that even women who work full time still do far more of the domestic chores, is countered in the books by a hero who does his fair share and often insists that he wait on the heroine.

The fears that girls have about being higher achievers are allayed by making the heroine bright but not too bright, in a good, interesting job but not too high a flyer, by the job being interesting but not so absorbing that it challenges the choice of marriage and family which for most women in real life will be the better bet.

The general cultural attitude which still, in spite of equality legislation, can see women as a subordinate, inferior group is countered in the books by the fact that the hero is shown, in the end, to value the heroine. While she accepts her

destiny of marriage, the hero sees her acceptance of him as a

precious and valued gift. There is none of the idea prevalent,

especially in masculine sub-cultures, that every woman is out to

get a man. As Modleski (1982: 48) points out,

> While the novels are always about a poor girl
> finally marrying a rich man, preferably of the
> nobility, they must be careful to show that
> the girl never set out to get him and his
> goods. This is of course a simple reflection
> of the double bind imposed upon women in real
> life: their most important achievement is
> supposed to be finding a husband; their
> greatest fault is attempting to do so.

As suggested in Chapter Eight, the whole arena of

heterosexuality is a power structure. In romantic fiction this

basis of real life inequality is explored and a utopia created in

which all threat is resolved. That most extreme instance of

heterosexual inequality - rape - is contained and made safe.

There have been hazarded explanations for the relationship of the

aggressive nature of some of the sexual encounters in the books,

aggressive sex, near rape, rape. The instances in the books, I

feel, merely represent the continuum of popular cultural

representations of what heterosexual sex is, the possession of the

female by the male. It has been suggested by some that the rape

scenes represent women's secret desire to be raped. Susan

Brownmiller (1976) has talked of the female response to the

pervasive male ideology of rape as a mirror-image female victim

psychology.

Unanimously, my readers declared their distaste for these

scenes. Of course, the desire may be at a deep, unconscious

level. But at a conscious level the fear, distress and loathing

of rape was absolute. Many ascribed such scenes to 'American' books and refused to buy or borrow the same author's work again. What the readers did like was romantic sex, sexual encounters framed in emotion. Where the author could convincingly rescue any over-aggressive sex by explanations of love, the reader, like the heroine, would allow herself to be wooed into belief in the hero. Where this was unconvincing she would reject it. However, many readers explicitly pointed out that this was in the books and that in real life they rejected this behaviour. It seemed to me that the books meet the very real fear that women have of being sexually attacked by men and neutralise it by explanations of a love and sexual attraction so strong it cannot be denied. This is not a very convincing excuse in life *or* in the books. And women are highly uneasy and ambivalent about the books' attempts to treat sexual aggression in this way. As Audrey Thomas (1986: 11) writes, 'It worrries me that millions of women are buying the violence and abuse, the *humiliation*, along with the happy ending. He didn't really mean it; I drove him to it anyway.' [italics in original]

At the same time as the books meet the inequalities listed in Chapter Eight, the manifest story also picks up the ideology of patriarchy, of women's roles, depicted in Chapter Nine. Within the books, women are caring, supportive, nurturing. They are educated sufficiently to be worthy partners, but not too much. They do occupy work roles that are interesting but marginal and/or supportive. They are inferior to the man in every aspect but interesting enough to catch his attention. By definition the

books set up the relationship between the heterosexual pairing as the defining relationship, the most important relationship adults have. The books are the ultimate carriers of the ideology of love.

Many writers have speculated as to the reasons for the popularity of the books. And it seems to me that these explanations have two broad characteristics. They are often imposed and they are usually psychoanalytic in approach.

Some of the speculations can be just that. They contain the writer's ideas about why women find these books so attractive - without asking the readers. However, I feel that the reading which a literary critic makes as s/he studies a popular genre may not be the same reading that a regular romance reader will bring to the books. It seems to me that one cannot just read a text and infer the attitudes of readers. It is essential to research the views of the readers and then to respect those views. Similarly it is even more patronising to make assumptions about the wider social and psychological circumstances of those readers without investigation.

The second characteristic of the explanations is that they are almost always psychoanalytic in character.

When women's great interest in, and avid reading of, romantic fiction has been explored most critics have come to see the background to this phenomenon in psychoanalytic terms.

As Modleski (1984: 57) says,

> Our analysis of Harlequin romances yields
> fresh insight into some Freudian concepts
> popular culture critics routinely apply to
> formula literature. The theory of repetition

> compulsion - 'the idea that art derives from
> some persistently disturbing psychic conflict,
> which, failing of resolution in life, seeks it
> in the symbolic form of fantasy' has often
> been invoked to explain readers' addiction to
> formula literature. We have seen that
> Harlequins, in presenting a heroine who has
> escaped psychic conflicts, inevitably increase
> the reader's own psychic conflicts, thus
> creating an even greater dependency on the
> literature. This lends credence to the other
> commonly accepted theory of popular art as
> narcotic.

Jeanne Allen (1989: 113) has rightly praised Modleski's book but when she talks of the 'brilliance of its insight into the interaction between female readers and texts psychologically', the question arises that while Modleski's thesis is lucid and well argued how do we know that the readers are really 'longing to disappear', (Modleski, 1984: 37), have hopes of 'transcending the divided self.' (1984: 37)? How far can Modleski be sure that readers reading for pleasure, rather than as literary critics, share her feeling that 'a great deal of our satisfaction in reading these novels comes, I am convinced, from the elements of a revenge fantasy, from our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees.' (1984: 45)? 'The disappearing act then, may be a temporary success, but it is an ultimate failure. In the end, women readers re-emerge feeling more visible - and hence more guilty than before.' (1984: 56) Do women feel more guilty than before? How do we know?

In answer to the survey questions, they gave opposing answers.

> I can lose myself for a while and then get
> on with other things refreshed.

> I enjoy it because it's something light you
> can read and relax with whenever you want to.

> Puts me in a happy mood. Relaxing. Sends me
> to sleep at night.

> Entertains you and keeps my mind busy.

It may be that we can ignore what women say and feel but I think this a dangerous and arrogant practice which can miss some of the realities of the situation completely. It is important to bear in mind that if, as seemed to be the case, the women I spoke to were taking the real materials of their existence and constructing a success story then it was important that the heroine should *not* 'bring the man to his knees.' It is difficult to conquer the world and protect a family from that position. Success necessitates a hero who will be aggressive and achieving.

Many writers about women's situation draw on the work of Nancy Chodorow. Radway, for example, utilises Chodorow's theories which suggest that women are always searching for the mother figure and the nurturing they received as infants. Radway (1984: 138) is careful to stress that 'there may be a correlation between *some* romance reading and the social roles of wife and mother.' [italics in the original] However, although she is stating that it is the social roles of mother and wife which fail to offer the nurturing which the separated daughter craves, it seems to me that it is the psychoanalytic aspect of being a woman to which she ascribes the unsatisfied desire for the mother and it is a psychological need within each individual woman which she feels is answered by the reading of the books.

As pointed out in Chapter One, Chodorow (1978) suggests that

because it is the mother who provides the early intense parenting

for both boys and girls, daughters identify themselves with the

mother. Because they are of the same sex this leads to

difficulties for the daughter in establishing a separate identity.

This difficulty is emphasised because for the same reason the

mother tends to experience her daughters as extensions of herself.

In our culture the father tends not to be as consistent a presence

day to day and therefore does not offer any alternative love-

object. The lack of sexual difference leads to a prolonged pre-

oedipal state in the girl's development that tends to continue her

dependence on the mother, her difficulties in establishing a

separate self and an ambivalence about the yearning she feels for

her mother's love. The end result of this process, according to

Chodorow, is an internalized portrait of the female self as a

self-in-relation, which is later generalized as a view of the self

as an extension or continuation of the world and others.

> An oedipal girl's 'rejection' of her mother is
> a defense against primary identification,
> hence her own internal affair as much as a
> relational affair in the world. Insofar as a
> girl is identified with her mother, and their
> relationship retains qualities of primary
> identification and symbiosis, what she is
> doing, in splitting her internal maternal
> image, is attempting by fiat to establish
> boundaries between herself and her mother.
> (Chodorow, 1978: 124)

While turning to her father as an object of erotic desire,

she, nevertheless, retains the affective ties with her mother. 'A

girl's rejection of her mother, and oedipal attachment to the

father, therefore, do not mean the termination of the girl's

affective relationship to her mother. Rather, a girl's dual

internal and external mother-infant world becomes triadic.'
(1978: 126) Chodorow feels this makes for an incomplete oedipal
resolution. This means that 'women situate themselves
psychologically as part of a relational triangle in which their
father and men are emotionally secondary, or at most, equal to
their mother and women.' (1978: 199) While heterosexual women
desire men, they need women. They need mothering.

This theme is picked up by Radway - and is utilised by other
writers - in many of her suggestions throughout her research on
reading the romance. It is indeed a much used explanation when
many of the 'problems' of women are explored.

She writes of the social isolation of the heroine at the
beginning of the story, noted in Chapter Five. 'When she is
plucked from her earlier relationships and thrust out into a
public world, the heroine's consequent terror and feelings of
emptiness most likely evokes for the reader distant memories of
her initial separation from her mother and her later ambivalent
attempts to establish an individual identity.'

However while this may be so at some deep, unconscious level,
at the conscious level it did not appear in the answers of the
women I talked to. Again, this may be a matter of culture. Most
of the research on the readers of romantic fiction has been done
in North America.

Many of my respondents talked of the fun of the books being
the story of a heroine who, at the beginning is alone and free
rather than alone and frightened. Most women are, as all the
critics say, surrounded by other people who make demands upon

them. Women are taught from an early age to be socially sensitive

and considerate of other people's feelings. Even the youngest

girls were sensitive to, and talked of, the importance of

feelings. In order to enjoy the fantasy then first one has to

discard the dependants. As one starts the imaginative journey one

must be free in order to go where the heroine goes. The

attraction of the fantasy is that it *could* happen. One can't

imagine being the heroine and living the book if one has not

already jettisoned the teenage children or the real mother who

expects you to help with the housework. In fact, as the readers

kept saying, it is that imaginative leap into orphanhood which

gives the time and space away from the family which most critics

mention.

It seemed to me in talking to the women that the dream was

primarily an answer to their position as women in the world. It

is an obvious fact that romantic fiction is women's writing,

women's reading, women's sphere.

The construction of a gendered position is a social

construct. When one examines any question relating to women other

than purely biological research (and even this is often a social

construct) one is looking at women and a construction of self and

a social position deriving from their social gender. It follows

therefore that one is first and foremost looking at a social

question.

Human beings are the most plastic of animals, the least

constrained by instinct and biology. This is not to say that the

biology and psychology of the individual do not form important

parts of the core personality but socialisation is also important,
particularly primary socialisation but also secondary
socialisation. Human beings do adapt and change in response to
the influence of family, peer groups and the wider society. The
taking on of such strong roles as wife and mother does feed into
the self. The much researched socialisation of students into
doctors is an example of the strength of work roles. How much
greater will be the effect of life roles which have even stronger
social expectations.

While not rejecting the insights of the psychoanalytic
movement into the construction of gender I think it can, and has,
led to an ignoring of the very real facts of social gender and the
concomitant social inequality. If we limit ourselves to looking
at the lives and circumstances of women in psychoanalytic terms
only, we do women a disservice because this constantly suggests
individual psychological answers. This obscures the very real
social problems and makes individual women always responsible. It
makes the woman her own enemy and, by veiling the inequalities of
society, contrives to perpetuate those inequalities. Theories
which continually ascribe the position of women or their behaviour
to oedipal conflicts ignore the reality of women's social
position, the inequalities which they suffer here and now.

The woman living in a slum in the Gorbals with several young
children or the middle-aged housewife caught between the demands
of adolescent children and ageing parents or the teenager with
eating disorders under the social pressure to conform to the image
of woman have social problems which would be eliminated in a

different society. Yet again and again we turn the problem back
on the woman. As Firestone, (1979: 72) quotes Marcuse,
psychoanalytic therapy becomes 'a course in resignation'. Just as
women's inequalities have been medicalised in the past it is
increasingly the pattern to ascribe them to incomplete resolution
of psychoanalytic processes. It may be that dark, threatening
males represent the dangers of sexuality but we should not lose
sight of the fact that they may represent, first, dark,
threatening males.

It is noticeable that so many psychoanalytic theories such as
Chodorow's start from the premise that women are incomplete
personalities, that where boys establish a separate identity girls
do not. Have we moved on from the view that women are inferior
because we lack a penis to the view that we are inferior because
we lack a stable identity?

One of the difficulties of psychoanalytic explanations is
that they are very difficult to operationalise. It may be that
women are motivated to read so much romantic fiction by a desire
for nurturing, for the male mother as, for example, Radway and
Anglela Miles (1986) believe.

Radway (1984: 140) suggests that 'because women move out of
their oedipal conflict with a triangular psychic structure intact,
not only do they need to connect themselves with a member of the
opposite sex, but they also continue to require an intense
emotional bond with someone who is reciprocally nurturant and
protective in a maternal way.' The books are supposed to provide a
hero who will perform this nurturing.

However, mindful of this thesis I explored the idea as much as possible with the readers I talked to. It can, of course, be argued that readers are not missing actual mothering or actual nurturing but the primal infant/complete mothering phase and therefore this will be at an unconscious or subconscious level which cannot be reached except under analysis. However, at the conscious level, my readers although, of course, happy to have others care for them as would be expected, did not particularly exhibit this desire for mothering. At the most practical level many of my respondents were still at school and were being mothered. Even many of the middle-aged women still had mothers with whom they had very close and loving relationships. Radway mentions (1984, 96), and again draws on Chodorow, that in contemporary society women no longer have the network of female relations and friends, of 'sisterhood', that had obtained in previous generations and believes this may contribute to the need of her readers for mothering. This may be an example of cultural differences between the United States and Britain (though the media would suggest that women do have friendship networks in North America). Indeed the north west where I was doing the research may be distinctive even in Britain but I made a particular point of asking about female friends and relations and the women I interviewed were very rarely socially isolated. Most had a very obvious 'best friend' in whom they confided. Many of the women were particularly close to sisters. Even the one woman who did seem to me more isolated than most, Mrs. Castle, because of illness which made it difficult for her to leave the house,

lived in a pensioners' court, where she was strongly supported by the mostly women friends and neighbours who lived around.

It may be that the geography of my research has led to particularly strong female networks but I think to take as given that women no longer have this support is dangerous. My respondents certainly talked constantly of the links with their women family and friends. At some deeply buried level the women may have been yearning for a primal mother but most had their real mothers and exceptionally strong and supportive female networks.

An important point which the psychological explanations lack is perhaps that while the making of the self is a process mostly accomplished in childhood it is by no means completed then. It is a continuing process. The taking on of adult roles is not a mere donning of a cloak by an already constituted personality. The role of the wife or the mother has a profound effect on the self of any woman.

I had felt from the beginning that the exploration of women's reading of romantic fiction might cast light on the whole area of women's lives, on their views on marriage, work, family etc. And this I found. In all the areas we touched upon women expounded upon the background to their lives and their feelings and attitudes.

They gave pictures of their leisure, the way in which they were looking for private space, the way in which television contrary to much research, was not a major factor, - given, of course, that these women were, by definition, readers. The

picture is supported by David Morley (1986) in his study of television watching. The women in the house do not have control of choice of programmes and while they are physically present they are not as much an audience as might be supposed.

They gave their ideas about how a woman should be. They stressed independence, 'spunkiness', and particularly that sense of humour, qualities that seemed to me rather more projected on to the character in the books than really stemming from the writing.

Most women felt that the books, though moving towards a slightly more 'liberated stance' were still opposed to the values of equal opportunity, etc. - a conservative few welcoming this.

Their ideas about how fair society is now were mixed, almost all however seeing that society had not become less fair but many taking the view that though, theoretically, equal opportunity culture was here, in practice in their own lives there was still a long way to go. One of the areas where they did feel progress had been made was an advance from the older women's day where men did not work in the home at all and indeed older readers talked of the absolute shame felt by a man if he had to push a pram or bring home the shopping, usually only in the case of the wife or mother's serious illness. Nevertheless even where the women talked of how the men in the household did participate it was apparent from what they said that it was just help. The man lent a hand to the woman who had the majority of the work and the overall responsibility.

Women felt that there were more opportunities for equality in the wider society but it was still very difficult to grasp them

and that while the opportunities could be there it took unusual circumstances to be able to take advantage of them. Again and again women said that they felt that to succeed in the work sphere it was an advantage to be unmarried. It seemed significant that they specified that it was best to be unmarried. They did not say that children were the bar. It would seem that they feel that as soon as they are married or in a similar relationship that work becomes difficult, has to be relegated to a secondary place.

Nevertheless most women wanted to work. And work was very important to them. It had a very important validating function. The independent income led women to feel that they had more importance, a greater right to speak in decision making in the home. Secondly, there was a fulfilment in doing a job, however humble, to the best of their ability and it was striking how conscientiously jobs were undertaken, even the most lowly, and how ambitious schoolgirls were about their future work. Thirdly to do a job outside the home gave the women self-confidence. Perhaps because for women work is a scarce resource and often the 'permission' to work has to be fought for, there was little time-serving or waiting for retirement or work-weariness apparent as they spoke. In an ideal society if women and men men did share jobs the burden of forty to forty-five years continual work for men could be shared and work would be valued by everyone.

I asked about the importance of marriage since the message of the books is that marriage is the one fulfilment for women. Since ninety per cent of people marry it is not surprising that most women felt that it was very important. Nevertheless almost all

agreed that it was quite possible to build a fulfilling life without marriage. There were many anecdotes in relation to this topic of sisters, aunts, friends who had happy lives without being married, bearing out Bernard's reporting of the better mental and physical health of single women. The salience of marriage for all is well represented, though, by the fact that all the young, unmarried women and girls expected to marry or form a long-lasting relationship. It does not seem as though a single life is widely viewed as an option in our society.

The women explored their ideas about men and their relationships with men. Again and again the importance of communication was stressed. It may be that this reflects the particularly British stress on the socialisation of men into non-communication! The link with the novels was apparent. In the books the hero listens and talks. The climax to the books was often one of the dreams of the women, that of the resolution of all difficulties in a relationship within a talk in which all secret hopes and fears were met.

In all these areas I think there is much further exploration to be be made. Perhaps it is a mark of a rewarding topic that with every angle it illuminates it suggests further avenues of exploration. I certainly found that at every turn there were further areas I should have liked to explore but for the limitations of time.

At a very practical level it appears that the occupational group of writers has been little researched, perhaps because of

the popular image of the author as a creature alone wrestling with his/her muse. While the popular image of the writers of romantic fiction may not accord with this, they had the same difficulties, in that in order to write it is essential to be alone, so there is little support. They invest a great deal of time and effort in work which, on completion, may not be successful. Because of their isolation, meeting with others in the same line of business was extremely rewarding. Again it is not surprising that people whose trade is words enjoyed meeting and talking with others.

Another occupational group who would reward further investigation were the librarians. The first important point is just how much influence they have on what people are reading. It has to be remembered that the books in the library are, on the whole, chosen by the Librarian-in-Charge. Especially as libraries try to become more lively places she has a great deal of influence on the atmosphere of her particular library, initiating activities such as story-telling for younger children or special displays for various interests. Libraries are important places for a great many people. Many of the readers, apart from enjoying the trip to the library to browse among the books, valued the social contact with the librarian and with other borrowers. It was a pleasant place to go for young mothers with small children and for older people with limited ability for outings. The role of libraries in the day-to-day life of the community can be overlooked. This possibly stems from the fact that public lending libraries seemed most used by the least 'important' members of society, those not gainfully employed and therefore not a significant group for the

social researcher.

In regard to the contents of the books, I found that the strong story line of this genre was an interesting ideal type for an exploration of the attraction of narrative and the qualities of narrative which draw the reader compulsively on through the text.

In regard to the more general areas of the project, at every interview it seemed to me that there were wide areas of what women were saying that should be explored further. One exploration of a seemingly trivial and frivolous pastime was indeed a way to explore the wider issues of women's lives. Within our interviews the readers talked of aspects of their lives that are not always open to researchers. There is much talk in the media and in academic circles, of post-Feminism, the New Woman, the fact that women, having gained equality, are now taking it for granted and working out new ways to live based on this equality. My sample were broadly representative of the population in socio-economic groups, age, education, number of children, etc. etc., as shown in Chapter Six. And for them, while they knew there were more opportunities out there in the world and the school-aged girls had higher ambitions, feminism has touched their lives only to decorate the dreams. Until equality is not merely on the statute books but in everyday attitudes within the home, community and workplace, women will be disadvantaged.

I had started out to explore how far reading romantic fiction can be seen as accepting of the patriarchal society, how far oppositional or subversive. From talking to the readers the question seemed more and more irrelevant. It was not a question

of for or against, but this game-playing exercise with the materials of a woman's existence.

I hope that this study has contributed to research into the reading of romantic fiction by carrying out an empirical investigation in Britain.

I also hope it suggests that to be a woman is a social construct and that, therefore, explanations of women's circumstances should be looked for, firstly, within that social sphere. To offer explanations couched only in psychoanalytic terms, is not only intellectually inconsistent, but also can perpetuate the disadvantaged situation of women and perhaps thereby we become 'the servants of power'.

It seems to me that still women's lives are circumscribed by patriarchy. Their opportunities are less within the larger design of their lives and day to day their lives are encompassed by their practical child-bearing and caring role, by their domestic work and by their role as nurturers. It is rather daunting to sum up all the hours of talk and all the shades of opinion in a sentence but, except for a very small minority, neither in their homes nor in the wider society did my readers experience a really equal society. And in this, too, I think they were representative of women generally. In reading the books they take the reality of their life chances and refashion them into a possible answer.

The women's recognition of the ideology being promulgated does not mean that it is necessarily without effect. The books play an agenda setting role. The notions of heterosexuality,

marriage, the female role as inferior but caring, are offered as the world taken for granted. Alternatives are excluded. Very often in my interviews women would mention alternatives but not for themselves. They would only visualise a different way of living for other people, perhaps for children or business women, or younger women or even 'women in London'. The structure of their lives was strongly felt.

However, critics who have suggested, therefore, that women are in the end, being fed propaganda, are perhaps unaware, as they have not asked them, that the readers themselves know this. There was always that constant movement in reading the books where the readers would slide from being the narratee or the implied reader to an actual reader, from a preferred reading to a negotiated or an oppositional reading. The laugh of the Medusa, to use Hélène Cixous' phrase, is often a wry smile!

And, crucially, this way of reading seemed to be mirrored in their day-to-day lives. Sometimes, as Berger and Luckman feared, they play at what they are supposed to be.

The women who read the books are lively and intelligent - and with a sense of humour - rather like their ideal heroine! They could be very detached, from the books and from their own circumstances.

Erving Goffman (1968: 280) has written,

> Our sense of being a person can come from
> being drawn into a wider social unit; our
> sense of selfhood can arise through the little
> ways in which we resist the pull. Our status
> is backed by the solid buildings of the world,
> while our sense of personal identity often
> resides in the cracks.

By taking the circumstances of their lives and by shaking up the kaleidoscope into a pattern which pleases them, women are resisting the shape of society. By separating themselves from those lives rather than meeting the difficulties head on they are ironic, distanced, living in the interstices. It may be that it is something of a suspicion of this practice which leads the men in their lives and indeed the wider society to be so dismissive of the books on the one hand, so suspicious and uneasy on the other. Every aspect of their reading, from the act itself which leads them to withdraw from their supportive, attentive role to the type of fiction they read, takes the lives which society prescribes and turns them to a sort of benefit.

Until the materials with which women can make their lives show radical change, they will continue to read the popular fiction which shows that material arranged to their best advantage. Stuff and nonsense, perhaps, but such stuff as dreams are made on.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE - READERS

1. Could you give the names and/or authors of three romantic fiction novels you have read recently?

2. Have you a favourite author(s)? If so, could you name him/her/them?

3. Why do you like this/these author(s)?

4. Why do you enjoy romantic fiction?

5. Do you read other types of books? If so, could you give the names of three books you have read recently, other than romantic fiction?

6. Do you read a daily/Sunday newspaper? If so, could you name it/them?

7. Could you give the names of three of your favourite television programmes?

8. How many romantic novels, approximately, do you think you have read in the last four weeks?

9. How many hours per week, approximately, do you think you spend reading romances?

10. At what time of the day do you usually read?

11. What qualities do you like the hero to have?

12. What qualities do you like the heroine to have?

13. What sort of features go to make up your ideal romantic novel?

14. Have you read romantic novels which you did not enjoy? If so, what are the features which make a poor story for you?

15. Do you think the stories reflect real life? In what ways are they 'real ' or 'unreal'?.

16. Do you think that the heroine's feelings and attitudes are like your own? In what ways do they differ from, or reflect, your attitudes?

17. Do the hero's attitudes and behaviour resemble men in real life? In what ways do they differ or resemble?

18. Do you own romantic novels as well as borrowing? If so, about how many do you have?

19. Do other members of your family share your enjoyment of romantic fiction? What is their attitude to your reading?

20. Do you think reading romantic fiction helps you to deal with real life?

NOW, WOULD YOU MIND GIVING SOME MORE GENERAL OPINIONS?

21. How do you feel about married women with children going out to work?

22. Do you think education is as important for girls as it is for boys? Could you give reasons for your answer?

23. What do you think of families where the wife goes out to work and the husband runs the household?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

24. What is your age group?

Under 15	.....	45 - 54	.....
15 - 18	.....	55 - 64	.....
19 - 24	.....	65 - 74	.....
25 - 34	.....	75 and over	.....
35 - 44	.....		

25. Are you

Single	....	Widowed	......
Married	....	Separated	.....
Divorced	.....		

26. If you are, or have been, married, at what age did you first marry?

27. Do you have children? If so, please give number of children and their ages.

28. Are you employed

Full-time

Part-time

Self-employed

A student

Unemployed and looking for work or between jobs

Full-time housewife

Retired

29. If you are employed, what is your occupation or job title?

30. Occupation of Head of Household, if not yourself.

31. At what age did you complete your full-time education?

Under 14	.....	17	.....	21		.....
14	.....	18	.....	22 - 24		.....
15	.....	19	.....	25 or over		.....
16	.....	20	.....	Still a student		.....

32, What was the last type of educational establishment you
     attended full-time (e.g. school, college, polytechnic etc.)

Pilot study variations from main study:

Question:

15. Do you think the stories reflect real life?

16. Do you think that the heroine's feelings are like your
     own?

17. Do the hero's attitudes and behaviour resemble those of
     any partner/former partner?

APPENDIX 2

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

The following were the list of topics which I tried to ensure were covered during each interview.

GENERAL:

Had the respondent always been an avid reader?. What particular type of romantic fiction did she enjoy?

THE HEROINE - and matters arising:

How far did the reader identify with the heroine, how sympathetic was she to the types of heroine in her favourite 'sub-genre?'

Given ideas about increasing equality, equal rights, 'women's lib' etc., how did the respondent feel that these were reflected/opposed in romantic fiction?

What were the reader's feelings about equality - were women equal - 1. in the wider society, 2. in the family/home situation?

Was outside, paid work important to the reader? How did she feel about the place of work in her life? How did she see the balance of paid work and home life? How essential was marriage in a happy life?

THE HERO - and matters arising:

What sort of qualities did the reader enjoy/dislike when reading about the hero? This tended to lead to talk about how the heroes were usually 1. rich, 2, aggressive. Therefore, went on to explore ideas about the importance of these two and, by extension, these qualities in real life. Ideas about the increasing sexual explicitness of the novels and how the reader felt about this.

POLITICS:

Explored ideas about how effective the reader felt, by discussing

her feelings about 1. formal, and 2. more informal politics.

LEISURE INTERESTS:

Television, newspapers, magazines, etc.

QUESTIONNAIRE: Explored any unusual, significant or difficult to

understand answers to the questionnaire.

Obviously, these topics were only starting points for very open

discussions, which ranged far and wide, on the topics which are

the concerns of romantic fiction.

APPENDIX 3

SOCIAL CLASS GRADING

I have based my social class gradings on those usually used by market research organizations and by academic researchers. They are derived from the Registrar General's scheme used in the Census but modified to produce a more generalised classification than the 20,000 occupational titles used by the Census. I have drawn particularly from the classification used by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising and their Social Grading on the National Readership Survey (Monk, 1985)

The broad categories are:

Social Grade

A	Higher managerial or professional or administrative.
B	Lower managerial or professional or administrative.
C_1	Skilled or supervisory or lower non-manual.
C_2	Skilled Manual.
D	Unskilled Manual.
E	Residual.

More detailed examples of the classification of occupations are given in Appendix A of the IPA Social Grading system book.

The head of household is that member of the household who either owns the accommodation or is responsible for the rent, or, if the accommodation is rent free, the person who is responsible for the household having it rent free. If this person is a married woman whose husband is a member of the household, then the husband is counted as the 'head of household'. If the head of household is not in full-time employment or is sick (for a period of more than two months) or is retired, widowed or a pensioner (with an income of less than the basic flat-rate pension obtaining at the time of interview) then the occupation of the chief wage earner (if any in household) determines the status of the household. *Temporarily unemployed* heads of household (in most cases those for less than two months) are treated as if they are employed for the purpose of social grading.

APPENDIX 4

QUESTIONNAIRE - AUTHORS

1. How long have you been writing for publication?

2. Do you write other types of books as well as romantic fiction?

3. What made you decide to write romantic fiction?

4. Could you give a description of the type of romantic fiction you write - e.g. historical, short contemporary, mystery, set in exotic places or the Middle Ages?

5. Who is your publisher?

6. Do you have an idea of your reader in mind? If so, could you describe him/her?

7. What suggests ideas for your plots?

8. Does your publisher, or agent if you have one, suggest books to you? How influential are they in your work?

9. Do you start with an idea for a plot or ideas for characters or settings?

10. Does your book start off from an idea you want to write or do you think of your market and work out your idea from what that market might want?

11. How did you first get published?

12. What made you decide to write in the first place?

13. What qualities do you feel it is important to give your heroine?

14. Heroes, apart from being 'tall, dark and handsome', are usually rich, often powerful and influential men. Do you think the story would work if the hero were not rich and important?

15. The hero is also often very aggressive. Again, do you think this is an essential ingredient in the story?

16. Why do you think romantic fiction gives so much pleasure to so many women?

17. Over the last twenty years or so there has been a rise in ideas of equality for women, 'women's lib', feminism, equal opportunities. Ostensibly romantic fiction, based on the

idea that the happy ending for a woman is marriage to a
strong man, runs counter to these values. What are your
views on this? (Sorry, I know this really merits another
book!)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

18. Age Group?

19 - 24	45 - 54 .....
25 - 34	55 - 64 .....
35 - 44	65 and over .....

19. Marital Status?

Single	Widowed .....
Married	Separated .....
Divorced	

20. Do you have children? If so, please give number of children
and their ages if under 21.

21. Do you work, or have you worked, at another job apart from
writing? If so, could you give the occupation or job
title.

22. Occupation of Head of Household if not yourself?

23. What was the last type of educational establishment you
attended full-time, e.g. school, college, polytechnic,
university, etc.

APPENDIX 5

AUTHORS WHO WERE INTERVIEWED OR ANSWERED THE QUESTIONNAIRE

(The names are those under which the authors write, not

necessarily actual names.)

Allan, Margaret

Andrews, Lyn

Cartland, Barbara

Fitzgerald, Julia

James, Margaret

Hill, M.

Kirby, Rowan

Lane, Dorothy

Lewis, Maynah

Lindsay, Paula

Marlowe, Joyce

Montague, Jeanne

Murray, Annabel

Shaw. Jane-Anne

Sinclair, Olga

Walsh, Sheila

Weale, Anne

Wells, Angela

Wibberley, Mary

Wyatt, Dee

(Sadly, since I completed my research, Julia Fitzgerald has died.

I am sure her lively personality will be much missed.)

APPENDIX 6

INTERVIEWEES

(Brief details from survey. All names have been changed)

Mrs. Banks, 55-64, widowed, retired.

Mrs.Barrett, 55-64, divorced, full-time medical social worker.

Mrs. Barrow, 45-54, widowed, full-time clerk/cashier.

Mrs. Bellman, 55-64, widowed, early retired local government officer.

Terry Black, 19-24, single, full-time secretary.

Mrs. Blackwell, 45-54, married, part-time stewardess.

Hilary Bourne, 22-34, single, clinical nurse teacher.

Mrs. Dorothy Cairns, 19-24, married, full-time housewife.

Mrs. Castle, 55-64, widowed, retired

Mrs. Chamberlain, 45-54, divorced, part-time auxiliary nurse/care worker.

Harriet Cheyney, 15-18, single, school student.

Mrs. Daniels, 35-44, married, auxiliary nurse.

Anna Delaney, 45-54, married, dental nurse/receptionist

Mrs. Edwards, 75 and over, widowed, not worked since marriage.

Mrs. Mary Elliott, 35-44, married, part-time general service worker.

Mrs. Fitzandrews, 45-54, married, secondary school teacher.

Jane Gilbert, 19-24, single, unemployed.

Mrs. Giles, 55-64, widowed, part-time accompanist at dancing school.

Sally Hall, 19-24, single, post-graduate student.

Mrs. Hayley, 35-44, widowed, unemployed and looking for work.

Mrs. Hatfield, 55-64, married, full-time housewife.

Mrs. Ireland, 45-54, married, part-time school meals supervisor, former secretary.

Anne James, 15-18, single, school student.

Mrs. Sylvia Kearney, 35-44, married, night staff nurse.

Mrs. Masters, 75 and over, widowed, retired.

Peggy Nixon, 35-44, married, retail florist.

Mrs. O'Bannion, 35-44, married, full-time housewife.

Rita Overton, 25-34, single, full-time shop assistant.

Mrs. Platt, 65-74, married, retired.

Mrs. Prince, 55-64, married, retired former cashier for solicitors.

Vivienne Porter, 15-18, single, school student.

Mrs. Redmond, 45-54, married, part-time coupon processing clerk.

Mrs. Amanda Redding, 45-54. married, part-time nurse.

Barbara Rylands, 25-34, married, full-time librarian.

Anne-Marie Sullivan, 15-18. single, school student.

Helen Vaughan, 19-24, single, full-time civil servant.

Mrs. Warden, 35-44, married, school dinners supervisor and looking for work.

Mrs. Wells, 35-44, widowed, full-time care attendant.

Mrs. Lisa Wells, 35-44, married, self-employed market researcher.

Mrs. Williams, 35-44, married, mature student and housewife.

(It will be noticed that I have not been consistent in the style of name used for the interviewees, sometimes using titles and surnames, sometimes first names. The women varied in the way they gave their names on the survey form, on the telephone, when others in their home spoke of them. I have retained the form they used, since this was how I got to know each of them.)

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