Janice Radway

READING THE ROMANCE

Women, patriarchy and popular literature

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

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

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

Only when Dot arrived at her last observation about reading and its ability to transport her out of her living room did I begin to understand that the real answer to my question, which she never mentioned and which was the link between reading, pills, and drinks, was actually the single word, "escape," a word that would later appear on so many of the questionnaires. She subsequently explained that romance novels provided escape just as Darvon and alcohol do for other women. Whereas the latter are harmful to both woman and their families, Dot believes romance reading is 'an innocuous thing.' As she commented to me in another interview, romance reading is a habit that is not very different from 'an addiction.'

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

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

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

Escapism

> I guess I feel there is enough 'reality' in the world and reading is a means of escape for me.
>
> Because it is an Escape [sic], and we can dream and pretend that it is our life.
>
> I'm able to escape the harsh world for a few hours a day.
>
> They always seem an escape and they usually turn out the way you wish life really was.

The response of the Smithton women is apparently not an unusual one. Indeed, the advertising campaigns of three of the houses that have conducted extensive market-research studies all emphasize the themes of relaxation and escape. Potential readers of Coventry Romances, for example, have been told in coupon ads that 'month after month Coventry Romances offer you a beautiful new escape route into historical times when love and honor ruled the heart and mind.'[1] Similarly, the Silhouette television advertisements featuring Ricardo Montalban asserted that 'the beautiful ending makes you feel so good' and that romances 'soothe away the tensions of the day.' Montalban also touted the value of 'escaping' into faraway places and exotic locations. Harlequin once mounted a travel sweepstakes campaign offering as prizes 'escape vacations' to romantic places. In addition, they included within the books themselves an advertising page that described Harlequins as 'the books that let you escape into the wonderful world of romance! Trips to exotic places . . . interesting places . . . meeting memorable people . . . the excitement of love . . . These are integral parts of Harlequin Romances – the heartwarming novels read by women everywhere.'[2] Fawcett, too, seems to have discovered the escape function of romantic fiction, for Daisy Maryles has reported that the company found in in-depth interviewing that 'romances were read for relaxation and to enable [women] to better cope with the routine aspects of life.'[3]

Reading to escape the present is neither a new behavior nor one peculiar to women who read romances. In fact, as Richard Hoggart demonstrated in 1957, English working-class people have long regarded art as escape, as something enjoyed but not assumed to have much connection with the matter of daily life.[4] Within this sort of aesthetic, he continues, art is conceivable as 'marginal, as "fun,"' as something 'for you to *use*.' In further elaborating on this notion of fictional escape, D. W. Harding has made the related observation that the word is most often used in criticism as a term of disparagement to refer to an activity that the evaluator believes has no merit in and of itself. 'If its intrinsic appeal is high,' he remarks, 'in relation to its compensatory appeal or the mere relief it promises, then the term escape is not generally used.'[5] Harding argues, moreover, on the basis of studies conducted in the 1930s, that 'the compensatory appeal predominates mainly in states of depression or irritation, whether they arise from work or other causes.'[6] It is interesting to note that the explanations employed by Dot and her women to interpret their romance reading for themselves are thus representative in a general way of a form of behavior common in an industrialized society where work is clearly distinguished from and more highly valued than leisure despite the fact that individual labor is often routinized, regimented, and minimally challenging.[7] It is equally essential to add, however, that although the women will use the word 'escape' to explain their reading

behavior, if given another comparable choice that does not carry the connotations of disparagement, they will choose the more favorable sounding explanation. To understand why, it will be helpful to follow Dot's comments more closely.

In returning to her definition of the appeal of romance fiction – a definition that is a highly condensed version of a commonly experienced process of explanation, doubt, and defensive justification – it becomes clear that romance novels perform this compensatory function for women because they use them to diversify the pace and character of their habitual existence. Dot makes it clear, however, that the women are also troubled about the propriety of indulging in such an obviously pleasurable activity. Their doubts are often cultivated into a full-grown feeling of guilt by husbands and children who object to this activity because it draws the women's attention away from the immediate family circle. As Dot later noted, although some women can explain to their families that a desire for a new toy or a gadget is no different from a desire to read a new romantic novel, a far greater number of them have found it necessary to hide the evidence of their self-indulgence. In an effort to combat both the resentment of others and their own feelings of shame about their 'hedonist' behavior, the women have worked out a complex rationalization for romance reading that not only asserts their equal right to pleasure but also legitimizes the books by linking them with values more widely approved within American culture. Before turning to the pattern, however, I want to elaborate on the concept of escape itself and the reasons for its ability to produce such resentment and guilt in the first place.

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

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

Dot, for example, went on to elaborate more fully in the conversation quoted above about why so many husbands seem to feel threatened by their wives' reading activities. After declaring with delight that when she reads her body is in the room but she herself is not, she said, 'I think this is the case with the other women.' She continued, 'I think men cannot do that unless they themselves are readers. I don't think men are *into* a part of anything even if it's television.' 'They are never really out of their body either,' she added. 'I don't care if it's a football game; I think they are always consciously aware of where they are.' Her triumphant conclusion, 'but I think a woman in a book isn't,' indicates that Dot is aware that reading not only demands a high level

of attention but also draws the individual *into* the book because it requires her participation. Although she is not sure what it is about the book that prompts this absorption, she is quite sure that television viewing and film watching are different. In adding immediately that 'for some reason, a lot of men feel threatened by this, very, very much threatened,' Dot suggested that the men's resentment has little to do with the kinds of books their wives are reading and more to do with the simple fact of the activity itself and its capacity to absorb the participants' entire attention.

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

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

This theme of romance reading as a special gift a woman gives herself dominated most of the interviews. The Smithton women stressed the privacy of the act and the fact that it enables them to focus their attention on a single object that can provide pleasure for themselves alone. Interestingly enough, Robert Escarpit has noted in related fashion that reading is at once 'social and asocial' because 'it temporarily suppresses the individual's relations with his [*sic*] universe to construct new ones with the universe of the work.'[9] Unlike television viewing, which is a very social activity undertaken in the presence of others and which permits simultaneous conversation and personal interaction, silent reading requires the reader to block out the surrounding world and to give consideration to other people and to another time. It might be said, then, that the characters and events of romance fiction populate the woman's consciousness even as she withdraws from the familiar social scene of her daily ministrations.

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

relationships and to throw up a screen between themselves and the arena where they are required to do most of their relating to others.

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

> As a mother, I have run 'em to the orthodontist. I have run 'em to the swimming pool. I have run 'em to baton twirling lessons. I have run up to school because they forgot their lunch. You know, I mean, really! And you do it. And it isn't that you begrudge it. That isn't it. Then my husband would walk in the door and he'd say, 'Well, what did you do today?' You know, it was like, 'Well, tell me how you spent the last eight hours, because I've been out working.' And I finally got to the point where I would say, 'Well, I read four books, and I did all the wash and got the meal on the table and the beds are all made, and the house is tidy.' And I would get defensive like, 'So what do you call all this? Why should I have to tell you because I certainly don't ask you what you did for eight hours, step by step' – But their husbands do do that. We've compared notes. They hit the house and it's like 'Well, all right. I've been out earning a living. Now what have you been doin' with your time?' And you begin to be feeling, 'Now really, why is he questioning me?'

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

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

paradoxically, however, they also seem to value the sense of self-sufficiency they experience as a consequence of the knowledge that they are capable of making themselves feel good.

Notes

1 These coupon ads appeared sporadically in national newspapers throughout the spring and summer of 1980.
2 Neels, *Cruise to a Wedding*, p. 190.
3 Marples, 'Fawcett Launches Romance Imprint,' p. 70.
4 Huggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 196.
5 Harding, 'The Notion of "Escape",' p. 24.
6 Ibid., p. 25
7 For discussions of the growth of the reading public and the popular press, see Williams, *The Long Revolution*, pp. 156–213, and Altick, *The English Common Reader*, passim.
8 As Escarpit has observed in *The Sociology of Literature*, p. 91, 'there are a thousand ways to escape and it is essential to know from what and towards what we are escaping.'
9 Escarpit, ibid., p. 88. Although Dot's observations are not couched in academic language, they are really no different from Escarpit's similar observation that 'reading is the supreme solitary occupation.' He continues that 'the man [*sic*] who reads does not speak, does not act, cuts himself away from society, isolates himself from the world which surrounds him . . . reading allows the senses no margin of liberty. It absorbs the entire conscious mind, making the reader powerless to act' (p. 88). The significance of this last effect of the act of reading to the Smithton women will be discussed later . . . For a detailed discussion of the different demands made upon an individual by reading and radio listening, see Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*, pp. 170–79.