

# Paperbacks Promoting Passion!

## What is Harlequin Really Presenting?

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*Les romans Harlequin lus par de millions de femmes peuvent sembler inoffensifs. Au moyen d'une méthode d'analyse structurale, on découvre les significations cachées sous la surface à l'eau de rose.*

Like biting into a Big Mac, one knows what to expect in a Harlequin even before opening the cover. Two destined lovers, idyllic settings and a touch of passion all wrapped up between the covers of a pretty pastel paperback. To the homemaker entering the supermarket, they are an easily recognized and familiar sight. Amidst the cartons of Cokes and the stacks of potato chips, the wholesome couples depicted on the covers beam out cheery smiles and beckon her to enter the world of romance that lies only 95 cents away.

Before trying to understand what really lurks behind those covers with their far-away settings and winsome couples, one must realize their place in the history of the modern novel. Harlequins, in their present format, only developed in the late 1950s but their archetypes had appeared comparatively early in the development of the capitalistic system — around the turn of the 17th century in England. The English novels of that time, particularly the works of Defoe and Richardson, 'marked the beginning of an approach to literary production that consciously created, served, and finally controlled a "market".'

From those early works to the 'penny novel' and finally, to the Harlequin books, culture became increasingly 'merchandized'. Concomitant with this trend, the greater the impact it had on the individual, the more it reflected the ideology of the system. This pattern, barely discernible in the early novels, is preserved today in the slick packaging of the Harlequin novel. This institutionalization of ideology makes it a vehicle for undreamed of psychological control. The repetition, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of mass culture tends to result in automatic reactions and weakens the forces of individual resistance.

It is largely through this sameness that lies the key to Harlequin's success. Given the standard plot formula, the reader always knows what will happen. In at least half of the books, the heroine is under some form of male domination either by employment, marriage or guardianship. And, even if she starts by being independent and career-oriented, she usually gives up her career which has become totally meaningless in the face of almighty love, admits her resistance to the hero was silly,



Illustration by Betty Keenan

and eagerly welcomes her future role as wife and, in the proper time, as mother (cf. Jensen, 1977). The acceptance of these plots on the part of the reader appears to signify a need for protection rather than a desire for thrills. The stories are as relentlessly inevitable as the lives of the readers.

Harlequins place a strong emphasis on conformity and conventionalism. Marriage is the reward for the heroine being pretty and chaste. Implied is that if the reader emulates the heroine with her 'feminine' characteristics, marriage will also be her reward. It must not be forgotten that a strong connection between the imagery of marriage and paradise has long been part of Christian symbolism. Conversely, if she deviates from the prescribed course, this ideal state will be denied her.

Similarly, character traits depict clear-cut prescriptions of how to behave and how not to behave. Take, for example, the story and characters in *The Changing Years*, a typical Harlequin romance. April Summers, a petite and pretty working girl, orphaned as a child, receives a letter from her rich Uncle Simon telling her to give up her job and come to Kinsley, his country estate in a remote corner of England. On her arrival, April re-encounters Nick Lawton, her uncle's stepson, a dark, handsome man upon whom she had a schoolgirl crush seven years previous. He

teases her about being helpless and his arrogant self-assurance causes them to clash. Donald Jordan, a quiet, fair-haired bachelor who owns the neighbouring ranch, begins to court April while Fenella Graves, a sophisticated blond 'who knows exactly what she wants and will stop at nothing to make sure she gets it,' zeroes in on Nick. Ultimately, true love is victorious. After rescuing April from many a scrap, including a car accident caused by Donald's drinking one night, Nick realizes that April has to be part of his existence and they decide to marry. They will, of course, inherit Uncle Simon's vast estate and April will never have to fend for herself again.

Note how the names even reflected the final outcome. 'April Summers', representing happiness, exhibits all the traditionally ascribed feminine behaviour, while 'Fenella Graves', with her determination and aggressive mannerisms, foretells a life of gloom. Since the outcome is pre-established, the reader is aware that all resistance is a sham. The unspoken message is that society will always win and, like marionettes, women are manipulated and kept in their 'place' by societal dictates.

*The more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present set-up of the cultural industry, the less people are likely to change their preconceived ideas with the progress of their experience. The more opaque and complicated modern life becomes, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to clichés which seem to bring some order into the otherwise ununderstandable. Thus, people may not only lose true insight into reality, but ultimately their very capacity for life experience may be dulled by the constant wearing of blue and pink spectacles.<sup>3</sup>*

The question still remains. Just what is so appealing about this subliterary product, with its unreal characters, artificial dialogue and highly improbable plots, that millions of female readers across North America read them by the score?

The usual explanation suggests that Harlequin books provide their readers with a means of escaping the monotony of their everyday lives. To love-sick adolescents and women trapped in the house by small children, the romances allow them to experience vicariously the love life of the heroine. While others watch soap operas or turn to drugs, Harlequins allow them to escape to another world.<sup>4</sup>

Reading Harlequins can also develop into a habit and some say, addiction. It acts as a catharsis to relieve the mental, physical and emotional tensions of everyday existence. Despite variations in style, the essential plot remains fixed and predictable. These formula stories carry the reader's attention, but there is no feeling of tension or suspense. If anything, the reader is impelled by curiosity over the means by which the expected ending will be reached.

While this explanation has readers enjoying pure escapist fantasy, another rests on character identification. Lacking the amorous attentions of a

male, the reader becomes the heroine herself, sought after by the handsome hero and his arch-rival. Alternatively, the reader, caught between the piles of dirty dishes and the diaper pail, retraces her own experiences in love but as a fantasy since the life is smoother, more pleasant and perhaps, at a social level, higher than her own. The Harlequin appeal stems from being able to express the fantasies, longings and suppressed impulses of living in an alienated world.

The proceeding interpretations probably contain varying degrees of truth, but none of them explain all of the facts. There could be a very basic underlying reason for the secret of the Harlequin success which is so enduring, so potent and so widespread. Since they exist, what function are they serving? What underlying convention allows Harlequin stereotypes to have meaning in our society?

The answer, I believe, has little to do with the exotic lands or the passionate kisses, but has a great deal to do with a much larger issue — how women are 'placed' in a 'man-made' world. My hypothesis is that the Harlequin romance is a vehicle for the perpetuation of one of society's greatest myths — the powerlessness of women.

If we are to study this myth of our own culture, we must first 'de-mystify' it. We need to 'see that the meanings we take as natural are the historical products of a cultural system'.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, to understand the full effect of Harlequins they must be studied by considering the hidden meanings in conjunction with their surface content. This interaction is precisely what structuralism desires to lay bare. Like psychoanalysis, structuralism seeks to expose the unconscious motivation behind the conscious manifestation. These motivations are not unconscious in the strictly psychological sense but rather are 'unobtrusive'. They hide behind the light-hearted fiction that pretends not to deal with serious issues. On the surface, they are pleasant stories and the reader enjoys the books, but underneath, the myth works on the unconscious with its distorted evocation of life experience and locks women in the belief that they are powerless to be anything else but what they are.

Even the setting of the novels, which may appear random and innocent, have implications in this scheme. Take, for example, the Kinsley estate in *The Changing Years*, situated in a remote corner of England, complete with its stable of purebred horses, far away from the cares of everyday life. It signifies the temporary freedom from constant pressures and financial worries that cloud the life of the average woman.

The myth here is that since life is predestined, the only way to be free from it is to escape into fantasy. This may, on the surface, appear to be the same as the common-sense explanation except for one major point. Structuralism would have us note the logical opposition of escapism — resistance and confrontation — is lacking. The woman is not made to see that she can change her place in society. As Toronto sociologist Bernard Baldus points out, the biggest harm is that it portrays society as exceedingly static in terms of social

change. 'If you are born in one position in society — unless you get lucky or married — these books imply there's little that can be done'. The problem remains individual and so does the solution. Being isolated and not collectively organized, the reader is not made aware that her solution is, in actuality, the problem. Unless her solution is recognized as the problem, no questioning of, or action against, the capitalistic structure that puts her place outside the modes of production, will take place. The more Harlequins that are sold, the more secure the *status quo*.

Another sign of this 'need for protection' myth is signified by the ages of the main characters. April, like most Harlequin heroines, has been orphaned and is living on her own. Despite being only 22, she has managed on her own, until she returns to Kinsley and Nick makes her believe that she needs him. In true Harlequin form, he is above her, both in age and social class, and is always in control no matter what situation arises. It seems only 'natural' that she should turn to him when in difficulty and eventually, by marriage, nestle comfortably under the umbrella of his protection. Here, however, the myth betrays its aim of denying the unfortunate complexities of human life. It carefully fails to mention the opposition: every gain entails a loss and any benefit exacts requisite costs. Hence, when a woman accepts a man's protection, she pays the price of her independence and reduces herself to his chattel. Under the happiness she is expected to receive lie the silent chains of bondage. In order to maintain the man's protection, she must give up control over her own life and destiny. From then on, she is to do as he wills.

This is seen very clearly in the closing scene of a recent Harlequin selection, *Love is Eternal*.

*... placing an arm behind her knees and lifting her as if she weighed nothing more than a child. ... "from now on, Mrs. Joanne Grant, your place is with your husband. Do I make myself clear?"*

*"Very clear, Dr. Grant," she smiled demurely, her arms tightening about his neck as she offered him her lips.*

*"Such obedience," he murmured after a moment. "It's marvellous what three little words can accomplish."*

After the love is professed, plans are always made for marriage, and the story ends. This is worthy of mention in itself. The myth portrays love and marriage as being the climax of a woman's existence and the male-female relationship is the most important aspect of her life. It also implies that a woman is only desirable (since that is all that is written) before she is attained. Symbolically, she may control her love, but both romantic and courtly love are 'grants' which the male concedes from his total power. This emphasis on love, and by implication, virginity as a desirable property characteristic, serves to obscure the patriarchal character of Western culture which forces a woman to repress her sexual desires in order to maintain patrilineal patterns of kinship and inheritance.

The basic theme and appeal of any Harlequin Romance is love. Interwoven with this major theme is the premise that personal happiness is totally bound to the man the woman has chosen to love. Underlying this is the sense of self-fulfillment the heroine (and presumably the reader) will find in getting and being married. This, of course, does not lessen but further enhances her role. Throughout Harlequins, great attention is paid to the lifestyle of the traditional woman: her hairstyles, clothing, accessories, are alluringly described. Thereby, reinforcing her position of being able to please the male while also implying it is her duty. As Maggie Jensen points out:

*Love in Harlequins is cardiovascular — hearts race, pulses pound, bodies tremble, knees go weak . . . Love is "caring more for him than you do for yourself. It's knowing a warm glow when he's near — and blankness when he's not." . . . The ultimate message about love is this one — "... it is really love that makes the world go round. Without it you are nothing, absolutely nothing." Love is the panacea for all one's troubles.*

The idea of love, then, is to make a woman belong, to give her 'roots'. Women are to find their security and protection in love and not in careers. It is interesting to note the importance of this systematic insistence on the traditional role precisely at a time when their role is changing and traditional sex roles are becoming blurred. What is signified is the approval and confirmation of the present structure of society and this continued reaffirmation underscores the duty of the woman to accept.

This theme is not new but its manifestation invests it with an entirely different meaning. As noted by Joseph Gusfield in *Status Politics*, 'Where domination of the society is in doubt, then the need for positive governmental and institutional action is greater.' Thus, the less the message is believed, the more categorically it is insisted upon in mass culture.

Consequently, what is more important in Harlequins is not what is said but what is left unsaid. For Harlequin Romances not only continue to affirm the *status quo* but they never question the structure of the system. By the blatant approval it gives to the traditional woman's role, it denies her advancement by any other means. Its structure prevents any cogent development of a critical outlook on how women live in our present-day society. It very effectively turns its readers away from any examination, realistic or otherwise, of their place in society. The rosy dream is a political reality that pacifies the alienation of women. Harlequins, like Valium, allow women to cope, but not confront the society in which they live. ©

*Extensive footnotes have been eliminated because of space restraints. For a copy of these footnotes, please apply to the author at: 9747 - 104 Street, Apt. 710, Edmonton, Alberta T5K 0Y6.*