SIN, SUFFER, REPENT: THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE CONFESSIONS MAGAZINE

All mass media are market oriented, but confessions magazines must also be supermarket oriented. Depending for the bulk of their circulation on single-copy sales through food, drug, and variety chains, they have a special task of supermarket salesmanship via magazine cover.

The first confession magazine ever published featured on its cover the swooning faces of a young man and woman and bore the title: "And Their Love Turned to Hatred." Since then, this basic structure of outward pictorial bliss and stark verbal reality developed into a standard formula for confession magazine cover design. The pictorial emphasis shifted almost exclusively to the radiant image of the confession-type cover girl, while the verbal context became ever more lurid and shocking. A casual glance at today's confessional displayed on the magazine rack reveals a striking contrast between the pictorial image and the apparently unrelated verbal meanings.

Struck by the incongruity, and intrigued by what appeared to be the ambivalent social role of the confessions -- provocative yet puritanical -- we conducted a series of studies. We also surveyed other evidence designed to find out what forces shape the unique and consistent cover and, in fact, editorial formula, and how they might function in the lives of their readers.

We began our studies with a sample of all covers available on a newsstand. We also wrote to confession magazine art editors. Then we surveyed the trade and scholarly literature, examined the content of the magazines over a 15-year period, and conducted a small experiment to learn how well the cover design might perform its symbolic functions. Some of the covers studied in 1957

FIGURE 1

can be seen on Figure 1, above It is evident that all cover girls displayed appealing features, flashing smiles, cosmetic perfection, and eye-contact with the viewer. But the verbal context surrounding the image of the radiantly poised, wholesome cover girl was anything but trouble-free. The story titles and blurbs spoke

Shameful Night of My Life," exclaiming "Oh, God, Don't Let Me Hurt Him," admitting that "We Didn't Know Our Love Was Abnormal," and so on.

About one out of every three cover titles dealt with sexual problems varying from apparent nymphomania to frigidity, and from taboos to sex-tests and tips. Another third reflected mainly marital and parental troubles such as adultery, bigamy, illegitimacy, miscegenation, etc. The remaining third focused on other forms of anguish, shame, terror, illness, and crime.

This is the dark and turbulent verbal world into which confession publishers insert, as a matter of policy, the glowing image of clean-cut all-American girlhood. "There is virtually no relationship between the pictorial element and the titles," explains the art editor of one confession magazine. "The blurbs or cover titles have no relationship to the subject," writes another. They all agree that each element serves its own purpose. Combined, they help satisfy the multiple functions and requirements of specialized distribution and sales.

Mechanics of distribution

Most confessions are sold from the magazine rack. Some outward manifestation of glamor helps the confessions match their slick rivals, the women's service magazines', bright facade of supermarket cheer.

But all cannot be sweetness and light. The basic appeal of the confession must also find expression on the cover. This appeal is the feminine counterpart of the stark cover themes of its brother magazine, the detective mystery, a subject we shall come to in Chapter 00. But the confessions cannot afford to follow the pictorial design of their counterparts.

The outwardly sadistic appeal of the crime-detective magazines (usually the portrayal of brutality against women) got that group into difficulty. By the mid-fifties only five detective magazines carrying advertising reported a single-copy circulation of over 50,000, with total monthly sales of less than a million and a half. Their fate could hardly inspire the 18 confession magazines in the same circulation class, still selling seven million copies a month over food and drug chain counters. "Regulations enforced by those managements," wrote one art editor, "result in penalties to a publisher from banning one issue to losing forever the racks of that chain. Local censorship and religious black lists are also important in establishing format, for local magazine wholesalers and distributors are held accountable for prosecution and penalties."

The economics of magazine display space and the rivalry among titles impose further requirements. Chain stores average about 60 magazine titles; but roughly 80 percent of the dollar volume comes from the top 20. Their total yearly sales from all general magazines put together just about equals that of the chewing gums; but the magazines take up more space.

Claims that confession readers spend more on some staples than others may attract advertisers but have little effect on retail store managers who consider the magazine display space a customer convenience, not a major profit-maker. Although many of the racks are owned and serviced by the wholesale distributor, the floor manager on the spot often rules the display. His judgment, guided by customer comment, may result in preferential treatment for the magazines whose outward appearance conforms to the widest variety of clientele sensibilities. Offenders, especially in the women's field, suffer by being hidden from sight -- and sale -- behind their rivals on the crowded rack.

The cover design developed by the confessions relegates the explosive social appeal to a relatively abstract -- verbal -- form. Counterpointing this appeal is the dominant pictorial image of the

cover girl, unrelated to the surrounding verbal context.

Art editors conceive of the romance-confession cover girl as a projection of the reader's self-image, "a composite of our reader type." Her function on the cover appears to be analogous to the inside heroine's function of identification. To take our analysis of the cover further, we must first look deeper into the development, mission, editorial specification and social functions of the magazine itself. After that look, we shall come back to the cover and to the experiment we conducted to test its appeals.

Empire: the selling of women of 'Wage Town'

The confession magazine grew out of readers' first-person accounts of intimate problems and true experiences written to Bernarr Macfadden's Physical Culture magazine. It sprouted out of the ferment in morals and manners following World War I, contributed to the daytime serial, came to full flowering in the decades of mid-century, and withstood the tidal wave of television better than most popular magazines.

"Broken-hearted women sent us letters. . ." wrote Mary Macfadden (1953) "after they had done two hundred knee bends, twice a day, and had thrown away their corsets, only to find that the Greek gods wouldn't give them a tumble. . .There were girls who confessed their sexual mistakes and thought they were fallen women until they had taken up dumbbells (the iron kind) and gone in for carrots which had given them bright eyes. . .

"These are true stories," she claims to have told Bernarr Macfadden. "They come from the following you have attracted . . . out a magazine to be called True Story, written by its own readers in the first person. This has never been done before. The idea has a correlative force. I studied correlativity in school . . . It's the kind of thing that helped to make the British Empire."

It was. By the second half of the century, some forty titles in the romanceconfession field tried to lure advertising sponsorship with a guaranteed circulation of 16 million. The first 18 titles reported an average sale of over 7 million copies per issue. Still, the same number of slick women's service magazines attracted more than twice as much advertising support. But while most big slick consumer magazines collapsed when, even at the peak of their readership, their sales power per advertising dollar was eclipsed by that of television, the confession group managed to stay in business. Cheap product performing a special service in a clearly delineated target area saved the confession magazines from the fate of the others.

The confession was first written by what the Saturday Evening Post once termed "Macfadden's anonymous amateur illiterates." For some time Bernarr insisted on stories from "the common people," and had the thousands of manuscripts pouring in screened by amateur "consultants." If a narrative sounded too highbrow, he might ask the elevator man to read it. If it was over his head, it went back to the author. A wag on the editorial staff had written a

piece for barroom reading entitled: "How I was Demoted to Editor of True Story and Worked My Way Up to Elevator Man Again!"

In the course of time, blatant amateurishness changed into a smoothly running fictional assembly line creating the illusion of homely authenticity. Typically, white males prescribe, select, edit, and publish for a lower-class female public the work of a "hard-core" of semi-professional free lance middle-class housewives. Reader response is slight and generally ignored in favor of a more empirical test. "When we see our sales figures dropping, that's when we try to change some format and content, and we do that until sales figures pick up again," explained one editor. The fictionalizing of authentic-sounnding stories, and male direction, assure the publishers and their business sponsors total editorial control. Editors describe the main tasks of the magazines as the cultivation of conservative and traditional values of middle-class society adjusted to a working class readership. Even the few black oriented confessions strive to "develop ideals suitable to young blacks. . . By and large, we are not different from middle-class white morality." (Sonenschein, 1972) By claiming that they are authentic "confessions" of ordinary Americans, the stories implicitly establish the "reality standard" to which readers may relate their own lives.

The editorial formula attracted, from the beginning, persons who had never before read magazines and still read little else. This is a public with little education or purchasing power, neglected by other publishers because they were not the sort that advertisers were especially interested in reaching. Only some 10 percent of the titles are addressed to black women.

Reader research and distribution data indicate that small towns, the South, and the Midwest furnish more than their share of romance-confession readers. Indicative of the composition of the readership is that, for example, 64 percent of True Confession's readers come from the homes of labor which about one in three own. More than half are young women with children under six. One in four has children under two. Sixteen percent also hold down an outside job. Five percent attended college, but 18 percent never finished high school. Seven out of ten own automobiles, but only six out of ten have telephones, and almost as many own sewing machines.

Comparable figures for slick women's service magazines like Ladies Home Journal show seven out of ten owning their homes; one out of ten having children under two; 30 percent having attended college; nine out of ten owning automobiles, but only 13 percent sewing machines.

Readers with less money to spend hold little attraction to advertisers. Sonenschein's (1970) study found one-third of all confession magazine advertising of the dime-store mail order variety, and two-thirds self-improvement through weight reduction,

breast expansion, cosmetics, loans, patent medicine, and religion. The confessions' editorial recipe must, therefore, bear a double burden; it must be appetizing for its lower class women readers, but it must also be spiced with ingredients worthy of business sponsorship.

Rather than trying to gloss over the working class status of their market, confession publishers make it the basis of their appeal. Class lines, they declare in the title of a booklet written for the trade, are The Invisible Wall -- The Social Factor in Mass Selling. "Wage Town," confession publishers claim, comprises half of all families in America. "Wage Town millions," the advertiser is told, "speak a different language and respond to different stimuli."

In an office memorandum "On the Subject of Social Class and its Relation to Magazines," the director of research for Macfadden Publications, defines the Family Behavior Magazine (as the trade prefers to call the confession) as the magazine of Wage Town. "These people can be reached effectively only in terms of their interests . . . When one of our editors got off the track and began running some stories which would have been excellent and fitting in . . . Ladies' Home Journal, the readership of those stories was the lowest in years . . . That editor was given his walking papers . . . In this America of ours there is no iron curtain, but there are distinctions of interest as different as those of the Texas cowboy and the Boston aristocracy."

A booklet entitled The Invisible Wall informs advertisers that "fundamentally. . . Behavior Magazine reading is largly a matter of class status. . ." and "Essentially the people who read Behavior Magazines are working-class people - -in both the occupational and social sense of the word." Businessmen are requested "to ponder the point that a different market requires a different media approach and a different kind of magazine concept" in order to "move your goods and services -- in ever increasing quantities through The Invisible Wall!" He is then reminded that wage earners "marry younger, start earning faster (because they leave school earlier), have larger families, more children, thus spend more."

The social mission of the confession magazine

Confession publishers regard their magazines as performing an economic service, a cultural task and a social mission. Perhaps the most lucid statement revealing a management view of this multiple function, seasoned with a bit of individual philosophy, appeared in a booklet entitled The Woman That Taxes Made; An Editor's Intimate Picture of a Large but Little Understood Market, by Fred Sammis of True Story.

Mr. Sammis dedicates his appeal in the hope "that my brief picture of these particular Women That Taxes Made will help the men who run American business to a better understanding of how to sell them." In it, he develops a thesis calculated to attract advertising.

Briefly, it is this. The post World War II "redistribution

of wealth through high taxes and bulging payrolls" has created a revolution in marketing. The classical image of the working class has, at least for merchandising purposes, given way to that of a new middle-class market, with anxieties and aspirations to match. The new "woman that taxes made" no longer cries herself to sleep with problems like "the roof leaks," or "I can't pay the doctor bill," or "we can't afford this new baby." Hers is no longer the life of "family labor" with few tools to help. "But she does not default in her vital role as heroine of the family. She simply takes on new problems." The problems that "fill her mind by day and worry her thoughts at night" are more likely to be "Nancy is going around with a wild crowd," or "Johnny will get killed in his hot rod," or "they say Jim is dating a girl on the swingshift."

These new women from the homes of labor find "moving up" strange, uncomfortable. Uncertain, often bewildered in their new roles, they have a burning interest in "reading how other women like themselves solved their problems." They form a "huge and responsive market of young hbor families who need everything American business can tell them about."

"Remember," writes Mr. Sammis, "these women never were, and never will be, the avid readers of textbooks nor the patients of psychiatrists . . . They cannot and do not often read the conventional woman's magazines. They read very little that is not written in their conversational language . . . Their interests are almost entirely in people . . . The abstract is seldom discussed. "Except for daytime serials (. . . which can handle only One behavior problem at a time over a period of several weeks) no other medium deals in the problems, lives, or language" of these women, the more than 10 million that we have gathered together with one careful editorial formula . . ." Thus, writes Mr. Sammis, "there is no comparable way of reaching this great mass of women who spend more than thirty billions of dollars annually!"

A note of warning about this reader adds the element of urgency to the magazines' appeal for business support: "She is exposed, far more than her white collar sister, to demageguery, labor agitators and radical philosophies! Yet American business, rarely, if ever, runs its institutional messages in the magazines read by these women . . . I believe it is an economic sin to default in the enlightenment of the more than ten millions of women who live and learn by our behavior magazines."

Such, in broad outline, are some managerial assumptions with which the "behavior magazines" approach what they conceive to be their economic, cultural, and social mission. Implicit in these assumptions is a double-barreled editorial formula. It is tailored to a "feminine" psychology in a working-class setting, with fears, anxieties (and pocket-books) raised to unaccustomed levels. Of special interest to advertisers is the fact that economic grievance has been minimized as not befitting the market status of "the woman that taxes made;" that the appeal of social resentment has been structured to revolve around "behavior problems" usually

within the family; and that "economic enlightenment" can diagnose today's ills as the price paid for "the redistribution of wealth through high taxes."

Depth studies help publishers define their targets. They trace the "invisible wall" that separates confession readership from that of white collar magazines. They spell out social issues in terms of personal troubles. They help condense internalized conflicts into editorial policy capsules.

A study by Social Research, Inc. explains that the confession reader does not feel as much the center and prime mover of the family as does her white collar sister. She is more emotional about her role as a mother, and is torn by a conflict between that job and her role as wife.

The confession publisher illustrates the difference by contrasting "Built in Baby Sitter" with the confession story, "I Killed My Child." The former, taken from a white collar woman's magazine is a "superficial problem, which does an excellent job of entertaining. But inherent in its situation, its manners, its artwork, is a social sophistication that is not to be found in Behavior Magazine stories.

"'I Killed My Child' is a stark title. It is also the true story of a young mother who saw her child killed by an automobile. Because she had taken the child with her when she left home in a fit of anger after an argument with her husband, she could never thereafter escape the sense of personal guilt she had for her child's death."

The confession reader, claims the report, looks upon men as more powerful, dominant, sexually active and demanding than does her white collar sister. "Since she sees her husband as more independent and self-sufficient, she does not seem to feel, as white collar magazine readers do, that her mother role will necessarily stably tie her man down . . .[Her] family is based on two rather separate sets of relations -- that of woman to man, or wife to husband; and that of mother to child. . .This split in her own social personality can give her trouble." She finds her troubles reflected in stories like "Torn Between Duty and Desire," "He Locked Me Out," and "The Devil in My Man," which has the subcaption "Facing the truth at last I knew my husband was destroying my children and me, but he was my lover, and I could not let him go."

The need for identification and realism "is one reason why editors employ the techniques that are the hallmarks of the Behavior Magazine format," the advertiser is told. Instead of "To Catch a Man," or "The Lover I dreamed Of," a confession story in the same vein is titled, "I Want You." "Photographs instead of the more idealized techniques of oil, tempera, or water color. The 'I did' or 'I was' type of headline rather than fancier, more subtle ones." "And," businessmen are reminded, "importantly, the factor of self-identification. . . seems to carry over with equal force into advertising."

Editorial prescription

Although most of the actual writing is done by a handful of semi-professionals, the need for fresh material makes it desirable

to publicize editorial specifications. This is done mostly through writers' magazines and market publications. Out of a survey of this material consisting of articles such as "I Sell Confessions," "How to Hit True Story," "The Truth About Confessions," and out of editors' own descriptions of their market needs in the yearly, Writer's Market, emerges a more detailed picture of the editorial prescription and social role of the romance-confession magazine.

Identification through the first person point of view and the flavor of authenticity requires settings congruent with that of the target audience. "Central characters must come from workshirt backgrounds," runs through all market advice. "Our heroines are waitresses, wives of mechanics, file clerks -- not heiresses or glamourous career women," and "usually not college girls." And: "People in our stories take out the garbage, have linen problems, need to wash the floors. . ." One writer warns the aspirant that "If you cannot identify yourself with a workshirt character, you shouldn't be trying this field."

The goals, motives, horizons appropriate to the "workshirt background" of that machinist's wife or file clerk, and befitting her "new status" on the consumer market, are spelled out in detail. She is, the writer is told, "a homemaker whose idea of decor extends as far as the large flowers on her wallpaper and no further. The woman's wants and ambitions are small ones: appliances to make her home comfortable; a freezer full of food because it's food that represents security; chintz and linoleum rugs and net curtains. A steady job with regular pay is all she requires of her husband -- that and fidelity."

Empathy is strengthened through sympathy. Editors are as reluctant to use unsympathetic leading characters as art directors would be to run unattractive girls on the cover. "Who," writes one of them, "wants to be identified with a bitch?"

Sympathetic characterization must be combined with the requirements of coming "realistically" to terms with sordid situations. The problem in the confession story is how to get basically decent persons into these messes," explains one writer. Understanding the heroine's motives, even when mistaken, or deeds, even when wrong, does not mean that she should gain insight into herself too soon or too broadly. We writers and readers, "have to know why she is hungry for love, or why she sticks by a brutal husband, why she doesn't escape from what she thinks is an impossible situation."

Even if readers do "turn to our magazines for entertainment and escape," another editor remarks, "the story must give them more. This then is the mission of our writers: to give our readers what they want plus constructive instructions on how to be happy."

The romance-confession path to "happiness" is long and rocky. And it leads through hell. The agony of the journey is made plausible only by the underlying assumption that is the norm, that life can be bearable if we grant that society is a hostile jungle. The empathetic reader travels this path through the eyes of the first person narrator standing for the norm to be demonstrated.

the "I" sins and suffers, stumbling inevitably in the booby-traps of common nightmares and universal fears placed along the road. Yet the story should be told "with the warm breathlessness of a girl confiding to a friend across the kitchen table," says one successful writer describing the genesis of her first big sale, a sleeping pill story -- "Side Door to Hell." "I wrote it straight across the kitchen table . . . In the breathless rush of words, grammar, syntax, correct antecedents went overboard. Where they didn't, I went back and threw them out. The story sold . . . And then I knew I had it -- the thing every published confession story shares with every other. That's the manner of telling."

Warm-hearted characterization and breezy, conversational intimacy counterpoint visceral themes of human misfortune. Summed up in the words of practicing writers and editors, "one simple formula underlies three-fourths of all published confession stories -- a simple, trustful human is faced with a complex, real and brutal world." And: "Characters make their discovery by bumping up against bad trouble as they rush headlong down the line of least resistance."

The protest inherent in this appeal is no secret to writers. In one of her stories, an author explains, "a girl contends with ignorance that calls her cerebral palsied sister an idiot. In another, a girl unknowingly marries a homosexual. Her contention is not with him as villain but with the fact of his nature, and indirectly, with society which has molded that nature. In 'I Lived With Evil,' the third story, an idealistic girl finds out that her grandmother is running an abortion hospital. But it is society, not the grandmother, which makes abortion mills profitable."

The editorial formula capitalizes upon its appeal to discontent by turning protest into adjustment. Aside from such "economic enlightenment" as can be imparted breathlessly across the kitchen table (or through service features and institutional ads), the formula is in making the "simple, trustful human" remain simple (even if not so trustful) till the end; in making her act of defiance a crime or a sin; in making her, not society, repent and reform; in permitting her only to come to terms, and not to grips, with the "brutal world" in which she lives.

"Usually," explains the expert, "this basic formula -- simple trustful human versus brutal world -- dovetails neatly with the old sin-suffer-repent standby formula. In fighting back against brutality surrounding her, the heroine first sins, then suffers, then repents. In the cerebral palsy story . . . when the pressure of society becomes too great, the heroine runs away, changes her name, deserts her family, suffers, and finally repents."

Analyzing why some of her stories <u>didn't</u> sell, a writer discovered that in the rejected stories, "my heroine was trying to wrest events about to suit herself, instead of dazedly watching them go by. The story lacked the theme: trustful, confused, human against the world."

Buffeted by events she cannot understand and is not permitted to "wrest about to suit herself," the heroine's headlong flight "down the line of least resistance" leads to her inevitable "sin." As she has no conscious relatedness to the larger social context with which she must, in fact, contend, her act becomes irrelevant as social protest. It only brings calamity to her and to those she loves. Her suffering is a spine-tingling object lesson in bearing up under relentless blows of half-understood events. Through her agony comes not insight into the circumstances of her act, transcending the immediate causes of her misfortune, but, if anything, a remote glimpse of such "happiness" as might be had in coming to terms with an unbending, punitive, and invisible code. Responding to hidden authority rather than being permitted to be self-directing, her "problem-solving" becomes an unreflecting drift toward adjustment.

The world of the confessions

Wilbur Schramm (1961) analyzed a sample of 100 confession stories. "It proved unnecessary to read that many," he wrote. "The results stabilized by the time 30 had been read. Indeed, the consistency and sameness of these magazines is one of their outstanding characteristics."

"Basic to the formula. . ." Schramm noted, "is the deliberately induced sense of reality. . .In effect, the reader of one of these stories is being invited to eavesdrop or peep on a very personal scene which would otherwise be hidden from him."

The style of the confessions has much to do with the style of news. Creating the illusion of representative authenticity and "normality" is the key to the norm-setting functions of both. The difference is that while news is a legend of things that happen to others, the confession story, even more than other forms of drama and fiction, (except perhaps the daytime serial and family situation comedy aims to hit home for most readers.

Occupational trends in the world of the confessions remained fairly stable with only the number of housewives declining somewhat and the proportion of professionals (mostly men) increasing. The pattern from several studies shows most employed characters in skilled, clerical, or sales work. Wealth comes into the picture rarely, as when a heroine happens to find (or lose) a rich man. Hardship is more frequent, but usually in the background or the past. The typical narrator is a pretty (but "average") woman in her late teens or twenties. She has an even chance to be single or married, and may work as a clerk or salesgirl, unless she is just finishing school or is already a housewife. She lives in (or comes from) a small town, confesses to the Christian belief in God, and has problems with money, housing, health, and job, in that order. But most of her troubles come from people and not from things. Her typical antagonist is an older stronger male in skilled work, sales, or lower management. It is the figure of a lover, husband, father in various combinations or just a man who will finally come to "tame" and dominate her. (deSagasti, 1971; Sonenschein (1970).

Economic striving in the world of the confession magazine is not the Horatio Alger type; it consists of stretching the paycheck to meet the monthly payments. Schramm found that where economic advancement was the goal (in about 15 percent of the stories) it had a 50-50 chance of involving the character in crime. (My maxim that "crime is the ruled acting like rulers" translates in the confession to "crime is women acting like men.")

Another study by Johns-Heine and Gerth (1940) sheds some light on the consequences of economic striving. The authors contrasted the fate of the career women in Ladies Home Journal with that of True Story fiction. They noted that the heroine model of both magazines suffers for her success. But "in True Story, contravention of the moral code results in extraordinary suffering," they wrote. "In the one the positive symbols of safety and security predominate; in the other, negative and harshly punitive symbols. It is the difference between threatened loss of social position ('what will people think'), of such vast symbolic import for the middle-class reader, and threatened physical injury where not status but physical and moral integrity are imperiled."

Schramm found these perils of life involving the characters in endless trouble and misery, most of it focused on family life. While "the most frequently stated goal in these stories is a happy and secure family life," he observed, "Family life. . . is -- to put it mildly -- troubled. Broken homes played significant parts in the family history of 38 percent of the narrators, and 44 percent of them reported their own marriage . . . on the verge of breaking up. . . .21 percent of the narrators remembered unpleasant scenes in the marital relationship of their parents."

Heli de Sagasti (1972) also studied the goals of confession magazine characters and found that while women overwhelmingly sought marriage, twice as many males as females sought just sex. Appropriately, then, women used sexual arousal of men as their most frequent means to an end. Heli de Sagasti compared the years 1955 and 1971, and found that the narrators were even younger and more tightly clustered in the twenties, and pre-marital sex was more frequently portrayed and occasionally even condoned as a means toward the still principal goal of marriage. An editor commenting on the change said that "We assume as a matter of fact, the nonvirginity of the narrator. . . and, of course, now we assume the nonvirginity of a lot of our readers. Where we used to use a line that said 'Virgin in Sin Town,' now we would have to put something like 'Teasing is Not Enough' to entice the reader." (Sonenschein, 1972).

Violence is always around the corner, and illness strikes frequently in the world of the confession magazine. In his 100 stories Schramm counted 25 accidents (17 fatal), 16 fistfights, 14 murders, 12 violent quarrels, 8 rapes, and 4 suicides, and about 30 cases of serious illness.

Pious pornography

To shoulder the burden of guilt privately and individually, the characters must be dominated by some inner, personal and uncontrollable urge that drives them to violate some code of conduct. Schramm found that to be the sex drive. "Typically

described as 'overwhelming' and 'overpowering'" the erotic scenes "usually described with gusto even though covered over with later shame" numbered 40 cases of adultery, 32 of premarital relations, and 4 of prostitution, plus the 8 rapes mentioned above. Historically, this kind of cultural preoccupation with sex is a puritanical one; its object is to bring the punitive inner and external mechanisms of society down upon the subject of domination and terror destined to suffering by nature. One sentence Schramm quoted as typical could have come from the Salem witchhunt: "Once the devil has the soul of a woman, only violence and death can set her free."

Pious pornography is in the forefront of the counterattack (or perhaps only preventive strategy) against women's liberation. The social content of most pornography makes objects of women, but in the confessions the increasingly explicit sexual descriptions are used as weapons to heighten the sense of sin, shame, punishment, and remorse. The other prong of the pincer movement is the ultimate power-put down of the female <u>as</u> female by the male <u>as</u> male -- rape. Along with what confession editors call "God stories" and plumbing stories" (religious and medical themes, respectively, the "bad girl story" and, as if in sequel, the "rape story" are perennial (and, according to Soneschein's [1972] study, increasing) favorites.

In contrast to male-oriented erotica, concluded Sonenschein (1970) it is trauma rather than just sex, which lurks around the corner. "In those relationships where sex occurs, the results for people involved were destructive. . . 54% of the relationships worsened because of the event. . . Guilt, anxiety, and personal difficulties for the narrator. . . are the costs of misusing or even just having sex." Heli de Sagasti observed that the fear or fact of sexual inadequacy -- always on the part of the husband or other male partner -- haunts one out of every six heroine narrators. To lose sex is to lose power and such access to power as the heroine may have through the male.

The "sex-love-marriage dynamic" of the confessions thus affects men and women differently. Heli de Sagasti studied this dynamic and described its symbolic functions as "the reinforcement of notions of sex as power and as the basis for interaction." Outside of marriage the male is "free" and usually takes the initiative. Marriage, however, represents a relative shift of power. While the husband is still dominant, some of his power is shared with the wife. "Within the marriage situation," writes de Sagasti, "it is the female who is the aggressive initiator and the male who is passive." The man's freedom of sexual initiative has been passed on to the wife as the symbol of her success.

Sex and violence are related in that the social content of both demonstrates power relations. Interpersonal violence in the confessions almost always finds a male as agressor and a female as victim. But there is a further difference. When males are victims, they usually suffer an accident, die in a war, or a fire, or fall victim of a variety of impersonal hazards, but never of women and rarely of other men. On the other hand, when a woman is victimized, is is ually by a man and <u>as a female</u>. Sex becomes an instrument of male violence aroused by women and directed against women. The results are traumatic unless and until legitimized, partly shared in marriage.

The sex code, concludes de Sagasti "has been polarized into becoming both the good and the evil of the moral dynamic. It is this which becomes natural law, by which all men and women live, and by which the deviant is defined and disfranchised. . . Whatever else the confession magazines may do, they systematically and lucidly cultivate certain perspectives of sex as power. . . They cultivate notions that this differential power between male and female is both the fact and potential of existence and the basis for interaction. It is on the unquestioned assumption of inequality that the entire structure and dynamic is based, and it is this notion which is constantly reinforced."

"As might be expected," observed Jerzy Kosinski (1973), "the magazines do not attempt to present anything but what he defines as the most conventional relationship between the sexes. . .Man is the agent of rationality. . .occasionally victimized by the demands of his own sexual instincts. Woman, on the other hand, is the agent of passion. . ." The pattern of social domination emerges as the rule of rationality, savage though it may be. Kosinski's analysis found all new trends and changes reduced to vindications of male dominance and the shaming, if not crushing, of any feminine grasp for power, money, and even sex on her terms.

Marriage as power structure

The final goal is, of course, marriage and family conveived as the conventional sexual and social hierarchy, as Albrecht (1956) also found in his comparisons with "upperclass" magazine fiction. But, wrote Kosinski, "although marriage is a social necessity for women, it is not always an ultimate good. . . It is assumed that marriage inevitably leads to sexual boredom. . .When the tamed wife periodically renews her image as sex kitten, she goes to premarital lengths not for her own pleasure but to renew her husband's 'orgasmic' energy. . .

"But sexual incompatibility and boredom are only secondary, predictable problems; a woman's relative 'failure' in the world and her disillusionment with marriage is as often due to financial, as to sexual, inadequacy:

> So, if there were stars in my eyes when I married Larry, I had a reason. Everything was magic, things had to go right for us and work out just perfect. When he took the job at the gas station, I didn't mind living on a mechanic's salary. I guess I expected him to own the station in no time.
>
> But it didn't work out that way. Larry's appealing shyness and modesty about how terrific he was carried over into the job area, too. He was too easy-going to be pushy the way you have to when you want to get ahead, and he was perfectly happy to on "making do" on a mechanic's salary forever.

A good marriage is thus a solvent marriage, Kosinski notes, even if sex destroys itself in it. A good shopping spree can compensate for any difficulty:

> . . .I lay snuggly against Ken's warm back and stared at the ceiling. The romance that was lacking in my marriage was mostly my fault. . .
>
> I will buy myself some new clothes, I vowed. I'll

also buy the velvet sofa and redecorate my whole house.

I drifted into a peaceful sleep, thanking God I was lucky enough to have a husband like Ken.

The world of the confessions operates under a stern code of justice which, Schramm observes, demands punishment for every transgression, but will accept repentance, and reward it with peace. . .The goal of self-respect and marital happiness. . . can only be attained by making peace with a puritanical judge, who is neither spiritual nor legal, but seems to operate through the structure of social relations. This is the most common dynamic of the stories."

"Who administers the code?" Schramm asks. "There is very little reference to an ultimate source of wisdom"; the way in which things are looked at, and the manner of telling does not permit the perception of institutional, social processes. "In general the private services. . .appear in a somewhat whiter light than the public services," but neither is portrayed as organized social activity subject to judgment, as well as to acceptance. Implicit in the findings of this content analysis is the reflection of the pattern of basic irrelevance, of the lack of conscious relatedness between the individual torn by built-in conflicts and the social dynamic of her anxiety and trouble. "The impression is given," commented Schramm, "that this is the pattern of a behavioristic universe; this is how society works; this is the law of human behavior." [Some concluding remarks on marriage as power structure.]

How society works

One story was picked by the simple expedient of taking the first piece that happened to be on top of my collection. It was an anonymous story entitled "How Can I Face Myself? I Let Him Cheapen Me," in Revealing Romances.

Narrated by the daughter of a plumber's family, the story opens in the shadow of recent tragedy. Father and brother had been killed in an accident which wrecked the new family car and the neighbor's kitchen. Mama and Marilyn (the heroine) are left with nothing but grief and payments, plus a debt of thousands of dollars for funerals, hospital, and damages. Morrison, owner of the department store where Mama is cashier and Marilyn salesgirl, discovers that Mama embezzled $450 to help pay the debt. He forces Marilyn to submit to his sexual assault by threatening to send Mama to prison. Marilyn feels she's being made a "tramp" to save her mother, and strikes her in a moment of bitter passion. Mama, ashamed and broken decides to give herself up. But Mama's new resolution gives Marilyn courage not to give in to Morrison again. Marilyn is tortured by her sin, but decides, "I'd bought my soul back" and marries her only suitor, a gruff junkyard operator.

The story illustrates the basic formula, "simple, trustful humans" with cards stacked against them from the outset. The father figure is killed by impersonal forces depriving the heroine of protective male domination. But one must shoulder the blame, says the heroine, and take the consequences rather than look for "excuses" in the conditions of life. "I keep wanting to say that terrible thing happened because we still had to pay for the funerals and the accident," Marilyn says. "When you've done wrong, you can't help but look for excuses. My mother was a weak person and -- there I go, excuses."

Life is cruel and dull, Marilyn asserts repeatedly. About the only thing you can figure is the monthly payment. "Life had been so cruel to Mama. . .Life was dull. . .Dad had always worked hard. . .But like a lot of people, our family always owed more than we had. If we wanted something and could figure the payments, we got it."

Sex comes to Marilyn as another of all the "sharp deals" her society metes out to its prey. "You're doing this only for your mother's sake," says Morrison, whom she describes earlier as "a thin nice-looking, gentle guy, not quite as tall as I." Sex turns him into a beast; shocked, helpless Marilyn into a broken-down tramp. "I let him hold me and kiss me. Passive, I let his hands go where he wanted them to. I saw the awful lust come into his face, making him look like an animal. Then I stiffened myself and closed my eyes for the shock of what followed." Even though when Morrison "made a sharp deal he never talked about it," Marilyn now feels that "I had come to the end of the road, the end of endurance. I, too, had broken down, a weak thing. A tramp! I felt so sick and bitter I couldn't even cry."

In loneliness and debt and grief, Mama also turns bitter against the world. She cries out in protest: "Jack Morrison's got plenty of money -- he's not always honest. Lots of people aren't, and I'm tired of being made to pay for things I'll never have -- other people's things I never even saw. I'm tired, Marilyn. I hate -- I -- hate the whole world."

But she cannot fight back. The only act of defiance available to her is crime; Marilyn's line of least resistance is sin. Torment and lament are their only choice until Mama "rises" to an act of self-sacrifice and offers to accept the punishment of the code. It is now found that society -- personalized in the owner, Jack Morrison -- can be met on its characteristically contractual terms:

"You're going to work and you're going to work for me," Morrison tells Mama and Marilyn. "And I'm going to take the money out of your check, so much each week." Marilyn gasps. "She is not going to trial?" "Well, you'll never pay it back in prison. . . She can go to trial any day I want her to." Morrison snaps.

The social appeal of the story pivots on the heroine's human frailties in a bewildering and punitive world she cannot fully understand. The "truth" of this world is brought home through the inevitable encounter and the final coming to terms -- resigned or tragic -- with the code of male-dominated society. The flame of rebellion is first kindled and then defined as illegitimate and doused in jet streams of remorse, sacrifice, and compromise.

The cover girl experiment

The heroine -- simple, trustful human against a brutal world -- sins, suffers, and repents, without consciously grappling with the social meaning of her difficulties. The cover girl, in suspended animation, her eyes gazing confidently into those of the viewer, appears pointedly innocent of insight into the tragic meanings around her.

Our experiment was conducted to answer this question: how is the contrast and apparent lack of relationship between the cover

girl and the sordid blurbs surrounding her resolved in the perception of the viewer? We wanted to gain some insight into the dynamics of identification with the idealized reader-heroine image in a stark social context. (For a more detailed and technical account, see my article on "The Social Anatomy of the Romance-Confession Cover Girl."

The experiment focused on the influence of the verbal content on cover girl image. Actual confession magazine covers were prepared in three different forms, and shown to three different groups. One group saw a form of the cover showing only the verbal material; the cover was cut out and replaced by a white sheet of paper. Another group was shown only the cover girl's picture cut out of the verbal form, and pasted on cardboard. The third group was shown the cover without any alteration. Figure 2 illustrates the three different forms of one cover.

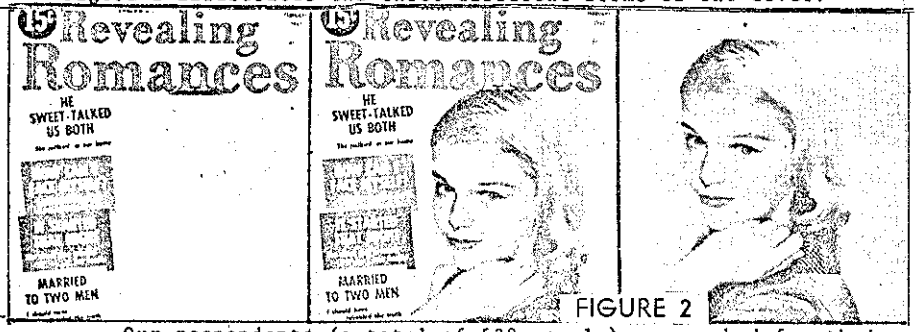

FIGURE 2

Our respondents (a total of 538 people) were asked for their views and feelings about the girl's picture before them. Those who had the girl cut out from the cover were instructed to respond on the basis of their mental image of the picture that they think might go on the cover.

We found that the blurbs alone make the viewers conjure up a mental image that is most unattractive. When the actual cover girl picture is seen, even (or, as we shall see, perhaps especially) in the contrasting verbal context, she is judged on adjectival (semantic differential type) scales as significantly more "good," "kind," "fine," "wise," "successful," "powerful," "active," "important," and "beautiful." The picture of the cover girl succeeds in overcoming the provocative but negative impression created by the super-charged verbal context of the cover. In fact, her juxtaposition with the clashing background makes the cover girl's image conform to the editorial and market specifications more than she would by herself. This is as if the verbal context with which she appears to have no meaningful connection would, by contrast, make her appear at once more vulnerable and more sympathetic, and no less attractive.

When asked to write a personality sketch, those who saw only the verbal context wrote the least about the cover girl's personality, and most of that was unfavorable. Those who saw the picture alone wrote more, and most of that was favorable. But those who saw the confession cover girl in her "natural" verbal habitat, on the actual cover, wrote most and came to her defense with the highest number of positive assertions. That this defense was felt necessary in view of her verbal setting is evident from the fact that in that setting she received more critical comment than in the absence of that setting (although not nearly as many as in the absence of her picture).

For a number of respondents (who were not necessarily readers) the confession-type cover girl appears "too good" for the confessions. As one put it, "She has a smile on her face that shows contempt at the thought of the type of magazine that she appears in." Wrote another: "What I can't figure out is what a pleasant, clean-looking American girl is doing on the cover of a scandal sheet." In these cases the threatening

implications of the verbal context did less to implicate the cover girl -- seemingly oblivious of her setting -- than to make her appear perhaps vulnerable but the more virtuous by contrast.

In the personality sketches, some respondents attempted to dispel the shadow of verbal suspicion cast upon the cover girl. Such protestations were unnecessary in the group that saw only the picture. In fact, the cover girl's glowing image standing by itself was, for some subjects, too good to be true; they had to invent something to be "behind the scenes." As some phrased it, "Looks innocent, but I doubt it." "Feigns innocence, but after a few drinks will tell off-color stories."

The cover formula appeared to permit the viewer to eat his cake and have it too. It presented a respectable yet promising image. As one respondent stated, "She is supposed to be the 'ideal' companion who appeals to sexual emotions while remaining the type most men would be proud to be seen with."

The findings of the experiment, as far as they go, suggest that the image of the cover girl, and her juxtaposition with the contrasting verbal context, serve well the editorial and distribution specifications. She resolves her apparent conflict with the lurid titles of the cover -- suggestive of the brutal world of the confessions -- to her favor. He dominant image exhibits the human appeals of the heroine menaced by male society. Her implicit involvement in the torrent of troubles verbally raging around her enhances, as if by contrast, some of her qualifications. Her posture, outwardly unconscious of the issues of her world, mirrors graphically the heroine's prescribed inability to come to conscious grasp with her society.

On the whole, the market position and social mission of the confession industry seem to dictate from the outset its role among the "new" women of Wage Town. The essence of this role appears to be the underlying message of social unrelatedness. The solid goals -- like meeting the monthly payments, keeping the family together and out of trouble -- are in constant double jeopardy. They are menaced both by the bewildering code of an inscrutable universe and by the neeessary human resistance to it. Wage-town protest -- in forms disguised, submerged, and disoriented -- becomes senseless individual sin, sexually defined and socially de-fused in the world of the confessions.

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