

## Eliza in the Garden: The Representation of Consciousness in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*

Mineo Takamura

Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* has long been acknowledged as a traditional example of the "seduction novel"—a literary genre whose central aim lies in teaching what young pre-marital ladies ought to learn.<sup>1</sup> Foster surely lays the novel's main plot in a didactic correlation between the heroine's moralistic transgression and her tragic death at the end. The novel serves a didactic purpose by exhibiting a "bad example" to readers and thus instructing them in how *not* to behave. Even the most radical reader could not deny the long-standing agreement among critics that the novel owes its contents and composition largely to the frame of the "seduction novel". Yet, we must note that this tacit agreement caused a relentless sameness in the criticism of *The Coquette*; until recently, the alleged "immature" didacticism of the novel has inhibited critics from hearkening to various dissonant tones ringing in the work.

However, most of today's critics doubt, and even attempt to subvert such frame of understanding. Julia A. Stern adequately summarizes recent interpretive controversy upon the novel. According to Stern, recent critics can be categorized into two opposing circles. Critics of the first group interpret Eliza's death at the conclusion of the novel as the ultimate repression of a woman's voice. In this tragic ending do they find an obvious signatures of republican patriarchy and even of Foster's resounding social criticism. Though the critics of this group approve the dominant tone of patriarchal discourse in this novel, they recapture its significance by putting it in social context. The second group is represented by, such critics as Cathy Davidson and Sharon M. Harris. They strongly insist, based on the social context, that this novel is an expression of women's desire for freedom in post-Revolutionary America. Their discussion makes it clear that the novel has some characteristics which didactic novels are not ordinarily expected to have. They emphasize the point that the heroine Eliza rejects the role of the "coquette" (and in fact, Eliza herself hates to be termed "coquettish" in the novel [109]). This group's feminist

approach appreciates the novel's more socially radical components.

However, these two ostensibly oppositional readings are similar in that they have a propensity to regard the novel or the heroine as a symbolic embodiment of something political or social. Julia A. Stern states that both these two groups represent the "dominant impulse to demonstrate that *The Coquette* embodied either republican or liberal tenets." She even says, "recent critics who attempt to secure the political meaning of *The Coquette* reduce the richness of its narrative" (Stern, 73-4). Although I do not specifically disagree to the interpretations of these recent critics, the most important aim of this essay is to show what Stern calls the "richness" of *The Coquette* by exploring the intricate narrative of the novel.

Ian Watt writes in his classic, *The Rise of the Novel*, that the "novel's primary criterion [is] truth to individual experience...which is always unique and therefore new" (Watt, 13). In this point of view, individualism of *The Coquette* is a historical landmark of American literature. This novel focuses on the heroine's personal situation and treats her subjectivity impartially to the extent that no other literary work in North America theretofore had attained. Close reading of Eliza's mental conflict illuminates realistic aspects of the novel which conventional plot-driven reading might miss. Sometimes Eliza acts passionately and at other times writes letters for an obviously moralistic purpose; in short, the author doesn't give consistency to the heroine's words and deeds. This inconsistency could be partly ascribed to the author's equivocal attitude toward the novel. However, as Stern's study shows excellently, it could also be ascribed to Eliza's own ambivalent feelings. As the following part of this essay shall attest, various ambiguous accidents in the novel can be read as some reflections of the heroine's inner conflict. Foster's exhaustive analysis of the heroine's psychology makes this novel a supreme examination of independent self of the heroine. Such reading will destabilize the rigid construction of the seduction plot within the novel and lead us reconsider historical significance of the early novel in American literature.

### 1. Eliza's Independent Self:

#### *The Coquette* as a Project for Destabilizing the "Seduction Plot"

Representations of the independent self in literary works flourished during the Romantic era. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* published in 1774, illustrates the protagonist's irrepressible love for his friend's betrothed.

Werther's love for Lotte conflicts sharply with the society's marital order and so leads him to suicide. However, despite this tragic ending, readers can perceive that Goethe defended the value of the protagonist's romantic love which is intrinsically antisocial. Thus, Goethe established the individual subjectivity in his literary work and it corresponded with the contemporary enthusiasm for civil rights in Western Europe.

But the situation was quite the opposite in contemporary North America. In the Revolutionary period, Richardsonian "seduction novel" gained great popularity, due to its social role. Nancy Armstrong writes, in her *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, that Samuel Richardson "was received with such acclaim and even recommended from the pulpit in a time when novels were considered dangerous" because "he used the feminizing strategies of conduct-book literature in his first work of fiction" (Armstrong 108). At that age, neither writing nor reading was a fully personal act. It is no wonder that Richardson was the first acclaimed author of the novel in such a religious society as the late 18th-century New England.<sup>2</sup> The "seduction novel" was understood as having a patterned development of story: an innocent and ignorant maiden is deceived and eventually raped by an unscrupulous villain. Pre-marital young girls were expected to know the grave danger of moral weakness through such fictions. For its obvious moral merit, this genre was acknowledged as religiously worthwhile in the society. It is unquestionable that Hannah Webster Foster's aim of writing was not far from producing a work that would be favorably received by the community. In fact, *The Boarding School*, the only work she wrote other than *The Coquette*, is just a typical example of the hackneyed "conduct-book literature"—which was at that time produced by many women authors. This convinces us that Foster was basically a conservative moral teacher.<sup>3</sup>

But modern readers, who are exempt from obligations of reading didactic lessons in literary works, might find in *The Coquette* several signs of departures from the rigid frame of the "seduction novel". As Kristie Hamilton says, we may at some points notice that "the story itself calls into question the practicability" (Hamilton 148) of some moral lessons included in the novel. For example, it is hard for us to categorize the pair of characters Eliza and Sanford as an example of classical unequal relationship of "the seducer" and "the seduced". For, although "the seducer" Sanford surely seduces Eliza for his selfish and prurient purpose, and Eliza's friend Lucy Freeman reckons him as a "second Lovelace" (134), Sanford, unlike any Richardsonian seducer, does not have social

superiority over the heroine. Even after he meets several times with Eliza, he still writes to his friend, "I have not yet determined to seduce her; though, with all her pretensions to virtue, I do not think it possible" (149). This statement clearly shows that Sanford's seduction is not decidedly included in his original intention; Sanford's success (or Eliza's depravation) is achieved little by little through the process of their reciprocal relationship. Later in the novel, amazingly enough to the readers, Sanford gives up his wife Nancy whom he married for acquiring money and social status, and runs away from the community with Eliza. Such Sanford's behavior reflects the growing notion of the "marriage for love" and even of the "love for love's sake" at that age. This induces readers to imagine that *The Coquette* is constructed upon quite complicated psychological process between persons. Though such process may not necessarily appear on the surface of the novel, it is actually hard to understand some important scenes without supposing characters' undercurrent inner struggle. We can neither say that Sanford acts consistently as a "seducer" nor that Eliza is an ignorant girl who is just passively seduced by an evil villain.

In fact, there is plenty of evidence in the novel for attesting that Eliza's inner conflict does not come from her naiveté. For example, she is quite aware that marriage with the reputable Boyer would serve her promising future. She writes, "Mr. Boyer's person, and character are agreeable. I really esteem the man. My reason and judgment ... declare for a connection with him, as a state of tranquility and rational happiness" (146). This passage shows that she knows from the outset social value of moral lessons which her female friends Lucy and Julia repeatedly give to her; in other words, their letters virtually teach nothing to her. The one choice highly regarded in the society is not so attractive for Eliza as to abandon the alternative. Eliza writes in reply to Lucy Freeman, "My reason and judgment entirely coincide with your opinion; but my fancy claims some share in the decision: and I cannot yet tell which will preponderate" (125). Eliza's inner conflict is represented by her dialectical terminology of "fancy" and "reason" or "judgment". She is suspended in the tension of these two polar feelings which are both deeply rooted within her.

It is a noticeable trait of this novel that the heroine's inner self is qualified to be against her community's collective sense of value. In this respect, though *The Coquette* is often compared with Susanna Rowson's contemporary work *Charlotte Temple*, these two novels are very different; Charlotte is hardly given personal independence. Despite her innumerable sufferings in life, her conflict

is rarely mentioned through the novel. The absolute power of fate and the surrounding “bad” people always overrule the heroine’s subjective world. Charlotte is provided with much weaker disposition than Eliza. She is in actuality no more than a naive, “ignorant” young maiden. In fact, she is easily duped by a “liberal” teacher, Mademoiselle La Rue, who obliquely leads the heroine into corruption. While in *The Coquette*, we can find no single instigative female character like Mademoiselle La Rue. Namely, readers can hardly blame any person but Eliza herself for her corruption.

To illustrate what essentially tortures Eliza is not so easy as it might appear. Her self-identity is suspended between her reason and sensation, both of which subtly reflect her social (un)consciousness. It is clear that Eliza does not just hesitate over the choice between Boyer and Sanford; she resists the presumptuous social agreement that a woman’s happiness should be attained by marriage. Her hatred of the social institution of marriage is explicitly described in the following passage:

Marriage is the tomb of friendship. It appears to me a very selfish state. Why do people, in general, as soon as they are married, centre all their cares, their concerns, and pleasures in their own families? Former acquaintances are neglected or forgotten. (123)

This passage is most frequently quoted by recent critics because here Eliza’s feminist view is expressed most vividly. The fact that Eliza calls the virtue of marriage into question is surprising. These are the lines Jane Austen would never allow her characters to utter; though marriage was an important theme for her novels, Austen never suspected the value of marriage itself. In Austen’s novels, marriage is not a matter of choice for daughters but a manifest obligation.

Eliza is insubordinate to any legitimate power. She attempts to challenge her fate; in a letter to Lucy she writes, “Sometimes I think of becoming predestinarian, and submitting implicitly to fate, without any exercise of free will; but, as mine seems to be a wayward one, I would counteract the operations of it, if possible (122)”. If a heroine’s submission to fate is a crucial factor of the “seduction novel”, her “exercise of free will” is an unmistakable mark of modern (or romantic) sensibility. In fact, many important decisions including her reunion with married Sanford and her final flight with him are made by her own will rather than by invisible power of fate. In the letter XIV, all

of a sudden Eliza begins to say to Boyer: "Self-knowledge, sir, that most important of all sciences, I have yet to learn." She continues: "Such have been my situations in life, and the natural volatility of my temper, that I have looked but little into my own heart, in regard to its future wishes and views" (126). Eliza faces the existential question of self when the marriage—an integral part of social system which suppresses woman's self—becomes a pressing problem for her. Thus, the heroine's individual personality poses a question of women's marginal subjectivity in the traditional society.

## 2. Eliza in the Garden: Eliza's Impulsive Letters and Allegorical Composition of Space

Eliza expresses her feelings through letters. As some critics have noted, at the beginning of the third letter Eliza writes: "I must write to you the impulses of my mind; or I must not write at all" (109). Many letters by Eliza are written just in the period when she is tortured, and so we can rightly suppose that her words reflect the undercurrent flow of her mind through their particular rhetoric and style. <sup>4</sup> In the preface of *Clarissa*, Samuel Richardson notes a remarkable characteristic of epistolarity: <sup>5</sup>

All the letters are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects (the events at the time generally dubious): so that they abound not only in critical situations, but with what may be called instantaneous descriptions and reflections (proper to be brought home to the breast of the youthful reader;) as also with affecting conversations; many of them written in the dialogue or dramatic way. (Richardson xi)

Letters in *The Coquette* verify the rightness of the Richardson's argument. Eliza's letters have a distinctive style compared with those written by other characters; they reflect more directly the writer's unstable feelings. Reading of how she writes and what she writes will allow us to approach her psychology.

One of the most noticeable traits we can read in her letters is her acute sense of space. As in the Gothic novels, key places in this novel symbolically represent the character's state of mind. In this respect, Eliza is an allegorist as a letter-writer. Many times Eliza relates marriage with the image of closed space in her letters. <sup>6</sup> For example, in a letter to her mother by which she first declares her unwillingness to marry Boyer, she writes that she "dare[s] not

enter" the married life and that her "disposition is not calculated for that sphere" (135). Shortly after that, in a letter to Lucy, she writes, "I am at present, and know not but I ever shall be, too volatile for a confinement to domestic avocations, and sedentary pleasures" (146). In her imagination, married life is associated with a confined status.

On the other hand, it is in the outdoors where she can enjoy freedom which she "so highly prize[s]" (113). Even in the opening letter of the novel, she writes, "It is *pleasure*; pleasure, my dear Lucy, on leaving my parental roof!" (107). Her "pleasure" of leaving her home sounds somewhat queer because at the time she has just lost her fiancé, Mr. Haly. Eliza's statement must be understood in relation with her quest for an independent self. It is written in her letter that her engagement with Haly was an outcome of her "implicit obedience to the will and desires of [her] parents" (107). It is easy to surmise from her letters that the engagement with Haly represents to Eliza the patriarchal marriage system. Indeed, though in the same letter she praises the deceased fiancé's character, her words sound too courtly and solemn to convey her true feelings when we see her more direct expressions in other places. A question might occur to the readers: if she sincerely mourns the death of the man, why does she begin her letter with such a cheerful tone? Or more fundamental question, does she really always write her true feelings? These questions lead us to the narrative problem of epistolarity which I shall see. Now for the moment, let us note that Eliza's imagination unites the closed space with the closed social system, detests both, and that she wants to run away to the outside of them.

But where could she go? Is there any truly outside space in the patriarchal society? These questions bring us to the interpretative crossroad where the novel's theme and the fictional space intersect.

As we have seen, Eliza's rhetoric of space is fundamentally based upon the opposition of closed space and open space. But the "garden" in the novel occupies a marginal section; only this space resists to be categorized neither as closed space nor as open space. The marginality of this space represents the plight of Eliza's selfhood in the traditional society: that is, her inner struggle between desire and inhibition. In fact, we can often see that Eliza walks in the garden when she is worried about something; the short distance between her home and the garden might be necessary for Eliza to keep herself away from the conventionalized patriarchal system and to lose herself wholly in private thought. Let us see how Eliza's imagination is associated with fictionalized space in an important scene. Nearly at the beginning of the novel, Eliza

“throw[s] aside the habiliments of mourning” and joins the party of Colonel Farrington and first meets Boyer. The very instant she is told the name of Boyer by Mrs. Laiton:

The gates of a spacious garden were thrown open, at this instant; and I accepted with avidity an invitation to walk in it. Mirth, and hilarity prevailed, and the moments fled on downy wings; while we traced the beauties of art and nature, so liberally displayed and so happily blended in this delightful retreat. (110)

In this passage, Eliza's excited feelings are expressed along with her description of the garden's open beauty. To Eliza's eyes, the garden is a place where intrinsically opposite things such as “art” and “nature” can coexist happily. And as the word “retreat” in the passage implies, the garden often provides for Eliza an escape from the rigorous world. In fact, the garden is a very private place and is in the contrast with the “confined” state that she believes married life would put her into. In the two letters that are written shortly after the scene above, the word “flowers” is employed metaphorically:

But beware Eliza! —Though stowed with flowers, when contemplated by your lively imagination, it is, after all, a slippery, thorny path! (113)<sup>7</sup>

His person, his manners, his situation, all combine to charm my fancy; and to my lively imagination, strew the path of life with flowers. (121)

We can see that in Eliza's rhetoric beauty and danger are two sides of the same coin. These metaphorical expressions reveal that images evoked by the “garden” influence much upon Eliza's rhetoric.

Rhetoric is intrinsically seductive. Reading Sanford's words closely, we can understand why he is so attractive to Eliza. In the latter part of the novel, when Sanford marries a woman named Nancy, he soon begins to feel the “confinement of a married state” (198). He uses the words that are common to Eliza's stock rhetoric because he knows they can stir Eliza's heart effectively. He makes use of Eliza's rhetoric to seduce her.

He [Sanford] painted the restraint, the confinement, the embarrassments to which a woman, connected with a man of Mr. Boyer's profession, must

be subjected; ... He asked if my generous mind could submit to cares and perplexities like these; ... (132)

These words have direct effect on Eliza's imagination. She half denies them but is eventually enchanted by the images they evoke: she writes, "I listened to him involuntarily. My heart did not approve his sentiments, but my ear was charmed with his rhetoric, and my fancy captivated by his address" (132). Sanford adroitly connects Eliza's vague hatred toward the marriage in general with her feelings about Boyer, and by doing so succeeds in keeping her from Boyer for the moment. "The seducer" Sanford never employs any violent act toward his target. He invades Eliza's heart by making use of rhetoric.

In this way, Sanford contributes to constructing thematic image of place in the novel. While he unites Boyer with the confined space, Sanford attempts to make himself related with the place of the garden. Actually, he invades many times the garden of the house Eliza lives in. And though Eliza writes, "I was walking alone in the garden yesterday, when he suddenly appeared to my view" (132), we can of course rightly suspect that this suddenness is just forged by his craftiness. He knows importance of the garden; he often goes there to approach Eliza's inner self.

One of the most important scenes both for the novel and for our discussion takes place in the garden: the scene that leads Boyer to give up the prospective marriage with Eliza. Let us read the passage written by Boyer's viewpoint:

On inquiry, I was told that Eliza had gone to walk in the garden; but desired that no person might intrude on her retirement. The singularity of the request awakened my curiosity, and determined me to follow her. I sought her in vain, in different parts of the garden, till, going towards an arbor, almost concealed from sight, by surrounding shrubbery, I discovered her, sitting in close conversation with Major Sanford! (168-69)

In the passage, the arbor quite symbolically represents secret sphere of Eliza's mind. Boyer's discovery results from his "curiosity," or more specifically from his prurient voyeuristic impulses which in fact every member of the community shares. We can say that Boyer's discovery emblematically represents people's discovery of woman's selfhood, which they think must be always checked, examined and repressed. Despite Eliza's strong desire for "self-knowledge", her self never belongs solely to herself; it is always already fragmented and

dispossessed by the society.<sup>8</sup> But it must also be noted that Boyer's discovery does not illuminate Eliza's private sphere completely. On the contrary, his discovery implies the extended sphere of Eliza's hidden self which is resistant to illumination.

### 3. Julia's Equivocal Attitude and the Unity of Sympathy

In this context, Julia Granby is essentially important for our discussion. In the latter half of the novel, she stays at Eliza's home and cultivates a close relationship with her; naturally she is deeply involved with Eliza's private life. Julia always stands by Eliza's side and watches over what she is doing. But her stance seems somewhat equivocal; while Lucy's watch is maintained by her own manifest intention of preserving the community's order, Julia's true purpose of watch is quite unclear. Surely, she writes many letters to Lucy reporting Eliza's daily behavior. But she does not so decidedly denounce Eliza's frivolity. Julia declares her neutral position in a letter: "I will not moralize. My business here is to dissipate, not to collect ideas" (194). Eliza apparently feels familiar with Julia than with Lucy; she writes in a letter to Lucy that Julia is a "valuable friend" and that "[H]er mind is well cultivated; and she has treasured up a fund of knowledge and information, which renders her company both agreeable and useful in every situation in life" (207). This Eliza's statement attests that Julia is involved with Eliza's private sphere deeply.

In fact, she witnesses some important accidents which Eliza's "impulses" bring about. Despite conventional moralistic words in her letters, it seems that she does not necessarily inhibit Eliza's "impulses". Considering what we have discussed concerning the symbolic function of the "garden", Julia's behavior in the following passage—which is narrated by Eliza's viewpoint—is quite ambiguous: "Julia and I have been rambling in the garden. She insisted upon my going with her into the arbor, where I was surprised with Major Sanford. What a crowd of painful ideas rushed upon my imagination!" (193). At this scene, Eliza meets Sanford for the first time since they were discovered at the same place by Boyer. It is clear for the reader that this scene replicates the former arbor scene. In fact, again in this passage, the arbor is thematically related with Eliza's impulsive psyche. Julia's behavior can be read as inducing Eliza to face her hidden feelings. No matter what she intends, as a fact she rebuilds the relationship between Eliza and Sanford. Indeed, in another scene, when Sanford beseeches Eliza to let him see her again, Julia encourages Eliza

to accept his request by saying that she “see[s] no harm in conversing with him” (199); without these words, Sanford would not be allowed to reenter Eliza’s private field.

Julia’s pattern of behavior is sometimes similar to Boyer’s in that both of them invade Eliza’s private area and “discover” something that would expose the heroine’s inner conflict. But unlike Boyer, she seems to be less interested in the meaning of what she discovers; Julia is rather an embodiment of pure voyeuristic desire. Therefore, her discovery gives more vivid impression on the reader. The most important discovery by Julia is reported in the letter LI: Julia goes into Eliza’s chamber and finds Eliza with a miniature picture of Sanford in her hand. This scene is set immediately after the arbor scene I have just discussed above. In this passage multiple invasions are dexterously woven; that is, Julia’s invasion gives readers a chance to see that Sanford’s invasion is internalized in Eliza’s mind. The author here vividly illustrates what is going on in Eliza’s mind using spacial composition.

In this way, Julia allows us to see into Eliza’s consciousness. But we must not forget that at the same time Julia herself is deeply entangled with the whole process of the psychological drama. Whether we regard her as a moral mentor or as Eliza’s bosom friend matters little. What counts is the fact that Julia’s immaturity evokes sympathy in Eliza’s mind. Julia represents what Eliza once had but now has lost; Eliza says that Julia is “all that I once was; easy sprightly, debonair” (192). Once, seeing Eliza’s pensive mood, Julia urges her to “revisit the scenes of amusements and pleasure” (192), but Eliza refuses, supposing that she can no longer feel pleasure in the fashionable circles as she did. Julia A. Stern is right when she says that Julia is a “virtual doppelgänger” of Eliza (Stern 141); Julia represents Eliza’s past.

In this sense, Julia destabilizes our conventional concept of “character”; she is an integral part of Eliza’s self. The same may be said of Sanford—though while Julia is related with Eliza’s past, he is linked to her future. As Julia’s discovery at the chamber implies, the three persons—Lucy, Sanford and Eliza—are emotionally interrelated with each other. As it were, they are in the same emotional vortex. Therefore, for considering the psychological undercurrent in *The Coquette*, we must regard these three characters as a sympathetic unity.<sup>9</sup> The sympathetic unification among Eliza and Sanford and Julia functions as a receptacle for Eliza’s passionate feelings. This hidden emotional unity is not so apparent in the letters but it surely exists and cultivates the unwritten and so unfathomable depth of Eliza’s inner self.

#### 4. The Limit of Epistolary Novel

The point of view I have described in the former section returns us to the stylistic problem of the epistolarity. In *The Coquette*, without one exception, Eliza communicates through letters neither with Sanford nor with Julia. We must not forget that they are always near her.<sup>10</sup> As we have already seen, Eliza declares that she writes about her “impulses” to Lucy and in fact confesses her true feelings through letters. But her statement does not hold true at all for the latter half of the novel. Nearly halfway through the whole story, Lucy gets married and exits the central narrative. As for Boyer, he also disappears from the story almost at the same time. Probably because of this, the dominant discourse gradually changes through the novel. As W.M.Verhoeven points out, Boyer (whose discourse is dominant in the former part of the novel) mainly approaches Eliza by letters, while Sanford (whose discourse is dominant in the latter part of the novel) “chooses the ephemeral medium of light-hearted conversation and witty small-talk” (Verhoeven 143). As the story goes on, the tone of Eliza’s letters also gradually changes. Her letters lose their characteristic enlivened quality and begin to assume a pensive tone. She probably begins to feel it difficult to narrate her true feelings through letters. Earlier in the novel we can find in her letters many ideal words such as “virtue,” “innocence” and “fancy.” But later she seems to have lost her belief in these words. Her letters become to be constituted by many realistic descriptions. Particularly, the letter XLII has quite interesting narrative style. In this letter, Eliza reconstructs a series of accidents like a narrator. For example, an exchange between Sanford and Eliza is narrated in her letter as follows:

I am a married man, Eliza. So I understand, said I; and I hope you will never treat your wife with the dissimulation and falsehood, which you have exercised towards me. Would to heaven, exclaimed he, that you were my wife! I should not then fail in my love or duty as a husband! Yet she is an amiable girl; and, had I a heart to give her, I might still be happy! But that, alas! I can never recall. (200)

In this way, emotional closeness of two persons is illuminated through their conversation. In such a letter, Eliza gives up summarizing the accidents by her own words. She faces the situation for which any ready-made words would be

inappropriate.

Surprisingly enough, in this epistolary novel there's a tacit assumption that a conversation between persons is more suitable than letters for articulating the human psyche. This is evident since, as I have stated by quoting Verhoeven, Sanford's spoken words attract Eliza more profoundly than Boyer's written words. And the stylistic changes of Eliza's words imply the limitation of the epistolary style; in other words, this epistolary novel goes as far as the limit of the genre. As some critics have noted, Eliza increasingly becomes silent towards the end of the novel (Baker 64; Davidson 146,7; Pettengill 198); in a letter to Lucy, she confesses that "Writing is not so agreeable to me as it used to be" (207), and again in another letter to the same, she writes at the beginning: "Writing is an employment, which suits me not at present. It was pleasing to me formerly, and therefore, by recalling the idea of circumstances and events which frequently occupied my pen in happier days, it now gives me pain" (213). She also feels similar linguistic agony even when writing to her mother: "In what words, in what language shall I address you? What shall I say on a subject which deprives me of the power of expression? Would to God I had been totally deprived of that power before so fatal a subject required its exertion!" (229). Eliza is deprived of her words as well as her body.<sup>11</sup>

Eliza's agony derives from her exhaustive self-examination, which might be an important factor for realistic novels but is intrinsically unnecessary for moralistic literature. As Pettengill points out, Eliza leaves behind at her death, "scraps of her writing" "containing miscellaneous reflections on her situation, the death of her babe, and the absence of her friends" (236).<sup>12</sup> Though Eliza feels pain to write to a particular person, she can still write in an isolated place only for herself. We can rightly imagine that her writings include many important facts not only about her elopement with Sanford or the death of her baby but also about her own death. But Foster does not open this important card and finally Eliza's death becomes a matter of gossip within her community. Modern readers may feel dissatisfied with the novel's desultory ending. Obviously, it is Foster's historical sense of balance that is at work at this bleak end of the novel. For the author, introducing Eliza's letters to the readers would be an act of opening Pandora's box. If Foster had done it, she could not have fitted the novel to the frame of the "seduction novel". Stern is probably right when she says that "Foster's imagination is entangled in a form of political double vision" (Stern, 74). Foster may have been tortured by her own ambivalence which is not so different from Eliza's.

As I have stressed in this essay, the psychological drama within this novel is so compelling that it nearly overwhelms the rigid plot of the “seduction novel”. Boyer’s viewpoint in the arbor scene or Julia’s discovery at the chamber scene may also tease the readers’ erotic desire to peek into Eliza’s inner self. *The Coquette* is full of such titillating details that arouse readers’ desire in unique ways. Eliza’s ambivalent modern self is the touchstone of every crucial event in *The Coquette*; her passionate feelings are so excessive that they almost disrupt the conventional style of epistolarity. Eliza’s complex self shows that this novel is surely a harbinger of the modern psychological novel.

### Notes

All parenthetical citations from Hannah Webster Foster come from William Hill Brown *The Power of Sympathy* and Hannah Webster Foster *The Coquette*. Ed. Carla Mulford. New York: Penguin. 1996.

<sup>1</sup> We cannot say that this type of interpretation belongs completely to the past. For example, Evans traces the patterned reading even in an essay issued in 1995. On the other hand, it would be unfair to early critics if I forgot to mention that a few of them noticed radicalism of this novel. For example, Alexander Cowie points out “the pert attacks of [the] heroine on the convention of the day” (Cowie 16).

<sup>2</sup> Carla Mulford says, “Richardson was of peculiar interest to Puritans in New England probably because the Protestant impulses available in his work appealed to some extent to the ideological underpinnings of elite-class New England society” (Mulford, xxvii). About the circumstances of reading and publication in the eighteenth-century America, see Warner.

<sup>3</sup> As for the American conduct tradition, see Newton.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Z. Baker points out Eliza’s acute sense of language. She argues that “Eliza’s struggle to control her life begins with the struggle to control language” and that “her language” is “her mode of self-expression” (Baker 58, 64). Baker’s linguistic concern comes very close to my own; however, principally my analysis emphasizes Eliza’s unconscious construction of rhetoric while Baker’s describes her acute sense of language.

<sup>5</sup> “Epistolarity” is a term of Junet Gurkin Altman. Altman’s work is a representative general study of this literary form.

<sup>6</sup> Walter P. Wenska, Jr. first pointed out this metaphor. He argues that it is “the novel’s principal theme” (Wenska 246). Sharon M. Harris compares this social

surveillance over women's behavior to Michael Foucault's Panopticon (Harris 15).

<sup>7</sup> These are Lucy's words but yet expressed in Eliza's letter.

<sup>8</sup> If the arbor scene was narrated only by Boyer's viewpoint, the reader might feel uneasy with his/her position. But in reality the important scene is narrated by three different characters: Boyer, Eliza and Sanford. This narrative method allows us to see the single event from three different points of view.

<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that their physical proximity is certainly related with their spiritual affinity. Here again, spatial composition is important. That Boyer often leaves Eliza is an important factor of hindering their union, and Lucy's relationship with Eliza becomes fragile when she gets married and moves from Hartford to the distant Boston. In contrast, both Sanford's move to Eliza's neighborhood and Julia's stay with her foster the mental relationships of these three persons.

<sup>10</sup> Stern writes on this point, "Despite Sanford's ultimate sexual cooptation of the heroine, he remains forever outside the social circuit that epistolary affords Eliza" (109). Sanford writes several letters to his friend Charles Deighton but no replies are represented in the novel. Stern also writes, "If correspondence is a figure, or even a substitute, for erotic exchange the libertine's writing must be seen as onanistic" (109).

<sup>11</sup> John Paul Tassoni writes, "Once Eliza becomes pregnant with Sanford's child, she can no longer rely on rhetoric to negotiate her place in virtuous society" (Tassoni 108).

<sup>12</sup> Pettengill 198. Pettengill appropriately points out that Eliza becomes "the subject of examination and judgment by the female circle" through her scraps of writing (Pettengill 198).

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