

Rereading Sentimental Novels:
Charlotte Temple and The Coquette

Taeko Kitahara

The main current running through the early American literature in the late eighteenth century is that of so-called "sentimental novels." Despite their contemporary enormous popularity and abundance, these products of the unfledged national imagination have been paid little scholarly attention and are almost ignored in the standard literary canon. In one of pioneering studies of this genre, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860* (1940), Herbert Ross Brown mentions that "very few of these once popular novels are read today by critical readers with anything save an ironical appreciation. . . ." The low literary merit of these novels, what is seen as their "widespread mediocrity," explains the scarcity until recent times of scholarship on post-Revolutionary American fiction. The rise of feminist criticism in the 1960s and the 70s, however, cast a new light on these long-forgotten sentimental novels, and critics have now begun seriously to reevaluate them.

As "sentimental novels" were about, as well as for, young women in particular, critics tend to focus on certain issues concerning women when they study these novels. Through female characters, they are eager to explore such topics as women's status, the condition of life, and the expectations of women. In terms of knowing how women were viewed in those days, the "seduction novels," one branch of the "sentimental novels," are undoubtedly valuable sources. The seduction theme was in fact inspired and influenced by Samuel Richardson. From the negative role models of "fallen" heroines in these novels, readers get the picture of ideal womanhood. In other words, they receive the didactic message that women need to be virtuous and chaste in order to get married, and that marriage is the only means to secure wom-

en's life economically and socially.

In addition to the above-mentioned obvious didacticism, it would be interesting to discover another message from the authors of sentimental fictions, especially from women authors, who were weighed rather lightly. That is, by examining how women look at men, one can find new perspectives on seemingly trifling, tearful novels. The didactic presentation of women characters is not all that these novels have to offer. It is worth remembering that the heroes and villains also have a role to play, and are indeed often the most interesting (or at least the most exciting) characters in the novels. Thus, this essay will consider the post-Revolutionary women's view of men and explore the subtext of two important seduction novels, *Charlotte Temple* (1794) and *The Coquette: or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (1797); I will examine the authors' treatments of male characters in their personal, familial, and social ramifications.

Both *Charlotte Temple* by Susanna Haswell Rowson and *The Coquette* by Hannah Webster Foster were read widely in their time. *Charlotte Temple* was actually the first best selling novel in America and was popular until the beginning of this century. *The Coquette* ran up to *Charlotte Temple* in popularity.³ While Rowson gives a continuous narrative, Foster, in the Richardsonian manner, uses an epistolary form between the main characters in *The Coquette*. The two novels' plots are similar: the heroine is seduced, abandoned, and dies in childbirth. Yet, the heroines of both works are contrasting. *Charlotte Temple* is an innocent fifteen year old girl. On the other hand, *Eliza Wharton*, the title character of *The Coquette*, is a sophisticated mature woman in her mid-thirties.

There are a couple of male characters who surround the heroine in each novel. They fall into two rough categories of the good and the evil. Nevertheless, they are not simply stereotypical characters with peculiar qualities, but are indeed rather convincing portrayals of real persons. The respectable figure in *Charlotte Temple* is Mr. Temple, the heroine's father. He is a benevolent, generous man who is willing to help the unfortunate. As a husband and a father, he is very affectionate and warm. In short, he is endowed with ideal human qualities. Similarly, in *The Coquette*, Foster describes Boyer, a minister, who is a suitor of *Eliza Wharton*, as honorable and virtuous. While he is wooing *Eliza*, Foster shows his sincere and devoted love. With this character and his holy occupation, Boyer, therefore, appears to everyone's eyes

as the most desirable partner for Eliza.

Although Mr. Temple and Boyer seem to be impeccable figures, however, they also make mistakes and have defects that prove fatal for the heroines. Being no more than a gentle father, Mr. Temple is not wholly qualified to be a guide in life for his daughter. This fact indirectly leads to the destruction of Charlotte. Patricia L. Parker writes: Mr. Temple “overprotects his daughter and educates her inadequately for the realities of life . . . [parents] must first provide their children with a proper preparation for life.”⁴ Similarly, Henri Petter points out that “her lack of experience and proper guidance” is the cause of Charlotte’s irreparable mistake.⁵

Before Charlotte’s departure for the boarding school, Mr. Temple could have taught Charlotte some worldly wisdom: for example, that one cannot judge others on superficial impressions, as a seemingly nice man/woman may turn out to be a villain. Also, that cajolement may hide the true intention of the speaker. If the young girl had known all this, she would neither have listened to her seducer, nor have read his alluring love letter, which initiates her fall. Furthermore, she might have learned that getting on in the world requires some art and shrewdness, because he/she cannot live on only good will. This is illustrated in the episode where the pregnant, penniless Charlotte is driven out of her apartment, by a merciless landlady; had Charlotte had any practical knowledge of money and known how to bargain with others, she would not have died.

Boyer is not only noble but also cold, possessive, and narrow-minded. These characteristics go against the expected image of a minister, who should have a generous heart and an unselfish attitude. His coldness is revealed in his calculating manners to his beloved as well as in his shallow love. Although Boyer seems to love Eliza deeply, he simultaneously keeps judging if Eliza is appropriate for a clergyman’s wife. In Eliza, Boyer observes “levity” and “extravagance” in her taste in dresses, which he finds undesirable traits for his prospective wife. He dislikes Eliza’s inclination toward the glamorous social life and tries to correct that aspect.

After Boyer’s accidental witness of the scene where Eliza and Major Sanford—his rival as well as the seducer—are alone in intimate conversation, his real personality emerges. Even without listening to her explanation, Boyer hastily concludes that Eliza is a “coquette” and deserts her. The truth is, however, that Eliza is seeing

Sanford to finish her flirtatious relationship with him. No matter how verbally affectionate the minister is, he is ultimately jealous and selfish. His tears, which seem to demonstrate how deep his affection for Eliza is, and his agony at parting with her, can be taken as the explosion of his sensibility, usually repressed by the nature of his occupational role; tears are observed on occasions when one's wishes are not fulfilled. In other words, Boyer's tears show his wounded pride in failing to wholly win Eliza's heart, not his genuinely sympathetic feelings.

It is not a surprise that Boyer soon finds another woman who "possesses [his] entire confidence and esteem"⁶ and decides to take her as his wife, though shortly before, he has said of Eliza that "she has a perfect command of my passions" (77). Boyer's flat rejection and his succeeding marriage inflict pain on Eliza so severely that they cause a depression which weakens her reason. As a result, though originally intelligent and perceptive, Eliza ends up being unable to resist Sanford's seduction.

While the ideal characters in these novels are not always perfect, their counterparts are not totally evil. The seducer in *Charlotte Temple* is Lieutenant Montraville, a handsome young English soldier. Charmed by Charlotte, he exerts the arts of seduction over her; he is "tender, eloquent, ardent, and yet respectful."⁷ Accordingly, the credulous English girl is easily deceived by him and is taken away to the unfamiliar new continent. In America, however, Montraville falls in love with the fair daughter of a wealthy family, Julia Franklin. Besides, he is trapped by his evil friend Belcour, who tries to snatch Charlotte from Montraville to possess her as his mistress; Montraville doubts the chastity of Charlotte, abandons his pregnant lover, and marries Julia. After being in misery, poverty, and coldness, Charlotte dies in childbirth.

In this way, Montraville appears to be an entire villain. Nevertheless, as Henri Pettey indicates, he has conscience and a warm heart, as well.⁸ Rowson writes about Montraville's character: he is "generous in his disposition . . . and good-natured almost to a fault" (37-38). In other words, he is presented as a naive young man, who is once driven by impulse. He regrets that he has seduced and ruined the innocent. He feels strong guilt in being united with Julia and is keenly aware that he does not deserve her affection. His conscience and attachment order the seducer to make

compensatory gestures for his folly before his marriage: to leave cash and a farewell letter with sincere apologies to Charlotte. Montraville's atonement is baffled, again, by Belcour's plot; Charlotte receives neither money nor the letter.

Caring about the girl, Montraville later visits Charlotte, but only finds the vacant house. On his way back, he runs across her funeral procession. Going up to Mr. Temple, the young man confesses that he is the seducer of his daughter and begs Mr. Temple to take his life. Yet, Mr. Temple says "thy own reflexions be thy punishment" and leaves Montraville (117). Montraville flies back to Belcour and takes revenge for Charlotte in the fight. For the rest of his life, Montraville is "subject to severe fits of melancholy" (118). At this point, poetic justice finally works, though it does not help the heroine.

Rowson, thus, portrays a "humanized antagonist" who regrets and suffers for his careless egotism that has brought disaster upon many, including himself. It can also be said that the presence of Belcour, by comparison, helps to lessen the gravity of Montraville's sin.⁹ As Cathy N. Davidson points out, among the sentimental novel writers, a few could create "rounded characters" instead of merely "one-dimensional proponents of vice."¹⁰ Montraville is a noteworthy villain in this sense.

In the same manner, Sanford in *The Coquette* is another rounded character. Unlike Montraville who becomes a seducer due to his ardent love, Sanford is notorious for being a "rake," who is described as "a second Lovelace." Sanford himself acknowledges his "arts of seduction" and dares not deny his previous record of depravities. He is, in fact, a misogynist as he explains the motivation of seduction: "I fancy this young lady [Eliza] is a coquette; and if so, I shall avenge my sex, by retaliating the mischiefs, she meditates against us" (18). Such realities are, however, well concealed by his innate charm and social polish. In short, he is at the opposite pole to the sober, stiff Boyer.¹¹ No wonder Eliza regretfully writes to her friend "[w]hat a pity . . . that the graces and virtues are not oftner united!" (22). Besides, Sanford knows exactly how to appeal to the seducee by accurate psychological calculation. Therefore, even a coquette is deluded by Sanford's image and his blandishments.

The seducer, Sanford, is a cruel man. The fact that *he* destroys the life of a woman hardly gives him feelings of guilt. This misogynist seems to completely disrespect the woman's individuality and ignore the humanity of the human being he

seduces. That is why he can impudently write to his friend: "I hope you will never be embarrassed with a wife, nor lack some favorite nymph to supply the place of one" (126). For him, the act of seduction is like hunting. The prize is, of course, the coquette. In this intellectual game, he competes not only with his game but also with other hunters (i.e. Boyer). His jealousy of as well as his desire to beat the rival drive Sanford to work hard on Eliza's estrangement from Boyer. Being calm and tactful, Sanford is invincible. Furthermore, his satisfaction in his victory over Boyer is deepened by deserting the prize; he leaves Eliza, marries an heiress, then returns to have her surrender completely. Sanford, thus, wholly takes pleasure in winning the game.

Sanford's malevolence is underscored by his ruthless treatment of his wife. First of all, his intention in marriage is mercenary. Sanford writes to his friend: "Whenever I do submit to be shackled, it must be from a necessity of mending my fortune" (23). In his matrimony, he neglects his wife, gradually gets sick of her, and even spitefully says to her that if Eliza had a fortune, he would have married her. The birth of his legitimate baby which is stillborn reveals his character; without mourning, he mechanically passes on the news to his friend.

This scoundrel, however, does have a human heart. Facing the death of Eliza, Sanford becomes a fanatic. Unlike the stereotypical seducers who abandon the seducees and rejoice in their death, Sanford deplors the loss of Eliza who, it turns out, was the "darling of [his] soul, the centre of all [his] wishes and enjoyments" (164). Her death at last arouses the rake's conscience; Sanford is greatly agonized by the awareness of the fatal effects of his seduction of Eliza. He asks in his letter, "Where shall I fly from the upbraidings of my *mind*, which accuses me as the murderer of my Eliza?" (164, emphasis added). Sanford regrets his guilt, severely blames himself, and wishes for his own death. He also alludes to his bleak future. His mind with which he enjoys and wins the game ironically tortures him at the end. Again, poetic justice exerts its power on vice, but it does not save the weak heroine.

As we have seen, both Rowson and Foster successfully build up these characters. That is, they neither idealize the good figures too much, nor exaggerate only the evil aspects of the bad figures. Their usage of poetic justice falling upon the villains allows readers emotional relief from a depressing ending; and this perhaps allows them to avoid a total rejection of these male characters. Interestingly, the male writ-

ers who appeared a little later than Rowson and Foster seem to persist in the sentimental tradition, particularly when they create female characters. As Judith Fryer indicates, writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville usually categorize women into two groups, though they certainly have exceptions; one is the fair blond who is a Mary-like virtuous woman and the other is the seductive brunette who is an Eve-like dangerous woman.¹² The female writers, it seems, chose to present a more realistic view of human beings who cannot be perfect, while male writers stuck to the vision of mythic women.

In the context of the family, Rowson and Foster's views on men can be measured by the criteria of "sensibility" and "sense." Sensibility respects spiritual values like love and family. On the other hand, sense considers economic gain as the most important part of life. Both authors portray three types of families: one is ruled by sensibility, another by sense, and another by sense and sensibility. In due course, they clarify the real meaning of marriage.

In *Charlotte Temple*, the Temples and the Montravilles are appropriate instances. Sensibility governs the Temples; Mr. Temple who is the youngest son of a nobleman decides to "marry where the feelings of his heart should direct him," because he has seen his brothers and sisters become unhappy due to the marriage that weighs fortune and titles more than affection (12). Consequently, against his father's will, Mr. Temple chooses Lucy Eldridge as his life partner, who is fortuneless but "fair as the lily," dutiful, capable and affectionate (13).

Mr. Temple's family, the couple and Lucy's father, has an Edenic image. Rowson writes:

[Mr. Temple] sought and found a cottage suited to his taste; thither, attended by Love and Hymen, the happy trio retired; where, during many years of uninterrupted felicity, they cast not a wish beyond the little boundaries of their own tenement. Plenty, and her handmaid, Prudence, presided at their board, Hospitality stood at their gate, Peace smiled on each face, Content reigned in each heart, and Love and Health strewed roses on their pillows (25-6).

As Hiroko Sato indicates, his family, in other words, is a place where "sensibility" is

respected, not ruled by “sense,” which relies on a social framework structured from the concepts of property and reputation.¹³

On the other hand, sense guides the Montravilles. The family is pragmatic and materialistic. Montraville’s father announces to his son that his success in life depends entirely on himself, after he has bestowed a commission in the army on him. The father, then, warns his son of hasty marriage, adding, though, that he would rejoice in the youth’s union with a woman with ample fortune. That is why Montraville hesitates to marry Charlotte, who does not have fortune, instead he marries Julia. At this point, Rowson shows that among the Montravilles social status and riches come before sensibility.

Similarly, in *The Coquette*, Foster gives a picture of different kinds of families: the Richmans and the Sanfords. Mrs. Richman is a cousin and very good friend of Eliza. Based on the egalitarian concept of mutual respect and love, the Richmans’ matrimony appears to Eliza ideal. In addition, as their name denotes, they are also rich, as is pointed out by Kristie Hamilton.¹⁴ Eliza envies them: “Health and *wealth*, with every attendant blessing preside over their favored dwelling, and shed their benign influence without alloy” (14, emphasis added). Sense and sensibility seem to reign in harmony for this couple.

The Sanfords are ruled by sense only—fortune and reputation. Sanford repeatedly deplores that Eliza has no fortune. After all, he marries an heiress from the economic necessity of pursuing independent pleasure, as he is not actually well off as he pretends. He even mentions that money may “supply the place of love” (72). After divorcing his wife, he recalls his marital life as “loveless.” Not limited to the wealth, the reputation of his wife matters a great deal to the seducer. Concerning marriage with Eliza, Sanford confesses to his friend that it would “hurt even [his] delicacy . . . to have a wife whom [he knows] to be seducible,” though he loves and himself seduces Eliza (157). Sanford is also a dry, utilitarian man, like Montraville’s father.

Throughout the portraits of the three kinds of families, Rowson and Foster seem to positively present the families which satisfy the criteria of sensibility. And yet, they do not delineate absolute happiness in these families; both the Temples and the Richmans experience the death of their children, the symbol of their bliss. The authors throw a shadow over the picture of domestic peace. The description of these

seemingly ideal families as well as worldly families indicate the two authors' awareness of the strength of the social framework made by men. They put the basis of judgement of things on "sense." They do not forget that monetary power governs a real world where people cannot always pursue their ideals. In other words, they show that marriage is not necessarily the result of a romance, but also a "business," where economic factors on the sides of both men and women may matter more than sensibility.¹⁵ In economic terms, wealthy men and women with fortune are more marketable in marriage. Furthermore, as Eliza complains, one can rarely find someone like Mr. Richman who possesses "virtues," "graces," and "*affluence*" at the same time (53, emphasis added). Therefore, while keeping the ideal picture of the family and husband in mind, Rowson and Foster avoid describing the image of the perfect family, rather they show the realities of life.

Then, in the context of society, how do Rowson and Foster judge men who hold control over their sex? Curiously enough, both authors show the lessening of patriarchal power. This phenomenon seems to reflect the social change and disturbances of the period. Nancy F. Cott writes:

By the post-Revolutionary years the moral justification behind apprentices' service to masters, the people's deference to governors—even children's obedience to parents—was undermined by newer ideals of individual achievement, equal representation, and popular rights.¹⁶

In the two novels, the description of weak brotherhood and powerless men exemplify the case.

Neither of the major male characters in *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette* has desirable male friends. In the former work, Montraville's friend, Belcour is, as already partially seen, a total villain who incarnates the "disgrace to humanity and manhood" so that he deserves the revenge of Montraville (98). Only egotism rules Belcour; he is "dissipated, thoughtless, and capricious" (37). Even though "something like humanity" kindles once in his heart when he sees Charlotte who blames herself for her fall, "selfish passion" soon stifles it (96). It is this man with the ironic name of "beautiful heart" in French who initiates the tragedy of Charlotte and

Montraville. His repeated deception of and amoral depravities toward others make him unpardonable; he steals Charlotte from his friend, but abandons her due to her illness, and goes on to seduce a new girl.

As for the missing brotherhood between Montraville and Belcour, Rowson writes:

had [Montraville] been so fortunate as to possess a friend who would have pointed out the cruelty of endeavouring to gain the heart of an innocent artless girl, . . . the humanity of his nature would have urged him to give up the pursuit: but Belcour was not this friend; he rather encouraged the growing passion of Montraville. . . . (38)

In other words, if there were the right brotherly guidance for Montraville, Charlotte's fall and the following tragedy would have been avoided.

Also, in *The Coquette*, readers hardly find an account of satisfactory brotherhood. Foster describes two forms of male friendship; one is that of Sanford and his friend, Charles Deighton; the other is that of Boyer and Mr. Selby. To the readers, the former relationship is limited and one-sided, for information comes only from Sanford's letters which report his progress in seducing Eliza, boast of his arts of seduction, and reveal his frivolous remarks on women. Deighton, who only receives these amoral, disgraceful letters without reproof, seems to be a barbarous man, though he never appears in the book. With such a man who has no power of redeeming his rake friend, how could there be dependable brotherhood for Sanford?

Regarding Boyer and Selby, similarly, they interact to each other only through letters; they do not appear together in the novel. Selby seems to be a worthy friend. He is respectful and loyal to Boyer. For his friend's sake, he kindly delivers the letters of Boyer and his swain, and watches Eliza while Boyer is away. In fact, however, Selby himself fancies Eliza. This is lucidly seen when he comments on Eliza's calligraphy. He writes, "I have heard so much in praise of Miss Wharton's penmanship . . . that I am almost tempted to break the seal of her letter to you; but I forbear" (46). Some kind of violation is presumably implied by this.

Despite his qualities as a friend, Selby's improper fancy absolutely degrades

him. His kindness, which can be a little officious, actually lessens his worth, as well. Thinking of his friend, Selby voluntarily follows Eliza to the uninvited assembly and later warns Boyer that she is a “coquette.” This implants a deep suspicion about Eliza in Boyer’s mind and results in Boyer’s decision to forsake Eliza without giving her a chance to explain her situation with Sanford. The meddler’s unnecessary observation and guess change the heroine’s life.

In addition to the weak brotherhood which indirectly helps the heroines’ falls, Rowson and Foster show another factor which causes the destruction of the fallen angels. Men who are supposed to be the protectors of women turn out to be powerless; they fail to save the heroines at the very moments when they need male support in both novels.

In *Charlotte Temple*, the three male guardians are unable to help Charlotte. First, Mr. Eldridge, the grandfather of Charlotte, is merely passive and weak. Although he dotes on his granddaughter, he only deplores and weeps at the news of Charlotte’s elopement. He does not take any action such as searching for Charlotte. Instead, he just informs Mr. Temple of the mishap, and says “Bear it like a Christian” (52). While Charlotte is away, the grandfather seems not to do anything but sorrow for the loss of the darling girl.

Compared to his father-in-law, Mr. Temple is more efficient and practical. Nevertheless, he is not influential in terms of saving Charlotte; he cannot find out where Charlotte is. Even when he sets out to America to search for his daughter after receiving her letter, he arrives too late; if he had come earlier, he would have saved Charlotte, who despairs of her parents’ pardon and becomes penniless as well as seriously ill. At least, the father is in time to see his dying daughter, but what he can do is only to attend her death.

Finally, Montraville illustrates the incompetence of men. Deceived by Belcour, Montraville leaves Charlotte who is pregnant and requires his care. He is away when she definitely needs his economic support, facing destitution and the collection of rent. Even though he entrusted Charlotte to Belcour, his lack of insight into human nature ends up driving her to adversity.

Likewise in *The Coquette*, the male characters fail to save Eliza. First of all, in this novel, as Eliza’s father has already died, there is no parental authority and guard.

Also, Boyer rejects Eliza as a coquette, rather than trying to redeem her with his honorable character. As Keiko Beppu suggests, this seems to ironically reflect the rigidity of the Puritanism Boyer believes in.¹⁷ After giving Eliza a severe admonition, he refuses to commit himself to her, and finds a more chaste and virtuous woman as his partner.

In the case of Sanford, like Montraville, he cannot offer Eliza economic support at a crucial time, though it is the possible and acceptable assistance from the libertine. This happens because on the day on which Sanford means to visit Eliza, most of his property is seized due to his immense debt; in order to secure the rest, he is obliged to become a “prisoner” in his own house. After Eliza’s death, therefore, Sanford deplors that he did not have the power “to preserve Eliza from death” (165).

It is part of the assumption of these novels that there has been a code by which only fallen women are censured; men escape blame; but the rise of sensibility has changed all this, and it is clear that men are also partly held responsible for women’s fall. The lessening of patriarchal power directly and indirectly affects women’s lives. In addition, like the weak patriarchy, there exists no solid matriarchy. The obvious cases are the almost-invisible presence of Charlotte’s mother and the passive, timid mother of Eliza. Both mothers are ineffectual in protecting and saving their daughters. Women are seen as responsible for their own lives and they can no longer count on supposed guardians who are unreliable.

Interestingly, it seems that the two novels reflect both authors’ actual lives in this respect. Susanna Haswell Rowson (1762-1824) was born in England, but after 1766, she was raised in America. After the Revolutionary War, because her father was a Loyalist, the Haswells were obliged to return in poverty to England. There, Susanna Haswell was a governess until 1786, when she married a hardware merchant, actor, and musician, William Rowson. Throughout her life, Rowson seems to have taken the place of “breadwinner” in her families. That is, before her marriage, Rowson worked as a governess for the Duchess of Devonshire, who insightfully encouraged her to write; through her writing, she could take advantage of getting acquainted with the then celebrities and successfully obtained a pension for her father. As the wife of a “charming but ineffectual person,”¹⁸ who soon failed in busi-

ness, Rowson had to be an economic provider. Even though she was childless, she managed a large household and supported her husband's younger sister, his illegitimate son, her own niece, and an adopted daughter.

What enabled Rowson to be the economic prop of her families was the fact that she was well-educated. She was called a "Little Scholar," and was educated in music, rhetoric, and the classics from her youth. Besides, as economic necessity urged Rowson to write, she became a novelist, playwright, poet, songwriter, editor, and essayist. Writing was thus one of the acceptable, important sources of income for women in those days. Among her works, it was *Charlotte Temple* that brought her fame and success. Yet Rowson was also an actress and her theatrical career brought her back to America in 1792. There, in Boston, she ran a "Young Ladies' Academy" that was distinguished as "one of the finest available"¹⁹ schools. Rowson was thus a forerunner of the modern "career woman," and her varied attainments show not only her talent but her tact and insight. Her indolent husband, it seems, was contented with his "hard-working" wife and enjoyed what she obtained, rather than becoming jealous of her achievements.

Although not much is known of her life, compared with Rowson, Hannah Webster Foster (1758-1840) led a more stable, quiet life. Born in the family of a well-known merchant in Salisbury, Massachusetts, and a descendent of one of the oldest families in New England,²⁰ Foster received an excellent education for a woman in her day. Her didactic novel, *The Boarding School: or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils* (1798) shows that she was enrolled in an academy, and at least, she was very familiar with the educational system of her time. In 1785, Hannah Webster married the Reverend John Foster, pastor of the First Church in Brighton, Massachusetts, where she spent her life until her husband's death. The couple had six children. Throughout her life, Foster published only two novels (i.e. *The Coquette* and *The Boarding School*), but she continued writing. Before marriage, she contributed political articles to local newspapers in Boston; after the birth of her last child, she resumed writing short newspaper articles.

As seen, the two authors' lives are different. The major fact that differentiates the two is that Rowson wrote for a living, while Foster's writings were not produced by the economic pressure. Nevertheless, it can be said that each author had her own

difficulties. Having a “weak” father and husband, Rowson’s hardship in life is not hard to imagine. This vision of unreliable men is clear from *Charlotte Temple*. Also, it seems that Foster’s life as a minister’s wife was not easy, either. This can be observed, for example, in her reference to the life of a minister’s wife as one of “restraint, [and] . . . confinement” in *The Coquette* (36).

Furthermore, as intelligent women in their day, it seems that Rowson and Foster could well grasp the disadvantageous situation and position in the light of law and the social system that women were placed in. In Foster’s case, her writing of newspaper articles and her fictional character, Eliza’s talk on politics mirror her own political consciousness. These writers would no doubt have been keenly aware that a woman’s course of life was very much limited, no matter how intelligent and talented she was; as a historian points this out, there was no appealing alternative to decent marriage, even as the industrious Susanna Rowson had to make her living as a wife.²¹ It is natural that these two writers who seem to deplore the powerless condition of women turned their energies to the education of young women, as demonstrated in Rowson’s opening of “Academy.” Their writing, however, can be considered as a more effectual device.

For the purpose of enlightening young women, they followed the conventional means to deliver their message. That is, they founded their “moral” stories on fact at a time when Puritan authority regarded novel reading as “dangerous.” Puritans thought that novels would mislead young readers, especially women, by giving them false ideas about real life, and would stir their passion and imagination.²² Accordingly, the authors gave their works plausible subtitles. In fact, *Charlotte Temple*’s original title was *Charlotte: A Tale of Truth*. *The Coquette*’s subtitle was, as mentioned, *The History of Eliza Wharton*. Both Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton had their own actual models. This convention in early novel writing ironically contributed to the commercial success of the two books. And yet, that they were “tales of truth” made the fictions convincing and persuasive for readers. In such a submissive, acceptable form, Rowson and Foster could include subversive elements.

Thus, in the guise of “sentimental novels,” Rowson and Foster portray *realities* of post-Revolutionary American society. They do not categorize men as simply good or bad; they shatter the illusions of a “prince charming” and of perfect marriage; they

do not forget to show the strength of the patriarchal social framework, while they disclose the decline of patriarchal influence. By showing these realities, the two authors seem to teach “the art of living” to readers, particularly young women. That is why Rowson, for example, writes that she designs *Charlotte Temple* for “the perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex” (5) and she repeatedly addresses “my dear girls” (29). Rowson and Foster constantly give young women the message to live wisely by not dreaming of a rosy life but by becoming self-reliant.

As they dare to select the genre of “seduction novels,” Rowson and Foster also warn their readers of seducers; Foster elucidates the falseness of the saying that “*a reformed rake makes the best husband*” (53). A rake is after all a rake. In her “realistic” novel, Foster does not portray the supposedly ideal suitor as attractive in terms of the nature of his occupation and his personality compared with the seducer. Rowson similarly acknowledges the individual, masculine charm of the villain. In other words, through their lifelike fictional male characters, the authors show the reality that, when considered as husbands, men of morals may not always be as appealing as seducers in some degree. Still, the two seem to assert that women must not be deluded by the seducers’ outward charm, but choose their partners from those who have never morally degenerated.

Furthermore, the two authors condemn the social connivance in double sexual standards. They harshly criticize the act of seduction, the ambiguous, easily overlooked violence on women in a male-dominant society. A man’s whim can literally destroy an innocent woman’s life. Leslie A. Fiedler sharply indicates this point:

Seduction is at best a slippery concept, applying as it does to an act halfway between legitimate persuasion and rape, to which moral indignation can respond but which the law cannot define. Implicit in it is a belief in the weakness of women in the hands of men. . . .²³

Rowson and Foster project their anger toward seducers in the use of poetic justice at the end of both novels. Sympathizing with their disadvantageous situation, however, they forgive the heroines at both ends; Charlotte and Eliza are not severely blamed for any supposed moral depravities. Yet, as double sexual standards do exist and are

not easily exterminated, again, the authors can only urge young maidens to protect themselves; they must not be fooled by the fake heroes, but make a wise decision in finding right partners in the restricted course of a woman's life. As for this point, Eve Kornfeld writes: for "all of the sentimental fainting and weeping in *Charlotte*, the fundamental lesson in this moral tale is the absolute responsibility of women for their own actions."²⁴

As we have seen, despite some critic's opinion,²⁵ Rowson and Foster do not necessarily praise the cult of womanhood. That is, the secret of the first best-selling novels' popularity cannot be attributed to the fact that the authors re-enforce the social norm which requires women's virtue and chastity, though, as a critic suggests,²⁶ they do seem to do so; rather it can be ascribed to the fact that the authors offer the "young and unprotected" female readers who are at the "first entrance into life"²⁷ a sort of sisterhood through their writing. Hence, their fictions come to play the role not only of didactic fictions, but of more user-friendly "self-help" books.

NOTES

1. Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860* (1940; New York: Pageant Books, 1959) vii.
2. Henri Petter, *The Early American Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1971) 3.
3. James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford UP, 1950) 63.
4. Patricia L. Parker, *Susanna Rowson*, Twayne's United States Authors Series 498 (Boston: Twayne, 1986) 56.
5. Petter 37.
6. Hannah Webster Foster, *The Coquette: or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (1797; New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 104. All subsequent references to this text will be cited parenthetically by page number only.
7. Susanna Haswell Rowson, *Charlotte Temple* (1794; New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 38. All subsequent references to this text will be cited parenthetically by page number only.
8. Henri Petter 37.
9. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 137. Davidson indicates the relevant point concerning the role of a second male character in *Charlotte Temple*.
10. Cathy N. Davidson, "Flirting with Destiny: Ambivalence and Form in the Early American

- Sentimental Novel," *Studies in American Fiction* 10 (1982): 22.
11. The contrasting qualities of the seducer and the minister are examined in; Walter P. Wenska, Jr., "The Coquette and the American Dream of Freedom," *Early American Literature* XII (1977/8): 248.
 12. Judith Fryer, *The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth Century American Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) 27-28.
 13. Hiroko Sato, *Amerika no Kateishosetsu: Jukyuseiki no Joseisakka-tachi [The American Domestic Novel: Women Authors in the Nineteenth Century]* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1987) 28-29.
 14. Kristie Hamilton, "An Assault on the Will: Republican Virtue and the City in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*," *Early American Literature* 24 (1989): 143.
 15. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976; New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 67-89. In Chapter 4, Moers argues how the institution of marriage can be treated in economic terms in English literature.
 16. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977) 187.
 17. Keiko Beppu, ed., *Amerika Bungaku ni okeru Joseizo: Tsukurareta Kao to Tsukkuta Kao [What Manner of Woman in American Literature: Portraits and Self-Portraits]* (Tokyo: Yumi Shobo, 1985) 39.
 18. Lucy M. Freibert and Barbara A. White, eds., *Hidden Hands: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1790-1870* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1985) 14.
 19. Cathy N. Davidson, introduction, *Charlotte Temple*, by Susanna Haswell Rowson (1794; New York: Oxford UP, 1986) xxvi.
 20. Robert L. Shurter, "Mrs. Hannah Webster Foster and the Early American Novel," *American Literature* 4 (1932): 306.
 21. Cott 193.
 22. As for the discussion of evil influence of fictions, see Herbert Ross Brown's *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860*, Book One, Chapter I; James D. Hart, *The Popular Book*, Chapter 4, and Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980; New York: Norton, 1986) Chapter 8.
 23. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960) 38.
 24. Eve Kornfeld, "Women in Post-Revolutionary American Culture: Susanna Haswell Rowson's American Career 1793-1824," *Journal of American Culture* 6 (1983): 57.
 25. Wendy Martin, "Profile: Susanna Rowson, Early American Novelist," *Women's Studies* 2 (1974): 1-8.
 26. Kathleen Conway McGrath, "Popular Literature as Social Reinforcement: The Case of *Charlotte Temple*," *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed., Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Univ. Popular Press, 1972) 21-7.
 27. Rowson, preface, *Charlotte Temple* 5.