**Susanna Haswell Rowson (1762-1824)**

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**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

As Susanna Rowson saw it, she was arming young women for survival in a perilous world inhabited by seducers, hypocrites, and false friends. The society that forms the background of the novel was dominated by a rigid moral code, and violations of it were dealt with very harshly. Keeping in mind that Rowson intended to reach "the young and thoughtless of the fair sex" (see the "Preface" to *Charlotte Temple*), and, if possible, to protect these vulnerable young women from the pain of social rejection, the modern reader can better understand the author's emphatic moralism and melodramatic language.

Although in other writings, Rowson warns unmarried girls about associating with women of damaged reputations (lest their own suffer), in *Charlotte Temple* she clearly approves of Mrs. Beauchamp's kindly regard toward Charlotte, whom she later befriends. It is significant that Mrs. Beauchamp is herself safely married, but she is obviously a foil to La Rue, who, established as Mrs. Crayton, shows detestable hypocrisy in shunning Charlotte as a fallen woman. Rowson's idea that women should take care of each other and not join in heaping insults upon a betrayed sister is similar to ideas in the writings of [Margaret Fuller](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/fuller.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22guide) in the following generation.

It is clear that in the "Conflict of Love and Duty," the defeat of the latter is due almost as much to La Rue's manipulations as to Charlotte's feelings for Montraville. Charlotte makes her fateful decision to elope after both La Rue and Belcour have "seconded the entreaties of Montraville," and later, when Charlotte regrets her decision, it is La Rue who pressures her into going to meet with Montraville, knowing that the self-delusive Charlotte will not be able to keep her resolve to bid him good-bye and return to the school. Since peer pressure of all sorts is an issue with which modern students are familiar, it might interest them to discuss its application to an eighteenth-century novel.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, and Personal Issues**

Ellen Brandt discusses the novel's "Clarissa theme," derived from the works of Samuel Richardson, to whom Rowson was indebted. Inevitably, the young woman who abandons the wisdom of her parents for the false promises of a lover is doomed to an early death. An instructor might wish to bring into the discussion the following famous song from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766):

When lovely woman stoops to folly, And finds too late that men betray, What charm can sooth her melancholy, What art can wash her guilt away?

The only art her guilt to cover, To hide her shame from every eye, To give repentance to her lover, And wring his bosom--is to die.

Students may want to discuss other works that contain elements of or variations on this theme, such as [Theodore Dreiser's](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/dreiser.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22guide) *An American Tragedy* (see below).

Rowson's place in American literary history is an intriguing topic. Despite the formidable reputation she enjoyed in the Federalist period, her importance as the first best-selling American author, and the enduring popularity of *Charlotte Temple*, by the middle of the twentieth century Rowson was virtually ignored in anthologies of American literature. Ellen Brandt says she became "a 'forgotten' woman in the archives of our cultural history." A discussion of possible reasons for Rowson's eclipse is a good way to begin or conclude the class work on this author.

The historical background of *Charlotte Temple* and the importance of Rowson as a major literary figure during the nation's infancy should be emphasized. In the preface to her insightful work on Rowson, Patricia Parker states the following:

Rowson lived during a crucial period in our nation's history, as it turned from provincial colony to preindustrial nation. She herself strongly identified with the political objectives of the new republic and came to consider herself American despite her British birth, as she lived most of her life in this country. Her writings reflect an increasing concern with freedom and democratic principles, both politically and sexually. To study her song lyrics and theatrical compositions during the 1790s is to understand the popular taste of the American public who were trying to decide how to live with their newly acquired independence.

Some of Rowson's song lyrics have been excerpted in the works of Parker and Brandt, and an interesting discussion might grow from reading them to the class. Further, Rowson's role in the early American theater and her association with the prominent theater company of Thomas Wignell could be explored.

The American Revolution had a great impact on Rowson's life and work. She was one of the first writers to use it as the background for a novel. Montraville and Belcour are both British soldiers being sent to America to fight against the rebels. Charlotte, wondering about La Rue's desertion of Belcour, reflects that she thought only true love had made La Rue follow her man to the "seat of war." Montraville, seducing Charlotte, says: "I thought that you would for my sake have braved the dangers of the ocean, that you would by your affection and smiles, have softened the hardships of war."

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Plot, Characterization, and Structure of *Charlotte Temple*

By explaining the motivations of the characters at length, Rowson makes their actions believable and, in doing so, invalidates the charge that she was a writer of melodrama. Her portrayal of Charlotte is masterful. The girl's naive and ingenuous character is rendered convincingly. Rowson details the progress of her seduction with sympathy and keen psychological insights.

Rowson devotes considerable time in this short novel to describing Charlotte's parents, and with good effect. Lucy Eldridge (later Temple) and her father had been driven to a debtor's prison by the machinations of an unscrupulous man who had designs on Lucy. Her refusal, under intense pressure, to submit to the kind of arrangement Charlotte enters with Montraville brings disaster upon the household, but the Eldridges and Temple never doubt that she has done the right thing. It is thus doubly poignant that Lucy's daughter Charlotte should yield as she does. It is ironic and also perfectly understandable that a couple so idealistic, so perfectly loving, and so trusting could produce a child as dangerously naive as their Charlotte.

Montraville too is carefully drawn. Although he plays an evil role in the story, he, like Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, is no villain. Attracted to Charlotte and unable to resist seducing her, though he knows that her lack of fortune will make marriage impossible, he abandons her because he believes the lies of his deceitful friend Belcour, and because he cannot resist the charms of Julia Franklin, his new love. Although Montraville brings great evil upon Charlotte, he, like her, is not so much evil as weak, and he suffers intense pangs of conscience--and eventually an early death--for what he has done. By making Montraville a sympathetic human being instead of a stock-figure of evil, Rowson lends plausibility to her story, and she accomplishes her goal, which is to show that yes, such things can really happen--even to the most well-meaning people.

**Original Audience**

*Charlotte Temple* was originally published in England, but when Rowson saw it republished in America, she was no doubt aware that its subtitle was particularly appropriate to her American audience. Influenced by their Puritan heritage, the hardworking inhabitants of a new and growing country might look askance at reading novels, but might be more receptive to "a Tale of Truth," only disguised by a "slight veil of fiction" and written to preserve the "happiness of that sex whose morals and conduct have so powerful an influence on mankind in general."

The most striking point about the audience of this book is that it was quite clearly intended to be female. In her "Preface" Rowson explicitly states that she is writing to "the fair sex," specifically to the "young and thoughtless" among them, and in the asides in which she comments on the story, she addresses her readers as "my dear girls." In one aside, interestingly, Rowson addresses herself specifically to the "sober matron" who might be reading the book before she trusts it "to the eye of a darling daughter." But even though she may depart from her view of the audience as exclusively young, it is apparent that this is a book written by a woman for other women, and throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the book's readership was largely female, a point that was not lost upon its detractors. For example, *Charlotte Temple* was described disparagingly by Carl Van Doren as appealing to an audience of "housemaids and shopgirls" ( *The American Novel*, 1921). A class discussion might center on the reasons for the book's appeal to such an audience. Instructors might raise the issue of the vulnerability of women of lower socioeconomic status and hence their identification with Charlotte.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

As noted earlier, Rowson has often been compared to Samuel Richardson, the British author of *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* (1747-48). The similarities between Rowson and Richardson are obvious, both in theme and style. Richardson is known for the epistolary form, and in *Charlotte Temple*, letters (often ones that do not get delivered) play an important role. Another comparison mentioned earlier is with Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), a novel dealing with seduction and the economic oppression of a family by a rake with designs on a virtuous daughter--a situation strikingly similar to one of Rowson's subplots, the story of Charlotte's parents.

An interesting comparison to a twentieth-century American novel is, as noted, to [Theodore Dreiser's](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/dreiser.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22guide) *An American Tragedy* (1925). The plots have many similarities: in both novels a self-indulgent young man of little personal wealth, but with wealthy connections, seduces a poor girl and then falls in love with another woman, who offers not only superior beauty, but money as well. In both stories, the young man, seeing the first girl as an obstacle to his material and romantic happiness with the second, regrets his rashness in seducing the first, who is pregnant and dependent on him. In both novels the seduced women die. Montraville does not plot to kill his mistress, as Clyde plans to and in effect does kill Roberta, but Charlotte dies as a result of her lover's neglect.

Both Dreiser and Rowson depict, to quote Charlotte, "a very bad world"--but their analyses differ. Rowson's solution to the evil is not to change that world, but to help develop in women the strength, wisdom, and common sense they will need to deal with it as it is. Where Dreiser sees Roberta and Clyde as victims of social and economic inequality, Rowson sees Charlotte and Montraville as victims of individual failings. Whereas Dreiser's novel is a sweeping indictment of the class system in supposedly egalitarian America, Rowson's is an indictment of personal evil and weakness.