

The Sentimental Novel

Introduction

The sentimental novel, also known as the domestic novel, deviated from the literary norms established by such authors as Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain to focus on the intimate details of women's private lives during the nineteenth century. A form of literature which was most popular in early and mid-nineteenth century America, the sentimental novel is traditionally dismissed in literary histories, though works such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854) were at one time among the most popular publications in American letters.

Epistolary novels (letter format) were popular during this time period.

The sentimental novel has historical roots in Europe, particularly in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady* (1747-48) and *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), both of which tell of men seducing virtuous women. American authors in the early nineteenth century replicated and amplified this theme, though later domestic novels expanded the variety of conflicts and protagonists: the unique social, spiritual, political, and economic circumstances of nineteenth-century America conditioned the issues that confronted the female characters and the ways in which such issues were resolved. Sentimental novels appealed primarily to female and middle-class readers who, in colonial and Revolutionary America, were taught to read in order to teach their sons democratic ideals. This idea of influential republican motherhood evolved into the "cult of domesticity," in which women were the guardians of spirituality and virtue, and which is embodied in the domestic novels' morally pure protagonists—such as Little Eva, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Eliza Wharton, from *The Coquette* (1797).

Charlotte Temple

important!

Sentimental novels are traditionally contrasted with the writings of Melville, Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who exalted individuals who transgress against cultural conventions. The historical identification of the sentimental novel with the "feminization" of American, and especially Southern, culture reinforces the criticism that these works uncritically replicate conventional ideas and values. But the identification of women as protectors of the family links sentimental novelists with abolitionism, which often argued against slavery by noting its destructive impact upon families, and with other political movements such as prohibition. Consequently, some recent critics argue that domestic novels are less formulaic than initially perceived, and have interpreted them as expressions of proto-feminism and as attempts to celebrate the traditional role of women in society.

what do you know about "early" feminism?

Think into the wild!

they define it with no thought of social commentary. But, this doesn't mean we can't create/interpret our own!

Despite the common criticism that sentimental fiction portrays an idealized account of domestic life, authors frequently insisted that their stories were grounded in reality, and feminist theorists such as Jane Tompkins and Cathy N. Davidson have challenged the idea that domestic novels are merely romantic and idealistic. Instead, these critics contend that the novels portray issues and characters that were relevant to nineteenth-century women—familial relations, issues of dependence and independence, and definitions of virtue and femininity. Although mundane and conventional behavior frequently dominates the private world represented in the domestic novel, the genre lends insight into both the cult of domesticity and the resistance to that ideal that emerged from the increased education of women under American republicanism.

exalted: placed @ a high or powerful level

formulaic: constituting or containing a verbal formula or set of words

Novels of Transition: From Sentimental Novel to Domestic Novel

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I

When American writers finally began to write novels of their own in the Early Republic, some fifty years after the genre's arrival in the colonies, the sentimental tale of seduction emerged as the most popular form. It seems reasonable to assume that this had something to do with the dominance of female readers among the novel-reading public. However, the exact nature of the gratification the sentimental novel provided for these female readers is still in need of further clarification. It would be reductionist to narrow down the imaginary appeal of the sentimental tale of seduction to the motive of a displaced sexual wish-fulfillment. In fact, in American sentimental novels of the period this aspect hardly dominates the level of representation. Even *Charlotte Temple*, in many ways the most explicit and, in Lillie Loshe's words, "sensationalist" of the early novels, deals with the guilty pleasures of its tale only in passing. The attraction the seducer Montraville holds for the innocent, still rather child-like Charlotte clearly lies in another area: In the sentimental tale of seduction, the seducer is a man of the world. Often, he is the only impressive man or, at least, the only one who is not dull (as, for example, in *The Coquette*).¹ What makes the offer of the seducer so tempting is that to be "chosen" by such a man for a companion is a moment of distinction for the heroine.² Through this choice, the heroine receives an acknowledgment of her person as "something special" that she never experienced before. The fact that the sentimental heroine is frequently father- or motherless, or that she is an orphan, must increase the attractiveness of this recognition. The crucial scene

1 Cf., for example, the comments of the independent-minded Eliza Wharton on Sanford in *The Coquette*: "What shall I say about this extraordinary man? Shall I own to you, my friend, that he is pleasing to me? His person, his manners, his situation: all combine to charm my fancy and, to my lively imagination, strew the path of life with flowers" (1970:148). Before, she had already praised Sanford as a man of fortune and fashion.

2 At one point of the novel, Eliza expresses her pleasure to be the companion of the notorious Sanford: "My partner was all ease, politeness, and attention; and your friend was as much flattered and caressed as vanity itself could wish" (146).

reductionism: distinct philosophical positions regarding the connections between phenomena, or theories
"reducing" one to another, usually considered "simpler" or more "basic".
* the complete opposite of this definition!

of a novel like *Charlotte Temple* is therefore not the seduction itself but the elopement. This elopement is not an acting out of sexual desire. Its major "temptation" lies in the prospect that, by eloping, the heroine becomes a "different" and important person because she has been asked by an elder, more experienced, and more worldly man to become his companion.

In the world of the sentimental novels, sexual desire is thus always linked to an act not only of moral but also of social transgression. The promise of individual distinction leads to renewed acts of disobedience. Although the melodrama of seduction and victimization implies being overpowered and led astray into a state of helpless dependency, it still, and ironically enough, holds a promise of imaginary individualization. The sentimental narrative dramatizes a struggle between moral norm and desire, between obedience and transgression, in which an individual has to make a crucial choice. Her story thereby assumes a dimension of exemplary importance. The unusual popularity of the genre which was obviously consumed eagerly despite the often hysterical warnings of personal and cultural guardians has something to do with this challenge to existing, social and cultural hierarchies and with an act of cultural empowerment. For the young female reader, the sentimental novel, probably for the first time in literary history, put her own fantasy life at the center of the literary text and thus acknowledged her as a potential "heroine." The fact that the novel could be taken to one's room and read privately must have nourished this sense of importance, because it contained a promise of control over the mental processing of the novel's imaginary elements without interference of parents or other representatives of the reality principle. This increase in control seems to have been one of the major sources of irritation for critics of the new genre, on the other hand, so that the harm caused by the reading of sentimental novels is usually attributed to their "untutored" use, that is, to the dangers and risks of independence which the young female reader cannot yet handle.

At the center of a sentimental novel like *Charlotte Temple* we find thus a struggle for self-esteem.³ The seducer can tempt the virtuous heroine, because, as the supremely independent person of the novel, he promises an alliance which would elevate the heroine to a new level of importance. It is a promise, however, which can only be realized on the condition of giving up traditional sources of recognition and security. It therefore also evokes strong fears of loss and self-destruction. In these stories of a sexual and social fall, it is crucial to show that the heroine has been betrayed by the seducer and that she is

3 I use the word in the German meaning of *Selbstwert*, that is, as having or developing a sense of one's self-worth, and not in the "Californian" sense of feeling good about oneself.

misjudged by the world, so that her status as a virtuous heroine and exceptional individual can be preserved. In fact, this is the reason why it becomes necessary to tell the tale in the first place, because the misunderstood individuals called Clarissa Harlowe, Charlotte Temple or Eliza Wharton must be absolved from the stigma of having transgressed the moral boundaries of society in unprincipled self-indulgence. While the sentimental novel claims to teach a moral lesson and submits the heroine to a symbolic punishment for her transgression, it is actually on the side of the heroine by skillfully linking elements of desire, fear, and shame with stories of imaginary self-enhancement.

Although it already contains some elements that go beyond the sentimental formula of the time, Hannah Foster's sentimental novel *The Coquette* (1797) can illustrate some of these points. In contrast to *Charlotte Temple*, the novel avoids the latter's clever sensationalism and retains the epistolary form; still, it was one of the most popular novels of its period. The reason may lie in the fact that of all the sentimental heroines of the time, *The Coquette*'s heroine Eliza Wharton is one of the most daring. While Charlotte Temple is still a somewhat confused child, Eliza is presented as a young woman with considerable social experience and a mind of her own. In a striking subversion of genre conventions, the death of her future husband (and, by implication, guardian) at the beginning of the novel is not seen as a disaster by her but as an unexpected chance for individual freedom and independence. This independence can only be gained at a risk, however, because it leads to the attribute of a coquette. This ominously "French" attribute is not an entirely negative term in the context of the novel, but it is one that already reflects a tension between individual self-empowerment and its social stigmatization. In the novel, to be a coquette carries associations of a sympathetic hunger for life, and yet it also points to a risky gamble over which the heroine may lose control. The conflict between the lure of self-empowerment and the fear of self-destruction is thus already expressed in the unstable semantics of the key word of the book. The novel's resemanticization of a painful separation into a welcome liberation is intensified by the fact that the family appears as a relatively weak institution, so that the sentimental novel of seduction, at least in its first half, moves in the direction of a novel of manners, in which the drama of seduction is replaced by the problem of finding the right suitor and safeguarding her reputation.⁴ However, marriage

4 In this respect, *The Coquette* already reveals an almost Jamesian sense of the fact that individuals are social beings and cannot escape social definition. As one female character advises the heroine: "Slight not the opinion of the world. We are dependent beings, and while the smallest traces of virtuous sensibility remain, we must feel the force of that dependence, in a greater or lesser degree. No female, whose mind is uncorrupted, can be indifferent to reputation" (1970:240-241).

per se is not a positive value in *The Coquette*. Consequently, Eliza Wharton does not show any inclination to accept the marriage proposals she receives, because she cherishes her independence too much.

In its transformation of the sentimental heroine from mere victim to a character who is actively struggling for independence, *The Coquette* already anticipates the transition from the sentimental tale of seduction to the novel of manners and the domestic novel as the two dominant novelistic genres of women's literature in the first half of the 19th century. This transition took place soon after the belated beginnings of the American novel and ended the relatively short reign of the sentimental novel. The reason, I suggest, is that these genres opened up new possibilities for the project that also lay at the center of the sentimental novel, namely the struggle for individual recognition and self-esteem. For this search, the sentimental novel is of considerable, but ultimately limited use. Its limitations become obvious if one poses the question how the heroine can protect herself against the fate "worse than death" that may be the result of her act of transgression. The only answer the sentimental novel seems to offer is to return to the fold of parental guardianship, that is, to reaffirm the dependency from which the heroine wanted to escape. In this way, a vicious circle is established: The only protection against betrayal and deception is provided by complete trust in, and dependence on, the judgment of one's guardian. However, it is exactly this lack of independence which puts the heroine in constant danger of falling prey to the deceptive maneuvers of the seducer as she lacks any social experience of her own.

In the long run, this limited choice between two forms of dependency could not provide a satisfactory model in the search for self-esteem and imaginary self-empowerment. Once the sentimental tale of seduction had established the novel as a privileged medium for imaginary self-empowerment in the new republic, it was therefore replaced in the favor of its readers by literary forms and genres that promised to be more useful and effective for the task. In the following essay, I want to provide three examples for this gradual emergence of new novelistic forms out of the conventions of the sentimental tale of seduction, Charles Brockden Brown's *Jane Talbot. A Novel* (1801), Rebecca Rush's *Kathry. A Novel* (1812), and Susanna Rowson's sequel to *Charlotte Temple*, published first under the title *Charlotte's Daughters; or, The Three Orphans* in 1828, before readers and critics came to prefer the title *Lacy Temple*. All three of these novels draw on the cult of sensibility, and on conventions of the sentimental tale of seduction. They are, in this sense, still sentimental novels. But all three also provide interesting departures from the convention or variations of it. Each, in its own way, transforms the sentimental formula and pushes it in a direction that reveals new needs and new possibilities. Each, therefore, also changes the balance between seducer and guardian, dependence

and independence on the level of representation, as well as the relation between imaginary self-empowerment and social risk, between participation and observation on the level of reception.

II

Brown's last two novels *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot*, both published in 1801 and using the epistolary form, have been habitually dismissed by literary critics as an unfortunate return to the sentimental formula and thus as "sell-out" of a writer who had become thoroughly disappointed and frustrated at this point of his career.⁵ Not only does this verdict ignore the fact that sentimental forms and formulas can be found throughout Brown's writing (most notably in *Wieland* and *Ormond*). It also fails to register that a novel like *Jane Talbot* is much more interesting and fascinating than quick dismissals on the grounds of conventionality suggest. This holds true especially for the first part of the novel which seems to derive directly from Laclos and uses the epistolary form to great effect in order to dramatize the utter vulnerability and dependency of the story's heroine Jane Talbot. In a skillfully managed dramaturgy of unanswered letters, Brown creates an image of complete emotional dependency on the side of his heroine, in which her extreme agitation is contrasted with the indifference and cool reserve of the apparent seducer figure Colden. During this first part, Jane's incessant requests for affection receive only one answer from Colden who remains, as his name suggests, cold and distant. It is as if the "unspeakable act" had taken place already and that stage in their relation has been reached where the heartless seducer tries to get rid of his innocent victim who, in turn, clings even more desperately to him.

Brown manages to create the impression of a frightful imbalance in the relation between the two main characters by leaving Colden almost a blank. Since Colden hardly writes any letters at the beginning, we do not know what he thinks and who he is — which, in turn, compels us to use the sentimental formula as a pattern of explanation. The worst fears activated by this formula seem to be confirmed when Jane writes a confessional letter about a night spent together in the same house:

You went away this morning before I was awake, I think you might have staid for breakfast, yet on second thoughts, your early departure was best. *Perhaps*, it was so. — You have made me very thoughtful, to day. What passed last night has left my mind at no

5 See, for example, Leslie Fiedler: "The later books, however, portray a world of female interests regarded through female eyes, perhaps partly as a bid for the alluring female audience that had already made Mrs. Rowson's fortune" (1966:99).

How *The Coquette* is a traditional form of a sentimental novel. This is back to Charlotte.

liberty to read and to scribble as I used to do. How your omens made me shudder! — I want to see you. Can't you come again this evening? but no, you must not. I must not be an encroacher. I must judge of others, and of their claims upon your company, by myself and my own claims. Yet I should be glad to see that creature who would dare to enter into competition with me.

(1986:234)

At this point in the novel, all indications lead in the direction of another sentimental tale of seduction. The little information we initially get about Colden seems to confirm this impression. Brown patterns him after the model of a Godwinian intellectual who recklessly defies social convention and social norms.⁶ Thus, we encounter a familiar character constellation: On the one side, we have a young, "innocent" (both in the sexual and social sense of the term), emotionally dependent heroine, on the other side, an uncompromisingly rational, emotionally reserved Godwinian intellectual, obviously without scruples, who promises to be another Ormond.⁷ In his transformation of this model, however, Brown creates a deliberate, almost programmatic "intellectualization" of the sentimental formula which has its own consequences. Both of his late sentimental novels, *Clara Howard* and *Jane*

6 For a description of Godwin's influence on American intellectual debates of the time and, particularly, the issue of marriage, see McAlexander: "Godwin argued that, because the average individual's reasoning power was strong, he could be truly virtuous only when completely free; thus any institution which limited individual freedom should be dissolved — not only Church, class, and King, but the 'sacred' institution of marriage and family. It is absurd," he writes, "to expect the inclinations and wishes of any two human beings to coincide, through any long period of time. To oblige them to live and act together, is to subject them to some inevitable [...] thwarting [...] and unhappiness." The long-range promises of marriage, the intimate, enforced partnership, the family obligations were all, in short, opposed to the spirit of freedom due the rational individual" (1975:257). In a letter to Jane, an extremely agitated Mrs. Fielder "unmasks" Colden as a Godwinian: "These apprehensions were raised to the highest pitch by more accurate information of Colden's character which I afterwards received. I found, on enquiring of those who had the best means of knowing, that Colden had imbibed that pernicious philosophy which is now so much in vogue. [...] These letters showed Colden as the advocate of suicide; a scoffer at promises; the despiser of revelation, of providence and a future state; an opponent of marriage, and as one who denied (shockingly) that any thing but mere habit and positive law, stood in the way of marriage; nay, of intercourse without marriage, between brother and sister, parent and Child!" (1986:226) According to Mrs. Fielder, the source of these views is Godwin's *Political Justice*.

7 Cf. Fielder's description of Colden's initial characterization: "Here is Lovelace returned to life (an opponent of marriage), with Werther (the advocate of suicide), Chesterfield ('a scoffer at promises') and Diderot ('one who denied, etc., etc.') thrown in to complete the composite portrait of a villainous libertine" (1966:101).

Talbot, are philosophical novels in which the permanent interaction between a narrow cast of characters is staged as an experiment in mutual education.

For this ongoing dispute on morals or the limits of disinterested benevolence, Brown cannot use characters who merely act out their formulaic roles, as is the case, for example, in *Charlotte Temple*. Instead, all three of the main characters are affected by his shift to the level of intellectual debate. At the beginning of the novel, the sentimental heroine Jane Talbot is completely in the grip of her own strong emotions. Even though she sees through the manipulations of her brother, for example, she is helpless when he appeals to her sympathy. Her heart, she writes, "is the sport, the mere plaything of gratitude and pity. Kindness will melt my firmest resolutions in a moment" (182). Similarly, Jane is incapable of resisting

the opposite emotional pulls of either Colden or Mrs. Fielder.

Even as a grown woman and widow, Jane is unable to form a resolution and stick to it in the face of appeals of feelings. At the urging of Mrs. Fielder, she vows 'an eternal separation from Colden'; yet, a word from him destroys her determination. 'No will, no reason, have I of my own,' she writes. (Ringe 1966:124)

However, by arguing incessantly with the seemingly superior intellectual Colden, Jane begins to develop guidelines for her behavior on religious grounds, because these alone offer a consistent and principled defense against Godwin's rationalism. By doing so, she learns to justify herself and thus to find a rational basis for her beliefs.⁸ And "just as Jane is brought to more humane and more rational views" as a result of her correspondence with Colden, "so also is he led towards faith by Jane and the others he associates with in the story" (Ringe 1966:125).⁹ All three of the main characters are humanized through the experience of intellectual exchange.¹⁰ Mrs. Fielder overcomes her

8 To act merely on the basis of "strong emotions" is, of course, already a perversion of sentimentalism in which sensibility is an instrument of discrimination in the service of moral judgments. Feelings thus do not replace principles but help interpreting them better. This, in fact, is also the movement in *Jane Talbot* where Jane learns to put feelings and principles in the right relation.

9 See also Ringe's description of this development in his "Historical Essay" of the Bicentennial Edition of the novel: "Jane becomes aware that her association with Colden has given her piety a rational basis, and Colden is awakened to a living religious faith by a long process that culminates during his voyage to the Pacific. Through the letters they exchange, Brown is able to suggest how their positions have gradually come together" (473).

10 Cf. the excellent description of this process by Ringe: "In *Jane Talbot*, on the other hand, the function of the epistolary method is more obvious. There is no character like Clara Howard to dominate the others with her philosophic theories. We find instead three persons in conflict who differ markedly in attitude and opinion and who reveal through

uncompromising rejection of Colden and learns to accept him as a correspondent and intellectual antagonist, while Colden is "socialized" by these revisions of traditional melodramatic patterns and turns from reckless libertine into sensitive suitor. In all three cases — and in striking contrast to Brown's Gothic novels —, strong emotions are thus finally brought under rational control.

Brown still takes his point of departure from a sentimental epistemology but he also emphasizes and employs its potential for deception and self-deception. This links *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot* to his earlier novels. However, the special task Brown seems to have set himself for his latter two novels is to find a way in which the characters would not fall prey to such deceptions. This, in fact, must have constituted one of the attractions of the sentimental novel for Brown: "The period's most popular literary entertainment, the novel of seduction, strikingly embodies society's pervasive suspicion that deceit is latent in every relationship" (Ziff 1991:56). Ultimately, both Jane and Colden successfully defend themselves against such deceitful appearances. One reason is that both, the libertine and potential seducer and the female struggling for recognition, come to accept limitations on their wishes.¹¹ Jane overcomes her own emotional self-indulgence and dependency by keeping distant from Colden in the second part of the novel, while Colden exchanges the role of Godwinian intellectual with that of a patient suitor. Brown thus stimulates a seduction plot in the reader's imagination in the first part of the novel only to domesticate it in the second.¹² As Fiedler points out,

their letters their personal limitations. The religious Jane is too emotional, too pliant, too volatile; the skeptical Colden is too cool, too rational; the strict Mrs. Fiedler too stern and inflexible in her judgments on them. Through the many letters they write, the characters explain their positions, respond to the others' statements, and react to their replies. In the course of time all are forced to alter their opinions" (1986:473).

11 This stands in striking contrast to the beginning of the novel. Cf. Jane's opening letter to Colden: "I am very far from being a wise girl. So conscience whispers me, and though vanity is eager to refute the charge, I must acknowledge that she is seldom successful. Conscience tells me it is folly, it is guilt to wrap up my existence in one frail mortal; to employ all my thoughts, to lavish all my affections upon one object; to doat upon a human being, who, as such, must be the heir of many frailties, and whom I know to be not without his faults; to enjoy no peace but in his presence, to be grateful for his permission to sacrifice fortune, ease, life itself for his sake. — From the humiliation produced by these changes, Vanity endeavours to relieve me by insinuating that all happiness springs from affection; that nature ordains no tie so strong as that between the sexes; that to love without bounds is to confer bliss not only on ourselves but on another" (151).

12 It is one sign of this domestication of the sentimental tale of seduction that the compromising letter about the night spent together finally turns out to be a forgery after all.

the dramatic change can best be assessed in comparison with Colden's double Ormond:

Ormond is, indeed, the mirror image of Henry Colden, Colden seen in reverse: at first, apparently an attractive though fanatically radical young man, he is revealed at last as a rapist and murderer. Colden, on the other hand, begins by seeming a thoroughgoing scoundrel, but turns out to be no more than the headstrong exponent of abstract nonconformism. For the latter, there is the reward of marriage and financial security, salvation by the female; for the former, death at the hands of his beloved, destruction by the female. (1966:102)

This successful domestication of the melodrama of seduction (something Eliza Wharton does not yet manage to achieve) should not be misunderstood as a meek compromise on Brown's part. What it indicates is a reorientation in the search for self-esteem and self-empowerment. To base recognition on the power of strong feelings, as Jane does, also means to create a state of utter dependency:

What is it, my friend, that makes thy influence over me so absolute? No resolution of mine can stand against your remonstrances. A single word, a look, approving or condemning, transforms me into a new creature. [...] So easily swayed am I by one that is the lord of my affections. No will, no reason have I of my own. (1966:256)¹³

In place of those infantile longings for fusion, linked with melodramatic fears of separation,¹⁴ that shape the sentimental novel, self-esteem is now gained through a process of social interaction and socialization that does no longer derive recognition from emotional intensity, including appeals of vulnerability and dependency, but from the strength to assert oneself as individual (and thus to withstand seduction). Elopement is replaced by communicative exchange, seduction by endless dispute, dependency by successful self-assertion, so that, in the happy ending of the novel, the relation between the former would-be seducer and the heroine is put on a new level of mutual recognition.¹⁵ It is a

13 See also the following passage from a letter by Jane to Colden: "Never was a creature so bereft of all dignity; all steadfastness. The slave of every impulse: blown about by the predominant gale; a scene of eternal fluctuation" (357).

14 To give but one example: After she has been separated from Colden for only one day, Jane writes: "It is but a day since I determined to part with you; since a thousand tormenting images engrossed my imagination; yet now I am quite changed: I am bound to you by links stronger than ever. No, I will not part with you" (256).

15 As Fiedler describes their relation: "Without a Lovelace there can be no Clarissa; and without Colden, Jane would have seemed as incomplete as Clara Howard. It is no tragic

recognition that does not derive from "daring" acts of self-abandonment but from assertions of individual strength in a complex social web of conflicting claims for which the question/answer pattern of the epistolary novel provides an ideal format.

In this changed script for self-esteem, the epistolary form provides a special potential for self-assertion. The heroine deals with the threat of separation by staying in touch with those others even in her most desperate moments, by arguing, defending herself, and by developing individual strength in the process. The protagonists of *Jane Talbot*, in spite of their differences, still find it possible to communicate with one another. They attempt reasoning and persuasion, and it is therefore not necessary for them immediately to resort to force or ruse" (Petter 1971:192). One measure of Jane's success at self-assertion is that the initially completely one-sided correspondence between her and Colden, but also between her and Mrs. Fielder, gradually turns into a real exchange of opinions, and, eventually, into a genuine dialogue.¹⁶ It is not her religious faith per se that saves her but the ability she develops to discuss her views and convictions on rational grounds. In the novel of manners, this idea of exchange will become the central source of self-esteem and will therefore move to the center of representation. In contrast, *The Coquette* still moves into exactly the opposite direction: We know that Eliza Wharton will "fall" when her letters get shorter and communication between her and her friends breaks off. *spoiler alert!*

III

Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy* offers another striking variation and transformation of the sentimental formula that, among other things, reveals the literary convention's inadequacy for grasping social experience in the New World. What still links the novel with the sentimental tradition, apart from numerous intertextual echoes and a focus on the world of affections, is the heart-

opposition, however, which they provide one another, but rather an educational one" (1966:101).

16 This also entails a breakdown of the melodramatic dichotomy between guardian and seducer-figure. As Petter points out, Jane evidently "feels there is something to be said for and against both Mrs. Fielder and Colden, neither of whom, to Jane's mind, is doing full justice to the other side" (1971:193). This uncertainty is one of the reasons why Jane keeps up contact between both of them even in moments of apparent final rejection. Cf. also Petter's final assessment of the novel: "The colorless to and fro of the tale, which reflects the heroine's refusal to decide rashly in face of complex views and attitudes, strikes the reader as the most characteristic feature of *Jane Talbot*" (195).

breaking victimization of its heroine.¹⁷ But the reason for the sorry fate of the fair, lovely, and almost perfect Emily Hammond no longer resides in the clever and cunning designs of a seducer. There is no seducer-figure far and wide in the novel. Rather, Emily's fate must be attributed to that person who still functioned as the heroine's only unwavering source of support and protection in the sentimental novel, the guardian-figure. In *Kelroy*, this guardian-figure is the heroine's overtly ambitious mother, Mrs. Hammond. There is no uncontrolled "desire" on the part of the heroine (thus also no desire for elopement) which finally leads to her death. What proves much more powerful as a source of separation than desire is the unfettered materialism of the mother and her willingness for social manipulation which she exercises in an alliance with a Charles-Brockden-Brown-like villain and forger.¹⁸ Mrs. Hammond's motives give the novel an almost Balzacian dimension and anticipate some of the most cruel moments of Henry James.¹⁹

The sentimental heroine of *Kelroy* may be able to guard herself against her own overheated imagination. Emily is almost blameless in this respect. But she cannot protect herself against the power of deception. These deceptions are no longer "supernatural," however, as they still are in Brown's Gothic novels. They are of an eminently social nature.²⁰ What the innocent Emily cannot

17 See also the following characterization of the heroine of the book: "Emily is an enthusiast; said Walsingham, she puts her head out of the question, and reasons only from her heart: 'Because,' replied Emily, 'I find it the best counsellor. My head sometimes takes half an hour to decide a question; but my heart unerringly says yes, or no in a moment' (85). Although the novel repeatedly points out the vulnerability of this sentimental epistemology, it has no alternative to offer for its heroine.

18 The crucial role of the figure of the mother in early American novels is pointed out by Cathy Davidson in her foreword to the recent edition of *Kelroy*. In novels like *Charlotte Temple*, *The Coquette*, or *Female Quixotism*, "mothers are either weak or absent. Through a mother's laxity or her death, a daughter is left vulnerable to a variety of ills ranging from seduction to novel reading [...]" (vi). All of this pales in comparison, however, to the duplicity of Mrs. Hammond. The other two novels under discussion here also follow a recurring pattern of "orphanning" their heroines. Jane Talbot's mother died when she was five years old, and Lucy Temple's mother Charlotte Temple died when Lucy was born.

19 The conspiracy of Mrs. Hammond and Marney anticipates that of Mme. Merte and Ormond.

20 This is why Davidson's classification of the novel as "early American Gothic" in her *Revolution and the Word* is not convincing and obfuscates Rush's achievement of social analysis. Davidson's argument is based on a simple rhetorical equation of social injustice with "horror": "What I find particularly interesting in the novel is the way in which Rush, a year after the publication of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and before *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Emma* (1816), already Gothicizes the novel of social manners by turning the Austenesque plot of arranging suitable marriages for the suitable into a grim matrimonial poker game" (234). Apart from certain associations

possibly know and take into account in her own behavior is that deception is exercised even by her mother, or, to put it differently, that her mother is driven by the same forces on which the organization of this society is based, so that money and status turn out to be more important than morals or love. As a consequence, Rush's novel establishes an entirely new attitude toward the "seductive": It is no longer the illusory nature of temptations that lead to the heroine's "fall," but the people who know these illusions and can manipulate them for their own purposes. In this new world of almost invisible, "civilized" forms of deception and manipulation, protection for the heroine can no longer come from reliance on her guardian who is, on the contrary — and again in anticipation of James — one of the master manipulators herself.²¹ It can only come from the development of a "social imagination" and social skills that would enable the heroine to imagine the possibility and the scope of such deceptions.

Yet, clearly Emily Hammond is no Isabel Archer or Maggie Verver. There is nothing in her characterization — which still follows sentimental conventions to a tee — that would allow Rush to get Emily involved in a social apprenticeship designed to develop adequate defenses. Worse, while social interaction "saves" and socializes the main characters in *Jane Talbot*, society becomes the source of a new and entirely unexpected vulnerability of the good and virtuous in *Kelroy*. Although the book goes in the direction of a social novel of manners, it thus stops half-way.²² In a world in which even the

raised by the forger Marney, there is little in the novel, however, to warrant such a genre classification. The "villainy" of Mrs. Hammond has no "supernatural" dimension. It remains entirely within the possibilities of the sentimental novel and the novel of manners. Or, to put it differently: A socially "horrible" behavior is not enough to classify a book as a "horror story," as Davidson does again in the foreword to the recent edition of the novel: "[...] *Kelroy* is one of the grimmest of early American novels and requires none of the blood and gore of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* to qualify as a horror story" (Davidson 1992:v).

21 Derounian describes Mrs. Hammond as "approaching Henry James' definition of a 'true agent.'" She "stands supreme as the prototype of the Great American Bitch, and one of the few genuine female villains in all of American literature" (1980:120). One should add, however, as Derounian herself does at another point of her essay, that Mrs. Hammond is by no means a one-dimensional character.

22 For a discussion of *Kelroy* as a novel of manners, cf. the essay by Derounian: "Rush's only work, as far as we know, *Kelroy* is a novel of manners which not only meets but fulfills generic possibilities" (1980:117). Quite rightly, Derounian emphasizes the novel's "vast and varied set of characters" (120) and its satirical focus on eccentric characters. However, in contrast to the typical novel of manners, the central characters, and, above all, the heroine, undergo no social apprenticeship and no development. In a hybrid mix that is characteristic of many works of transition, the novel places a traditional sentimental heroine in a new, emergent genre — which Derounian finally has to

guardian-figure has turned into manipulator, Rush, obviously, could not envision an "innocent" individual that could be shown in productive and mutually enriching interaction with society.²³ In a typical novel of manners of the Jane Austen-school, the ups and downs of social interaction have the eventual effect of regenerating the social body by readjusting social balances, reintegrating the mildly deviant, and expunging the unredeemable. As a result, the model character of the inner circle of exemplary characters can be successfully reaffirmed in the end. In contrast, *Kelroy* punishes and eliminates not only its villains, but also its model characters. What remains are characters to whom the narrator never paid special attention and who never had any identificatory potential for the reader.

IV

Surprisingly, it is Susanna Rowson, the often ridiculed writer with little or hardly any literary prestige, who offers a solution to the problematic relation between female self and society that points to a new and stable generic convention. One of the remarkable aspects about *Lucy Temple*, Rowson's sequel to *Charlotte Temple*, is how far the novel is already removed from the sentimental formula, although it seems to promise yet another version in the intertextual echo of its title. Its sentimental heroine "is by circumstance, training, and temperament shockproof; Lucy is a girl who laughs when I hear of love at first sight." Where her mother found a depopulated world of disaster, she finds a populous but ordered social scene. [...] Lucy's body undergoes no ordeal; her lesson — and she learns it — is one of the mind and conscience" (Douglas 1991:xxxvi). One of the consequences is that Rowson "skips the big love sequences, the encounters of shock and rapture, as 'dull in detail' or best left to be 'imagined by readers'" (xxxix). However, the readers' imagination does not receive much nourishment or stimulation from the book. As in *The Power of Sympathy*, the seduction plot is moved away from the heroine and

acknowledge herself: "As traditional hero and heroine, Kelroy and Emily are essentially romantic figures — more abstract and less rounded than the one true protagonist in *Kelroy*, Mrs. Hammond" (123).

23 As Pether points out, the "cruel parents"-motif can be found in a number of early American novels. However, in its uncompromising denial of a happy ending, *Kelroy* goes beyond other novels of the period: "With the partial exception of *St. Herbert*, this is the only novel using the 'cruel parents' pattern that does not offer a happy ending" (1971:201). Cf. also Davidson: "Stoicism is the only consolation at the end of *St. Herbert*, but the ending of Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy* offers even less than that. Indeed, the grim conclusion of each novel well might explain its early unpopularity and virtual disappearance from the literary scene" (1986:232).

presented with almost ironical distance. As it would do in Jane Austen's novels, Mary Ann's elopement reflects her vanity. It therefore carries no longer the extreme melodramatic force as in *Charlotte Temple*. Rather, it is presented as a foolish act for which the conceited and superficial Mary Ann has to suffer the bitter consequences. And although these consequences teach a cruel and painful dimension, the novel's demonstrative de-melodramatization is confirmed by the fact that Mary is not deserted but eventually allowed to return to the happy family circle. She is thus successfully reintegrated into the social world whose norms she has violated.

That it is no longer the novel's purpose to indulge in the seduction plot becomes even more obvious in the love story of Lucy Temple which is long delayed and for which the other stories seem to function as a kind of overture. But when the story finally unfolds and it turns out that her lover Franklin is actually her half-brother, this unhappy ending never develops its melodramatic potential, as it still does in *The Power of Sympathy*.²⁴ Instead, the loss is soon turned into a gain. It teaches Lucy to devote her energies to socially more important and morally more respectable matters. All the drama in Lucy's life turns out to be pseudo-drama, not more than an intertextual echo of the past. What would have destroyed the sentimental heroine of the past, an unhappy, "impossible" love, thus becomes part of an exemplary story of female education:

Lucy will never be caught up in a living dénouement of passion; Rowson always provides her the time and distance needed to take thought, to learn, to develop and mature. The third-hand news of the full meaning of her mother's story is swiftly converted into the motive for a prosperous, happy, and selfless life as the teacher of young girls. (Douglas 1991:xxxiv)²⁵

24 In *The Power of Sympathy*, the discovery that they are brother and sister leads to the tragic death of the lovers. In *Lady Temple*, the heroine falls ill but soon recovers and then shows remarkable strength: "What was his joy to find that she received the disclosure which he had so much dreaded to make, not with resignation merely, but with satisfaction. It brought a balm to her wounded spirit, to know that she had not been voluntarily abandoned — that the man on whom she had placed her affections had yielded to a stern necessity, a terrible fate, in quitting her without even a last farewell" (239-240).

25 "Active benevolence" is not only "The Best Remedy For Affliction" (239), but also of great usefulness in the search for self-esteem. This is already pointed out at the beginning of the novel: "Dear me, ma'm, interrupted Lucy, 'it was to make myself of consequence that I did it; for Lady Mary, here at home, says I am nobody, an insignificant Miss Mushroom, but sergeant Blandford calls me his guardian angel, his comforter, and I am sure those are titles of consequence'" (136). At the end of the novel, Lucy has "learned the great secret of woman's happiness, to enjoy the happiness of others. Selfish gratification was no concern of hers" (260). "Various and comprehensive schemes of

The strength which Lucy demonstrates comes out of her successful socialization in the family circle of the Reverend Mr. Matthews, a world full of "humdrum daily-life talk of cakes and ale, its birthday feasts of hams and pies and plum puddings [...]" (Douglas 1991:xxxviii). This is the world of the novel of manners, or, more precisely, of the domestic novel in which social learning replaces the exclusive focus on the cultivation of affect which is still typical of the sentimental novel.²⁶ This generic shift offers solutions to two major problems that already stood at the center of the sentimental tale of seduction. One is the problem of independence: How can the heroine manage to find resources that help her to overcome an ill-fated dependency on others which leaves only a choice between obedience or self-destruction? The other is the problem of self-esteem: How can the heroine gain recognition and self-respect in a world in which acknowledgment of her "worth" is not yet established and in constant jeopardy?

As we have seen, in the sentimental tale of seduction the heroine tries to gain recognition and "distinction" by a dramatic act of separation — and thereby only renews and reinforces her complete dependency. In the novels which gradually transform the genre without being able to put a fully developed generic alternative in its place, independence cannot be gained by separation but only by a slow, continuous process of social learning. In *Kelroy*, this is only implied yet.²⁷ For Rush, society creates a new and even more terrifying source of vulnerability.²⁸ However, the logic of Rush's analysis already indicates that this vulnerability cannot be safeguarded by withdrawal but only

benevolence formed the work of her life, and religion shed its holy and healing light over all her paths" (265). We have arrived in the world of the domestic novel.

26 Although both the novel of manners and the domestic novel are genres which are especially popular with female readers and often tell stories of the social apprenticeship of a heroine, there are two major differences between the two genres. To start with, the novel of manners focuses on a larger range of social relations, whereas the domestic novel often remains restricted to the description of a relatively narrow social circle such as the family. As a consequence, the major source of self-esteem is different for the heroine in the two genres: in the novel of manners she has to acquire the right balance between social skills and moral fortitude, in the domestic novel she has to learn to discipline herself. In the novel of manners she is primarily a social being (so that her story becomes part of a moment of regeneration of the social body), in the domestic novel, due to its origin in religious fiction and evangelism, she is primarily a moral being who is measured by her capacity for self-sacrifice.

27 Lillie Loshe captures this transitional quality quite aptly when she puts the novel in the context of the didacticism of the early novel and then says: "In a somewhat later work by Rebecca Rush, *Kelroy* (1812), the didactic novel, while retaining its moralizing tone, shows the influence of the novel of social manners" (1970:15).

28 As Davidson points out, "metaphors of hazard and chance (particularly references to cards and lottery) pervade *Kelroy*" (1986:234).

Social Learning as Criticism

by moving into the world where power is exercised. And while the epistolary structure of Brown's *Jane Talbot* can only provide a glimpse of this society, Rowson already provides a scenario of social apprenticeship in which independence, strength, and self-esteem are derived from the individual's increasing competence and assurance to master the codes of society and to regulate her own behavior accordingly.²⁹ As recent feminist interpretations of the domestic novel have shown, the domestic world can become a realm where such training can take place. In *Kelroy*, society is revealed as a new threat, in *Lacy Temple*, society becomes a potential source of self-esteem.

V

The highly interesting aspect about the novels "in transition" discussed here is that they move in the direction of a novel of social apprenticeship but have not arrived there yet. This can be seen in their difficulties to come up with a convincing and consistent conceptualization of society and social experience as sources of insight and "growth." To be sure, in *Jane Talbot*, society reconstitutes itself successfully in the end, instead of falling apart as it still does in sentimental novels like *The Power of Sympathy* or *Charlotte Temple*. However, in Brown's novel society is still a small community of correspondents. In contrast, the world of *Kelroy* is pervaded by destabilizing forces such as money and credit which can no longer be controlled.³⁰ Since fortunes undergo constant changes, society constantly rearranges itself and represents itself in ever new constellations of power. Characters can be "in" or "out" of society at the spur of the moment. Such an unstable environment can only produce a "negative" socialization. It will destroy those who are not willing or capable of going along. There is nothing Emily Hammond can or should learn from her mother.³¹ In *Lacy Temple*, on the other hand, we finally encounter a view of society approaching that of the novel of manners in the style of Jane Austen:

29 In contrast, the seduced and deserted Mary, "a young woman of strong imagination and ill regulated feelings," (190) "never made that mental exertion which is necessary when persons mean to judge and decide for themselves" (203).

30 Very aptly, Gilmore calls the novel "a book obsessed with economic and social disorder" (1994:635).

31 The only "lesson" of the book is voiced by Walsingham in conversation with Emily and presents "a frightful picture" (to Emily) indeed: "Experience will teach you the real characters of the beings who chiefly compose your species. You will find them a set of harpies, absurd, treacherous, and deceitful — regardless of strong obligations, and mindful of slight injuries — and when your integrity has been shocked, and every just, and native feeling, severely tried, the sensibility which you now so liberally bestow on others, will then be absorbed in lamenting its own cruel disappointments, and

Transgressors are expelled from the social body, but they are taken back into society after they have learned their lesson, so that, at the end of the novel, each of the three orphans of the original title of the book has finally found her place in society. The continuing stability of that society in the next generation is thus secured. This stability is only gained by retreat, however, not by venturing out into society. When Edward has to make a choice between a political career and retreat to the country-side, he chooses the latter. Seclusion and domestic enjoyment are the social ideals of the novel because they provide the best basis for self-regulation and self-cultivation.³²

These different views of society are reflected in the different ways in which the relationship between guardian, seducer, and developing subject is reconfigured in the three novels. As was already pointed out in the discussion of *Jane Talbot*, "Brown is doing more than writing a love story. Jane Talbot and Henry Colden, the reader soon perceives, have intellectual as well as romantic roles to play in the novel, and their final union represents the solution of a real philosophic question" (Ringe 1966:122). The problem of intellectual and religious incompatibility which the two face at the beginning is in the end dissolved in a figure of complementarity which also includes the guardian-figure Mrs. Fielder. Such a complementarity, however, depends on small social units. As metaphor of a regenerated society it is of limited use. What it promises is the possibility of individual development. Such development is impossible in *Kelroy*, because, in a striking and daring inversion, Rush has moved deception from the seducer-figure to the guardian-figure. The novel's lovers cannot respond to this threat simply because they have no adequate conception of it. The struggle for money and success has infected the idea of guardianship, but since the developing subject cannot possibly be aware of this change, it is defenseless against it. In *Lacy Temple*, finally, there is no final union either, but also no melodramatic fall. The impossibility of a union is no longer considered a disaster, because self-esteem is now derived from the inner discipline and strength of the developing subject, whereas guardian and seducer become increasingly de-melodramatized and domesticated family members.

The transitional quality of our three novels can be most clearly seen, however, in their uncertain handling of the question of aesthetic effect. If the individual is to be empowered, then this project has to be extended to the literary text and its effect on the reader. This, in turn, must affect the novel's

inefficacious tenderness; and you will gladly consult the dictates of your understanding, to prevent being preyed on by continual depravity" (86).

Cf. "the regular well conducted family of Mr. Matthews, where a kind of sedate cheerfulness went hand in hand with rational amusement and mental improvement" (201).

attitude toward its own seductive nature. Or, to put it differently, it must imply a new function and form of fiction. Novels can no longer pretend to be guardians but are in danger of becoming "seducers."³³ All three novels of transition are therefore characterized by a distancing of its seductive aspects, although to varying degrees. The seductive elements are still most strongly present in the first part of *Jane Talbot*, which, both in form and theme, comes closest to the tradition of the sentimental tale of seduction. Accordingly — and in keeping with its epistolary form — the book is characterized by erratic waves of emotional agitation which threaten to overpower the reader and to produce strong feelings of helplessness. The reader may therefore be relieved when the novel takes a rather sudden turn, moves away from its strategy of strong emotional stimulation and shifts to the level of a moral and intellectual debate. By doing this, the novel loses its center for imaginary participation, however, since the struggle of the converted Godwinian radical begins to become more interesting than that of a heroine who is no longer in distress.

This, in fact, may explain the lukewarm, uninterested reactions to the novel. In terms of aesthetic effect, the lack of a center of imaginary participation poses its actual problem. Because of its shifts in theme and movements between characters, we do not have a clear focus for imaginary participation in *Jane Talbot*. Similarly, *Kelroy* offers an uneven and irresolute version in this respect. On the one hand, we have a perfect embodiment of the fair and sweet sentimental heroine. But this heroine does not act, not even falsely. Because she is not aware of the deception of which she is a victim, she cannot struggle and defend herself. Instead of a conflict or struggle, the only experience the novel offers is a grim picture of utter betrayal and desertion. There even exists a possibility, especially from the point of view of today's reader, that Mrs. Hammond, in her monstrous schemes and ambitions, becomes the novel's "secret" heroine.³⁴ While Emily is still a sentimental stock character, her mother is almost a strong Balzacian individual.³⁵ It is the

33 For a closer analysis of the movement between guardian and seducer as a *mis en abyme* for two conflicting possibilities of fiction, see my essay "Sentimentality and the Changing Functions of Fiction" (1990/1991).

34 Meserole emphasizes "the complexity of Mrs. Hammond's character" (1977:11) in contrast to the lifelessness of her daughter Emily and even goes on to predict: "Her [Rush's] characters are lifelike, and for the most part, exceptionally well drawn — particularly the character of Mrs. Hammond, who will become, once *Kelroy* is more widely known, one of the memorable characters in American fiction" (12).

35 The tone is already set by the first characterization of her offered in the novel: "She was a woman of fascinating manners, strong prejudices, and boundless ambition [...]" (3). Cf. also Meserole's characterization: "The dominant mode is tragic, and at the center from beginning to end is the powerful figure of Mrs. Hammond. Hers is a consuming ego that must try to control all: people, situations, events, even destiny" (1977:11).

problem of the novel that it has moved the sentimental novel to a new world of social manipulation but that it has not been able to provide a fitting heroine for the reader's confrontation with this world. By giving the novel the title of Emily's lover, Kelroy, the novel may even suggest that, as in *Jane Talbot*, the male seducer figure undergoes the novel's actual learning process. As a character, however, Kelroy is hardly developed.³⁶ Thus, the issue of imaginary participation is further complicated by the book's title, not least because Kelroy remains such a bleak, ineffective, and ultimately pathetic figure who is unable to protect Emily in any way.³⁷

In both cases, *Jane Talbot* as well as *Kelroy*, the demelodramatizing and domestication of seduction leads to an uneven, uncertain, and unfocused structure of aesthetic effect. In *Lacy Temple*, Rowson, too, does no longer base her strategy of effect on a sequence of melodramatic shocks, as she still did in *Charlotta Temple*, but on the model character of the social apprenticeship Lucy undergoes. In this apprenticeship, disappointments in love are just one element among others. The seductions of Lucy's mother and of Mary do no longer stand for "fates worse than death," but for social lessons to be learned. In this nascent novel of social apprenticeship something is taken away — a structure of strong effects — but something is also offered in return, namely the strength and self-assertion shown by the heroine which provides a stable and reliable focus for acts of imaginary self-empowerment. Such imaginary participation may nevertheless have its limits, because the "model" character of the story (and the heroine) is so strongly emphasized that there is little room for a narrative representation of the heroine's individuality and interiority. The result is a distance which works against the novel's own invitation for identification.

If they are successful, sentimental novels can be overpowering. The problem they pose therefore for the reader is how to "get out" at the right time. This, in fact, is one of the major functions of the death-bed scene in novels like *Charlotta Temple* which provide the reader with an opportunity to

36 Meserole calls Kelroy "an imperfectly conceived character": "He is clearly more than a stereotype, but just as clearly, Rebecca Rush has not fully succeeded in her characterization" (1977:6-7). Derounian notes: "We might expect, then, that she would create protagonists in her hero and heroine. Yet this is not entirely true, especially in Kelroy's case, where Rush prefers to be mysteriously incomplete" (1980:122). Petter emphasizes the romantic reference ("Kelroy is obviously meant to be an exceptional being. He is very much a romantic conception."), but then also has to admit: "Yet he remains a shadowy creation" (1971:204).

37 The complication of imaginary participation which the novel presents is well captured by the following characterization Derounian makes in the context of her discussion of the figure of Kelroy: "Despite the title, the novel focuses primarily on Mrs. Hammond and secondarily on her daughter Emily, rather than on Kelroy" (1980:123).

move back to the position of someone who looks at the heroine from the outside.³⁸ Because of their undecided movement between different characters and scenarios, the novels of transition, on the other hand, pose a problem of "getting in." In their uncertain search for a form of fiction that would successfully modernize fiction's potential for imaginary self-empowerment, all three of the novels discussed here comprise elements of the sentimental novel, the novel of manners, and the domestic novel, without being able to establish a convincing new generic pattern and a consistent structure of aesthetic effect.³⁹ None of the novels solves the problem of imaginary participation successfully; none finds a convincing balance between participation and observation; none, consequently, managed to secure a central place in American literary history.⁴⁰ But their transitional quality is instructive because it indicates a major shift in

38 In *The Power of Sympathy* and *The Coquette*, this same function is fulfilled by gravestones and their inscriptions which stand at the end of the two novels and offer the reader the role of the "weeping friend." Cf. the end of *The Coquette*: "This Humble Stone, in Memory of ELIZA WHARTON, Is Inscribed By Her Weeping Friends To Whom She Endear'd Herself By Uncommon Tenderness and Affection. Endow'd With Superior Acquirements, She Was Still More Distinguished By Humility and Benevolence. Let Candor Throw A Veil Over Her Faults, For Great Was Her Charity To Others. She Sustained The Last Painful Scene Far From Every Friend And Exhibited An Example Of Calm Resignation. Her Departure Was On The 25th Day of July, A.D. — In The 37th Year Of Her Age. And The Tears Of Strangers Watered Her Grave" (271).

39 A fine description of the hybridity of *Kelroy* is given by Dana Nelson in her introduction to the novel: "Viciously characterized as 'sentimental,' 'didactic,' and 'novel of manners,' *Kelroy*, carefully read, defies any easy categorization of plot or character, and demonstrates the value of carefully assessing novels critically on an individual basis for their artistic, cultural, and historical merit" (1992: xv). Unfortunately, Nelson then proceeds to offer her own formula, derived rather mechanically from current "complicity"-criticism: "The novel does not acknowledge, though, how the bourgeois class already exists in a condition of surplus of wealth that implicates all of them in 'avarice,' and, more important, how that excess is derived from the labor of the working classes" (xx). "In the margins, servants (especially Black ones) give their services and bodies to make possible the leisure and society of their masters. But the fact of their invisibility, both to the characters and within the novel generally, plots *Kelroy's* unwitting complicity with the system that it critiques" (xxi). What have we really achieved when we point out that writers like Rebecca Rush or Jane Austen did not yet have the political awareness of the 1980s? I find it much more productive to focus on what they managed to achieve within the intellectual and literary system in which they were operating and which they could not possibly transcend all on their own.

40 Although one should add that there may have been other factors at work as well, as Derounian points out with reference to *Kelroy*, the most interesting of the three novels discussed here: "[...] *Kelroy* may have been overlooked until recently because critics assumed its female author was a forerunner of Hawthorne's mob of scribbling women. In other words, *Kelroy* may have suffered from the misconception that it is just another sentimental novel, which it is not" (1980: 125).

the pursuit of imaginary self-empowerment and, linked with it, in the use of fiction. Because of their own unevenness these novels of transition could not establish a new generic model for this transformation. But they provided an important transition to the novel of social apprenticeship that opened up entirely new possibilities for fiction and the self.

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MARIA GIULIA FABI

The Coquette or the Ambiguities.
On the Fiction and the Reality
of Independence in the New Republic.

Spoiler Alerts!

if this makes you mad, do not read this until after we have finished the novel!

In her 1797 epistolary novel *The Coquette*, Hannah Foster situates her critical analysis of female freedom and the politics of courtship and marriage within the restrictive confines of a conventional seduction novel. Loosely based on the real-life story of Elizabeth Whitman, *The Coquette* can be properly termed a "dysphoric": in line with Nancy Miller's description of the "dysphoric text," ¹ *The Coquette* ends "with the heroine's death . . . and the move is from 'all' in this world to 'nothing'." ² Eliza Wharton, the protagonist, starts out as a successful, independence-seeking heroine and ends up as a seduced, "fallen" woman who dies giving birth to an illegitimate child.

a profound state of unease or dissatisfaction; may accompany depression, anxiety or agitation.

The friction between Foster's fascination with Eliza Wharton's quest for self-determination and the moralistic conventions of the sentimental genre splits the novel in three thematically distinct sections which are not smoothly connected. The first section (letters 1 to 48) is situated mostly in urban New Haven. Focused on Eliza's remarkable intellectual endowments and her quest for self-realization, it is structured around the classical topos of the testing of the hero. Unlike male epic heroes, however, who fight against nature or super-human forces, Eliza defies socially constructed limitations imposed on female activity and self-development. Analogously, her first defeat (the failure of her marriage plans) is brought about by her well-meaning mother, rather than by a blind fate or a powerful enemy.

letters 1-48

The second section (letters 49-63) takes place chiefly in Hartford, Eliza's small hometown. It dwells on the powerlessness of the lonely heroine, the comfort she derives from the attentions of the

Common tropes

Analogously: having analogy; corresponding in some particular

letters 1-63

prolific: producing offspring, young, highly fruitful

fashionable Major Sanford, and the foreboding of her second, fatal defeat: her pregnancy. While Eliza is less epistolarily prolific in this section than in the first, other characters like Major Sanford and Julia Granby (who is rather suddenly introduced in the novel) seem to take over the story and undermine Eliza's narrative authority. They refer to her as "blind"³ and "altered" (p. 125), and Julia reiterates that Eliza's mind is "not perfectly right" (pp. 121-31).

The third section (letters 63-74) features the revelation of Eliza's pregnancy, her consequent flight, and her eventual death. In this section, Eliza's story is interpreted and narrated almost entirely by other characters. Her complicated life is simplified into a warning to "the American fair" (p. 168) and used by the novelist to justify the morally suspicious act of writing novels. Such a conventional ending, however, barely disguises a much more enigmatic subtext. This subtext stretches the seduction plot to the limits of credibility and exposes its socio-ideological foundations and functions.

Is the crime of dependence to be expiated by the sacrifice of virtue?⁴

This rhetorical question that Harrington, the male protagonist of William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, "reads" in the eyes of the noble-minded but propertyless Harriot whom he is planning to seduce, is enough to convert the rake into a potential husband. But the plight of Eliza with Sanford is a true exemplification of Foster's skepticism toward the saying that "reformed rakes make the best husbands" (p. 57). Eliza's is to join the large group of repentant but irredeemably fallen women characters who die giving birth to an illegitimate child.⁵ Harriot, on the contrary, is celebrated by Brown as the innocent victim of someone else's sexual crime, one who dies in the noble attempt to repress her strong but immoral passion for her brother. Harriot's virtue has not been any more conducive to happiness than Eliza's sin. The differences between *The Power of Sympathy* and *The Coquette* indicate more than simple variations on the theme of seduction. Foster turns the ethical dilemma of Brown's heroine on its head and identifies the crucial paradox confronting women in her society: even the preservation of virtue is to be expiated through dependence, namely, marriage.

As the only form of virtuous sexual union, marriage was a rather

expiate: to atone for; make amends or reparation for

letters
63-74

18th

complex institution in the late XVIII century. On the one hand, (it) marriage represented the traditional coronation of the sentimental heroine's successful struggle to preserve her chastity (against all odds). On the other, it was a social contract which "in its economic aspect resembled an indenture between master and servant." ^{abstinence} ^{apparently} ^{was not the} ^{female sex's} ^{strong suit} ^{- environmental} ^{- social} ^{- personal} ^{odds or forces?} "The new, Lockean theories of an affectional rather than an authoritarian economy within the family influenced the new Republic's rhetoric and behavioral patterns, but left untouched a legal system that sanctioned the subordination of woman, her status as "feme covert." Ironically, the combination of legal subjugation and ideals of romantic love put women in the position of having only enough freedom "to choose their bondage," or to risk an even greater social marginality and the ridicule of spinsterhood. ^{ouch. stuck between a rock and a hard place.}

nk about marriage is... advise to you... id + about times !! This extremely want 9h, 5000 r kiss r this!

More than any other female character in *The Coquette*, Eliza Wharton explores this paradoxical gospel of happy dependence and dutiful contentment that informed the life of women in the new democracy. She articulates her doubts in letters to her female friends who pity her and sympathise with her problems in choosing a marriage partner, yet resent her lucid analysis of female powerlessness, and censure her outspoken critique of marriage. Whether fondly remembered (Mrs. Wharton), wholeheartedly enjoyed (Mrs. Richman), soberly accepted (Lucy Freeman Sumner), or anxiously anticipated (Julia Granby), marriage is connected with subordination, obedience, and reduced mobility, and at the same time it is accepted as one of the "self-evident" truths of femaleness by all the women in the novel. They are unprepared to interpret Eliza's rebelliousness in ways other than as coquetry, immorality, and, finally, insanity. For men, a few years before, truth had justified a revolution; in the post-revolutionary world

What a Contrast!
why challenge the status quo. Only focus on things you have the power to change
goodness gracious.
other people!

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. ⁹

For women, on the contrary, truth prescribed submission and achievement coincided with a deferential morality, which in turn was identified with marriage.

Eliza resists the sexual double-standard and resents the hiatus

between the rhetoric and the reality of marriage. Like her contemporary Eliza Southgate, she is painfully conscious that "not one woman in a hundred marries for love," and chooses to separate the social function of marriage from its accompanying rhetorical justifications, namely, the joys of selflessness, domestic contentment, and romantic love.¹⁰ She is aware of not being rich enough to be a fashionable spinster, and perceives marriage as a necessity rather than a pleasure.¹¹ Consequently, she is determined to prolong her "freedom," to savour fully the power of choice she enjoys during courtship, and to use such power to her best advantage (p. 30). *power in being a possession...*

Eliza disregards her friend Lucy's remark that Reverend Boyer's "situation in life is, perhaps, as elevated" as she has a right to claim (p. 27). Convinced that her "virtue" - a crucial term in the male republican rhetoric of achievement - resides in more than her simple chastity, Eliza is self-confident enough to believe that her intellectual endowments and her beauty will enable her to choose her marriage partner freely and be as much of a self-made woman as the middle-class protagonist of an eighteenth-century novel could imagine. Marrying Major Sanford, whom she believes to be rich, becomes a potential route to worldly success.

The opening letter of the novel, written to her closest friend Lucy Freeman, signals Eliza's entrance into the fashionable circles of urban New Haven. However tempered by the language of filial affection and female delicacy, the letter registers Eliza's happiness at the death of Mr. Haly (the man her parents wanted her to marry) and her subsequent removal from the relative seclusion of her hometown. Having regained freedom through a providential, albeit "melancholy event" (p. 14), Eliza declares her determination to protect her liberty actively, and to cultivate "no other connection than that of friendship" (p. 6).

In her epistolary reflections on her recent experiences, Eliza discusses what she perceives to be the reality of "authority" hidden behind the rhetoric of familial affection and romantic love (p. 13). She realises that her parents put "shackles" (p. 21) on her mind in the shape of Mr. Haly; marriage is described as "hymenial chain" (pp. 13-14). The husband, like the father, is simultaneously a "friend and a

filial: of, relating to, or befitting a son or daughter

providential: of, relating to, or resulting from divine providence

guardian" (p. 5); in both cases, harmony and affection rest on the fiction of voluntary obedience to the guardian's will. Dissent would reveal the underlying inequality of power and would have to be quelled by the exercise of explicit authority.

Significantly, at the start of the novel Eliza is linked by the duty of obedience to her "indulgent" mother only (p. 4). Freed from direct male authority, her father and her fiancé dead, Eliza underestimates the larger patriarchal structure of her society and the hegemony it exerts on her female cohorts.¹² To her distress, in fact, all of her women friends, including Lucy, perceive her "declaration of independence" and her quest for happiness as improper, dangerous, "coquetish," and deserving "monitorial lessons and advice" (p. 78). Their censure seems far too harsh. As Eliza often repeats, the freedom she so highly prizes and her friends so deeply fear is nothing more than the temporary liberty to have friends but no guardians, and eventually to choose independently the man she will marry.¹³ If obedience to her parents had threatened to create a split between reason and happiness, in that she had rationally accepted a decision that she knew would make her unhappy, Eliza now wants to use her new freedom and judgment to pursue happiness. Soon aware that neither of her most determined suitors pleases both her reason and her fancy, Eliza decides to base the choice of a husband on an accurate evaluation of which profession, status, and geographical location would be most conducive to her happiness. Give me the cold, hard facts.

hegemony: leadership or predominant influence exercised by one nation over others, as in a confederation

Such concerns were far from uncommon among unmarried women at the time. What makes them so disruptive in Eliza's case is her insistence on pursuing her own happiness rather than on making someone else happy. Eliza is deviant because she appropriates for herself the male definition of happiness as self-fulfilment, rejecting feminine self-sacrifice and conceiving of pleasure as direct enjoyment rather than the recollection of virtue. In sum, Eliza's major sin is individualism, the self-reliant attempt to pursue her self-interest. That she initially connects the death of a man with her own freedom reveals just how disruptive the ethics of self-making can be when appropriated by a woman. Even more dangerous is Eliza's critique of marriage, which provides the rationale for the crimes against the family which will later be perpetrated by this attractive and gifted single woman.

norm; a social pariah (outcast) of sorts
rank xpress for
ALMA!

What a concept?
oh my goodness. She is deviant bc she wants to be equally happy to that as a man...

libertarian: a person who advocates liberty, especially with regard to thought or conduct

egalitarian: asserting, resulting from, or characterized by belief in the equality of all people, especially in political,

Female individualism was a concept neither contemplated nor welcomed in post-revolutionary America. The Founding Fathers had claimed the natural right of the male offspring to separate himself from a domineering motherland. But they had also assumed that the natural duty of women (as mothers or potential mothers) was to nurture their offspring under any circumstances. The libertarian and egalitarian ideals proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence were "peculiarly a function of what [could not] be written there,"¹⁴ i.e., the realities of sexual difference. Rights and duties, self-making and self-sacrifice, self-reliance and affiliation were silently and "self evidently" distributed along gender lines in the new Republic, a fact which explains the very different careers of two famous characters, one fictional, one real: Eliza Wharton and Benjamin Franklin.¹⁵

Eliza indeed possesses many of the qualities that the practical-minded Franklin considered conducive to success in the new nation: ambition, self-reliance, education, and reserve. But in Eliza's case, multiple endowments are not of much avail. On the contrary, they cast an ambiguous shadow on her reputation, that crucial though ethereal entity which in Franklin's world was deemed as important, if not more important than, virtue itself. Eliza's ambition is considered "folly" (p. 74) and her self-reliance improper by a society that defines female propriety as the passive acceptance of woman's status as property. Similarly, Eliza's remarkable education elicits censure as well as admiration, because she is too educated and too aggressively conscious of her abilities.

Eighteenth-century arguments in favor of female education stressed its pacifying function. In the words of the contemporary Eliza Southgate, Pacify: quell the anger, agitation, or excitement

Women would be under the same degree of subordination that they now are; enlighten and expand their minds, and they would perceive the necessity of such a regulation to preserve the order and happiness of society.¹⁶

Rather than using her education to accept women's subordination, Eliza uses her intelligence to analyse. Rather than becoming contented with her lot, she becomes so conceited as to feel free to judge the character and merit of her suitors. Far from being intimidat-

connection to political texts not the revolutionary era (Thomas Paine's Common Sense)

Benjamin Franklin → I am going to read an excerpt of his autobiography a bit... super dry, it prepared

Fabi economic, or social life.

an elite group of people whose progress is based on ability and talent rather than on class privilege or wealth.

We have come so far!

do you agree with this...

impropriety: a failure to observe the conventions of show due honesty or modesty; improper language, behavior, or character
13
reverence: great respect; reverence

ed by Reverend Boyer, she proves to be his intellectual equal in several verbal exchanges, and, in her letters, she mocks his pretentious seriousness with scathing irony (pp. 12, 65). The daring impropriety of Eliza's relationship with Boyer becomes apparent when comparing her nonchalant behavior with Mrs. Holmes's lecture on "the veneration due to the characters of the Clergy" in *The Power of Sympathy*.¹⁷

awkward
haha

ms
fully
sive
oppressive

Eliza's relationship with Sanford is as egalitarian as that with Boyer, but more competitive. Disregarding all "prudish" warnings about his dangerousness, Eliza claims to "despise those contracted ideas which confine virtue to a cell" (p. 13). Confident in her own intellectual and moral strength, she plays a flirtatious game with Sanford and assesses his mediocrity and shallowness on intellectual, rather than purely moral grounds. Sanford is deficient not only in virtue, as her female friends repeatedly point out, but also in intellectual cultivation. In her letter to Lucy, Eliza refers to Sanford's ignorance in polite but unequivocal terms:

During tea, the conversation turned on literary subjects, in which I cannot say that the Major bore a very distinguished part. (p. 38)

If Eliza's liveliness and charm are displayed in fashionable circles, her intelligence and cunning emerge chiefly from her personal correspondence with other women. Like Benjamin Franklin, she is aware of the power of silence and the effectiveness of covert action.

high
praise here

just
trailing
-latency

Initially, both of her suitors are attracted to a personality they do not understand, and can therefore arrogantly interpret as they please. Boyer, the moralist, idealizes her as the union of "truth and the virtues and graces" incarnated "in a fair form" (p. 10). On the other hand, Sanford, the misogynist, underestimates her cultivation and describes her as "gay, volatile, apparently thoughtless of everything but present enjoyment" (p. 18). The blindness of her suitors to her real personality gives Eliza an advantage, which she uses to manipulate them so skillfully as to almost succeed in persuading (forcing?) the libertine Sanford to marry her.¹⁸ Only her mother's unpredictable and deeply resented interference ruins Eliza's scheme, by causing Boyer's departure and the destruction of Eliza's reputation in her hometown.¹⁹ Ironically, Mrs. Wharton's protectiveness creates the conditions for Eliza's fall.

change in
manipulation
from Charlotte
Temple

Boyer's reproachful departure (which Eliza initially cherishes), Sanford's unexpected abandonment, her public humiliation,²⁰ the absence of her closest female friends, the unsatisfying trips to visit the Richmans, and the permanent spectre of her unexciting hometown, plunge Eliza into a depression. Her "melancholy" is more the result of objective circumstances than of "indulgence" (p. 112) or a "disturbed imagination" (p. 108) - as her strikingly unsympathetic friends prefer to believe. Indeed, Eliza's increasingly frequent romantic broodings over Boyer, always followed by contradictory lamentations over Sanford's absence, can be taken seriously only in the context of Eliza's growing awareness of her status as a propertyless spinster.

Melancholy is the dominant mood in the second part of the novel. After her rather pathetic, fruitless attempt to reconquer Boyer, Eliza utters the conventional cry of the seduced woman ("I am undone!") which opens the second section (p. 105). In her introduction to the 1986 edition of *The Coquette*, Cathy Davidson interprets this cry as signaling Eliza's "psychologically fallen status" which will soon be confirmed by her succumbing sexually to Sanford.²¹ Davidson's comment gives more credit to the insinuations of Eliza's insanity advanced by other characters than to the material conditions of her existence. In light of the few life options then available to women outside of marriage, Eliza's cry voices her belated realization of the dismal consequences of the failure of her marital schemes. Being a moderately well-to-do single woman, separated from all her friends, who are away and married, Eliza experiences at a physical as well as a psychological level the powerlessness and isolation of the outcast long before being seduced.

The newly-wed and newly-enriched Sanford rescues Eliza from marginality and obscurity. By now fully conscious that the status of women depends on their male relations, Eliza does not want to give up the reviving attentions of the fashionable Sanford. At the same time, she has to justify to the world, as well as to herself, the concern which a married man, too young to be fatherly, shows towards a woman other than his wife. Thus she attempts, ineffectively, to neutralize the threat of Sanford's sexuality by defining him as her "brother" (p. 126) and his wife Nancy as her "sister" (p. 127).²² But as a result, Eliza's eventual liason with Sanford takes on the connotations of an incestuous seduction.

ref in
and reference
to depression
The
maternity
not "The
Yellow Wallpaper"

not back @
Charlotte
simple to
find the
my "I am
undone!"

flashback
to Charlotte
on her own
for the first
time!

The Coquette can thus be seen to incorporate the two most disturbing themes present in much post-revolutionary fiction: incest and seduction. While the former is connected to the young Republic's preoccupation with origins, the latter is linked to the "fear that political liberty would be associated with sexual license" and to the relation between good citizenship and female virtue in the rhetoric of the new state.²³ That these two themes dominate the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries invites speculation on the connection between them. Both incest and seduction exemplify the restrictions that the past and biology (rather than nature in its largest sense) impose on personal freedom, especially in the case of women. In addition, both are sins which call for the intervention of society in the regulation of the individual, through either reformation or punishment. In the democracy of the new world, seduction and incest, as examples of sexual deviance, epitomise the disruptive potential of unqualified notions of personal freedom and natural rights. The dying heroines of many sentimental novels come to realize that there are biological limitations to liberty. Ironically, the subtitle of *The Power of Sympathy* is "The Triumph of Nature."

Commonly regarded as the first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy* addresses the themes of seduction, incest and the related issue of female happiness in ways that differ from, but shed light on, *The Coquette*. As stated above, Brown's novel celebrates the redemptive moral qualities of the best among women. In spite of the heroine's virtue, her happiness is thwarted by the uncontrollable, lingering effects of past illicit sexuality: as a result of her mother's seduction, her potential husband is revealed to be her actual brother. Once her virtue is defeated by someone else's sexual crime, Harriot dies, helplessly wondering:

yet I have preserved my innocence and my virtue-what then have I to deprecate, what have I to detest?²⁴

The Power of Sympathy sets the tone for the sentimental novel's exploration of the passive power of female virtue: it is forceful enough to reform men, yet it is not powerful enough to ensure life, liberty, and happiness for the heroine. In striking contrast with the meritocratic

male universe of Benjamin Franklin, the world of the sentimental novel reveals that there is no causal link between virtue and happiness. In Brown's novel, only death seems to offer Harriot the realization of the Republican triad: *freedom* from service to Mrs. Francis; *happiness* in the otherworldly union with Harrington; and everlasting *life*.

If female virtue is not always rewarded, female crime is always punished. The pattern of female death and male survival that characterizes *The Power of Sympathy* and seduction narratives in general is repeated in Foster's novel.²⁵ Even though rakes are vociferously condemned in both *The Coquette* and *The Boarding School*, adherence to the true story of Elizabeth Whitman and to the narrative conventions of the sentimental genre require that Eliza die and Sanford live. Nonetheless, Foster's treatment of the seduction theme is amazingly, though ambiguously, innovative.

It is almost inaccurate, in fact, to describe Eliza's liason with Sanford as a seduction. The crucial factors of naïveté, youthfulness, and speed are missing. Undoubtedly, Sanford is a rake, but Eliza is aware of it and has been able to neutralize his verbal chicanery for years. Also, unlike most other seduction victims, who are generally under twenty-five, Eliza is a mature woman in her late thirties.²⁶ Lastly, Eliza is ruined in her hometown, in her mother's house. The elopement that often accompanies seduction occurs only when her pregnancy becomes "too obvious to be longer concealed" (p. 154). These facts, together with the half-articulated admission that the affair has been going on for sometime and Julia's hint at Eliza's temporary elevation of spirits, point towards a deliberate union rather than a reluctant seduction (pp. 145, 136). Yet, society's proscription of consensual premarital or extramarital sex among the middle classes is so strong as to oblige Foster to impute Eliza's sexual transgression to her temporary insanity. Deprived of free will, Eliza does not accept the liason with Sanford: she is seduced into it. Almost a century later, Catherine Dall's attempt to salvage Eliza's reputation offers interesting insights into the persistence of traditional notions of female purity. In order to invalidate Foster's charges of insanity, Dall strives to prove that Eliza was properly married to her supposed seducer.²⁷

The real, final decline of Eliza's physical and mental stability occurs when she learns that she is pregnant. Immediately before

socially
comparable
Temple
charitable

Sound
familiar?
"

the yellow
and paper

Sanford's letter announcing the "unlucky, but not . . . miraculous accident" to his friend Deighton, the worried Julia wonders what new occurrence has brought about the resurgence of melancholy evident in Eliza's last letter. Sanford himself admits that

At the first discovery, absolute distraction seized the soul of Eliza, which has since terminated in a fixed melancholy. (p. 140)

It is not so much the sexual transgression in itself that haunts Eliza as the visibility of such transgression, for it makes it impossible "to elude the invidious eye of curiosity" and obliges her to face the ultimate female powerlessness, her lack of control over her own body (p. 154).

If Eliza's authorial presence in the novel has been waning in the second section, it virtually disappears in the third, after she becomes pregnant. In one of the only two letters she writes here, Eliza resigns the copyright of her story to Julia, and her subsequent silence is ominous of her impending death. Long before she dies her life has become "a tale" for others to tell (p. 141).²⁸ By mixing narrative with direct quotations from Eliza's speeches, the fictional authors, especially Julia, replicate in the narrative the interpretative activity of the real author. Foster thus displaces the burden of historical accuracy: she hides behind the authority of eyewitnesses and presents her interpretation of Elizabeth Whitman's life as truthful.

Sanford and Julia are the dominant figures in the third section of the novel. The former enjoys "full possession" of Eliza's body in much the same way as the latter possesses her narrative voice (p. 139). Their control over Eliza is confirmed on a structural level, in that the last two letters written by the heroine are enclosed in one by Julia and followed by a letter from Sanford to Deighton. Also, of the twelve letters of the last section of the novel, six are written by Julia and three by Sanford, and only one is addressed to Eliza. The "fallen woman" is talked about, rather than talked to by her concerned friends. The very structure of *The Coquette* thus mirrors the reality of the community-enforced exclusion and silence that befalls the seduced female, and brings to completion the circular retributive pattern of the novel: the initially boisterously free Eliza ends up as a "wretched wanderer" (p. 154).

ask yourself: how does this differ from Charlotte Temple as a historical text?

is FP plans how to reveal social commentary on how the community treats "seduced" women of this time period!

The authorial coup of Sanford and Julia takes on further significance in the light of a comparison between these two characters and Eliza. Julia enters the novel as the consoler of the depressed and isolated Eliza as well as her *alter*, and better, *ego*. Julia resembles Eliza in many ways: she is attractive, gifted, and single. Being younger, she is going through much of the same troubling decision-making Eliza experienced earlier in the novel. Julia's uncertain speculation about her future, "should I ever enter a married life," echoes Eliza's previous, more reluctant statement, "should it ever be my fate to wear the hymenial chain" (pp. 136, 14). However, their respective models of perfect marital happiness are significantly different. Eliza fantasizes about the romantic marriage of the Richmans as being distinguished by "the purest and most ardent affection" as well as by "health and wealth" (p. 14). Julia, instead, exhorts the more rational marriage of the "discreet and modest" Lucy, whom she describes as "most happily united" (p. 136). In support of her assertion, she adduces a list of the virtues of Lucy's husband. Interestingly, Eliza's evaluation of a happy marriage focuses on the quality of the interaction between the two spouses, while Julia seems to assume that the simple juxtaposition of two worthy individuals is conducive to happiness. In reality, there is nothing in the letters Lucy writes that confirms Julia's optimistic assessment of her marriage. Rather, the only comment Lucy makes on her married life is far from enthusiastic and reveals a desire to return to her hometown, as symbolic of her previous status as "Freeman." She writes to Eliza:

I am happy in my present situation; but when the summer returns, I intend to visit my native home. Again, my Eliza, will we ramble together in those retired shades which friendship has rendered so delightful to us. (pp. 113-14)

Morally correct but fictionally rather forced, Foster's celebration of Lucy's marriage of reason is connected, on an ideological level, with the destruction of Mrs. Richman's happiness following the death of her beloved daughter. Between Mrs. Richman's punished romantic enthusiasm and Eliza's fall, stand Julia's sense of duty, her realism, and her sober acceptance of the "modest freedom" to which women can aspire on earth (p. 27). Shielded by her unbreachable virtue and aggressive discretion, which ward off even the libertine Sanford, Julia

vow.
vow.
vow.
vow.

will go through life relatively unscathed. In comparison with Eliza, however, it is apparent that what Julia gains in safety she sacrifices in complexity of personality.

Eliza shares with Sanford an elasticity of moral sense that sets her in opposition to the rigorous Julia and the other women in the novel. Foster scatters throughout the text evidence of the similarity between the language and personality of the heroine and the profligate *:recklessly extravagant or wasteful in the use of resources.* seducer. Both think of marriage as imprisonment and intend to avoid it as long as possible; both are tempted by the freedom that a single life seems to offer; both are "gay" and ultimately rakes (pp. 14, 23, 37).²⁹ Such clues to Eliza's potential for immorality speak loud to the sexual double-standard of the late 1700s. Sanford is censured and ostracized, albeit belatedly, for being actively "incontinent": he is a well-known libertine who squanders a large patrimony and ruins both the life and the fortune of his worthy wife. For this, he is punished with poverty and homelessness. Paradoxically, Eliza is punished much more harshly than Sanford, and not for what she does, but rather for what she does not do, i.e., for not rejecting Sanford's attentions from the very start, for not securing her own modest happiness by marrying Boyer and, finally, for not protecting her chastity. Sexual double-standards equate man's active immorality to woman's failure to protect her virtue. The "veil of charity" (p. 37) that Sanford asks Eliza to draw over his faults early on in the novel, is unjustly similar to the other "veil" Eliza's friends ask "candor" to throw over her "frailties" (p. 169). Such a wish is inscribed on Eliza's tombstone, a far more tangible veil than the one Sanford had in mind.

However profligate, men maintain the authority to judge female virtue or lack thereof. In the same letter in which Sanford praises Julia for her incorruptibility, he also blames Eliza for her fall. At the end, Eliza herself seems to accept the moral double-standard, as proof of her own repentance and a means to exert moral influence on Sanford. In their last meeting she tells him:

"I wish not to be your accuser, but your reformer. On several accounts, I view my own crime in a more aggravated light than yours; but my conscience is awakened to a conviction of my guilt. Yours, I fear is not." (p. 160)

Sanford's
frivolous
unreliable

Awesome

Eliza's moral redemption rests on her acceptance of the ethics of female self-sacrifice. Having confessed to having abandoned all hope of earthly felicity, she relishes the idea of becoming a "beacon to warn the American fair" (p. 159) and of saving the rake who, unlike herself, "may yet become a valuable member of society" (p. 160).

Paradoxically, it is only by losing her life that Eliza regains part of the power she relinquished to Sanford and Julia. On the one hand, death finally puts her beyond the reach of the libertine who has pursued her, physically as well as psychologically, throughout the novel.³⁰ On the other, her last speeches, though reported by other characters, contain her own interpretation of her life and compete in authority with Julia's. Eliza's final powerfulness results from renunciation rather than acquisition. She loses life to acquire freedom and happiness in the next world. She renounces the independent dreams of her youth in order to gain respectability. From the male rhetoric of self-assertion, she is forced back to that of female self-denial. It is a sad irony that the novel ends with Julia's expression of "the supporting persuasion . . . that . . . Eliza is happy" (p. 169).

didactic: intended for instruction

Even those critics who perceive *The Coquette* and Eliza to be, respectively, the "most memorable seduction story in eighteenth-century American fiction,"³¹ and "the only convincing heroine in the sentimental novel,"³² have a hard time reconciling the highly complex and ambiguous portrayal of Eliza's quest with her conventional death. Traditional interpretations emphasize the inevitable, awkward didacticism that characterizes sentimental novels. In *The Early American Novel*, for example, Henry Petter notes:

Mrs. Foster succeeded with considerable discretion in steering clear of the numerous opportunities to preach which her plot afforded; but she appears to have yielded to the necessity of making her moral points at the conclusion of *The Coquette*.³³

More recently, however, scholars of popular fiction like Walter Wenska, Linda Kerber, and Cathy Davidson have focused on the socio-political implications of the sentimental genre.

In his 1977 article "*The Coquette* and the American Dream of

Freedom," Wenska identifies the crucial preoccupation of Foster's novel as the attempt to define liberty. Hailing Eliza as an "antinomian" ³⁴ prefiguring many other freedom-seeking American characters like Huck Finn, Natty Bumppo and Isabel Archer, Wenska notes the inevitable failure of all idealistic quests for absolute liberty. That both Eliza and Sanford "are defeated in their quests for self-determination," confirms the genderless, universal limitations to human freedom. Foster emerges from Wenska's analysis as a rather moderate ideologue of post-revolutionary America who wants "to dispel or at least radically qualify" illusions of perfect liberty. As such, it is only "unintentionally" that Foster's novel lends itself to more controversial interpretations. ³⁵ Notably missing from Wenska's article is the analysis of the very different degrees of unfreedom that pertain to men and women in Foster's fictional and real world.

Antinomian: a person who maintains that Christians are free from the moral law by virtue of grace as set forth in the gospel

ennoble: giving someone a noble rank or title (of character)

More detailed and gender-conscious is Kerber's 1980 book, *Women of the Republic*. In direct contrast to Wenska who describes the new Republic rather generically as a new land newly dedicated to births of new freedoms, Kerber maintains that even "the most radical American men" never intended the libertarian ideals of the revolution to affect the status of women as non-political, happily domestic beings. Women were to remain "a tradition-bound, underdeveloped nation within a larger, more politically sophisticated one." ³⁶ ~~The hiatus between the democratic ideals and the legal non-existence of women gave rise to an ambiguously ennobling ideology of "republican motherhood," which articulated women's liberty to integrate political values into their domestic life.~~ ³⁷ Far from providing them with a collective political identity or concrete political power, republican motherhood kept women at the periphery of political life. In the long run, however, it provided a rhetoric that women's movements could invoke to justify agitation for their political rights. While not describing Foster as a radical, Kerber none the less claims she is one of "the central architects of the new female ideology" and credits her with a higher degree of awareness than Wenska does. ³⁸

If Kerber, a historian, sees Foster as a moderate reformer who never totally escaped the prevailing rhetoric of her times, Davidson, a literary critic, stresses the limitations that the sentimental sub-genre imposed on the conceptualization of a different story for Eliza Whar-

summary

ton. In her introduction to the 1986 edition of *The Coquette*, Davidson writes:

the form itself - or the writer - cannot imagine a life beyond her society's limitations without violating the essential social realism on which sentimental fiction . . . is ultimately based.³⁹

The female writer, that is, faces the same problems of unfreedom as her heroine. Foster's attempt to give voice to the powerless is as doomed as Eliza's quest for freedom. Davidson reinterprets the story of Elizabeth Whitman in these terms:

The full tragedy of the novel . . . is that ultimately there was no tragedy at all - only the banal predictability of a fall that was precisely what the most conservative proponents of the status quo labored to prevent. Or perhaps the tragedy is that it can readily be reduced to this formulation and is thus reduced even in the telling.⁴⁰

The ideological contradictions and structural disjunctions of *The Coquette* can also be approached from another angle that incorporates the issues of unintentionality, agency, and cooptation. In both her novel and her manual, Foster seems to grapple with the realities of hegemony and the divided loyalties of women, "the only subordinated group that has belonged to the same families as its rulers."⁴¹ With respect to the ambiguous position of middle-class women who share their men's socio-economic status and have some self-interest in reforming, rather than radically transforming, an ultimately convenient status quo, *The Coquette* becomes a study not only of "silence, subservience, stasis,"⁴² but also of the degree of female complicity in the maintenance of such silence.

From this point of view, Foster herself can be seen as hegemonized. In her novel, she explores the fascinating notion of female liberty only to show what one loses by pursuing it; she uses her perceptive understanding of the tragedy of Elizabeth Whitman's life to sanction the social values that caused it and to write a socially acceptable novel. The narrative of Eliza's death thus becomes the exemplary public execution of a rebel who has been betrayed by her own group. The fictional female community is extremely judgmental of Eliza. Her women friends use the same sexist, unsympathetic vocabulary to rebuke her as her suitors do to condemn her; they treat Eliza like an

summary
plus
analysis
↳

hegemony: leadership or predominant influence exercised by one nation over others, as in a confederation.

irresponsible child and misunderstand or scorn her most open-hearted confessions. They justify such behavior in the name of the necessity to protect "the honor of [the] sex" (p. 63). The suspicion remains, however, that Eliza's friends censure her non-conformist behavior because it obliges them to question their own vulnerable logic of existence as self-sacrifice. Indeed, the plain telling of Eliza's life exposes female powerlessness and unfreedom-rather than female immorality-as the primary reasons why the community needs to protect its members and fails to do so. That the women characters try to neutralize the disturbing pariah by persuading her to get married reveals their keen, albeit unarticulated, awareness that marriage means silence, dependence, and legal inexistence.

The Coquette, then, explores the underside of the protective "network of emotional and moral support" Foster portrayed in *The Boarding School*. The very necessity of such a "sorority of affection" was a response to women's subordination.⁴³ The female world of love and ritual that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg idealized in her 1975 article, was indeed a "milieu in which women could develop a sense of inner security and self-esteem" but not one where "hostility and criticism of other women were discouraged."⁴⁴ Belonging rested on acceptance of, and obedience to, a moral code that for a long time would remain identical to that of the larger patriarchal society, and would be as strictly enforced by women as by men. In this context, strong female friendships among middle-class women emerge as contradictory amalgams, as both fulfilling and potentially revolutionary relationships, as compensatory reactions to subordination, and as instruments for the enforcement of internalized hegemonic patriarchal values. They function to console, rather than liberate; they turn anger into grief, rather than protest.

Many of the same contradictory impulses surface in Foster's ideological stance. *The Coquette* both registers and tries to quell the last spurts of turbulence and discontent among the women of the new Republic. Like other novels of seduction, it responds to the need to qualify uncalled-for dreams of freedom by portraying the exemplary failures that even the best among women inevitably encounter in the world. With the increasing consolidation of the "separate spheres" economy, women's chances to face the dangers of the world outside

their homes seem to diminish drastically, and the novel of seduction loses its socio-ideological function. Not surprisingly, "after approximately 1818, the seduction plot virtually disappears from sentimental fiction."⁴⁵

¹ Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. xi.

² Miller, p. xi.

³ Hannah Webster Foster, *The Coquette* (1797; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 111. All subsequent page references are given in parentheses in the text.

⁴ William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789; rpt. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 17.

⁵ Sexual transgression is indeed an unforgivable sin. In a popular didactic text on the subject of female deportment, Foster writes: "But though I advocate the principles of philanthropy and Christian charity, as extending to some very special cases, I am far from supposing this fault generally capable of the least extenuation." See *The Boarding School* (1798; rpt. Boston: J. P. Peaslee, 1829), pp. 207-08. Such a strict moral code applies to the white women from the middle and upper classes who populate Foster's novel. On the contrary, according to John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman in *Intimate Matters. A History of Sexuality in America*, the moral standards of "working-class, immigrant and black women" are expected to be looser (New York: Harper & Row, 1988, p. 46). In *The Boarding School*, after telling the story of a seduced and abandoned Irish woman, Foster concedes, with a touch of condescension, that "allowance may be made for those, whose ignorance occasions their ruin" (p. 208).

⁶ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 185.

⁷ Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 110.

⁸ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 78.

⁹ Cott, *The Grounding*, p. 187.

¹⁰ Nancy F. Cott, ed., *Root of Bitterness* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), p. 103.

¹¹ Twenty years after *The Coquette*, Jane Austen will explore the connection between money, spinsterhood, and ridicule in *Emma*: "it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! . . . but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else!" See Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 79.