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Author(s): [Marion Rust](http://0-go.galegroup.com.topekalibraries.info/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=LitRC&userGroupName=wuacc_mabee&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=Marion+Rust&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm)
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[(essay date January 2003) *In the following essay, Rust considers Rowson's treatment of the themes of women's sexual responsibility and personal agency within eighteenth-century American society in* Charlotte Temple.]

Charlotte Temple, the eponymous heroine of Susanna Rowson's late eighteenth-century best-selling novel, is fond of "lying softly down," and her timing is terrible. She faints into a chaise in Chichester; she crawls into the bed where her seducer, the dashing Lieutenant Montraville, already sleeps; and she takes an afternoon nap that allows his even less scrupulous "brother officer" in the British army, Belcour, to position himself beside her in time for her beloved to discover them together.1 Given Charlotte's propensity for putting her feet up, it is no wonder that critics have taken the book bearing her name as an exemplar of the novel of seduction, a genre wherein the reader "is asked to deplore the very acts which provide his enjoyment." Some see the novel as evidence of "the appalling popularity of the seduction motif" in early American sentimental fiction, while others take a gentler view of how the genre "blended the histrionic and pedagogic modes." But whether they favor pleasure or instruction as the primary narrative impetus behind Charlotte's loss of virginity out of wedlock, most scholars take the centrality of the sex act--and with it, of Charlotte's presumed lust--for granted. A story of "the fatal consequence of ... illicit sexuality," the novel is said to depict a woman "betrayed by her own naive passions" and thereby to provide an "example of virtue fallen through seduction and sexuality."2
A closer look calls this emphasis on Charlotte's passion, and its ill-effects on her virtue, into question.3 The novel rarely mentions sex: there is no indication of how the "kindness and attention" that Montraville shows a seasick Charlotte during their voyage from Portsmouth, England, to New York leads, five chapters later, to the first allusion to her "visible situation" (pp. 62, 81). And while Charlotte's pregnancy attracts other euphemisms, such as "present condition," it receives little actual discussion beyond Charlotte's brief description of "an innocent witness of my guilt" in a letter to her mother and a posthumous reference to a "poor girl ... big with child" (pp. 99, 85, 129). This reticence cannot be attributed merely to a desire to spare the reader's feelings, since Rowson had no qualms about sensationalizing sexuality in other work. At the same time that the novel was taking off in America, Rowson was in Philadelphia writing stage comedies and patriotic drinking songs in which lust, albeit parodied, racially marked lust, played a central role. Her play ***Slaves in Algiers,*** first performed in 1794 in Philadelphia and Baltimore, makes much of the Algerian Dey's "huge scimitar" and includes a scene in which the cross-dressed heroine makes a "mighty pretty boy" in the eyes of her unknowing lover. The sailors drinking to their lasses in **"America, Commerce and Freedom,"** Rowson's popular song of the same year, show "eager haste" to join the young women running across the beach to meet them over the "full flowing bowl." Even in the novel at hand, desire is given its due as long as it occurs within the sanctified bonds of marriage.4 Mrs. Temple, Charlotte's mother, is the very picture of marital satisfaction, in continual possession of "the delightful sensation that dilated her heart ... and heightened the vermillion on her cheeks" (p. 34) in the presence of her husband. The woman who speaks to Charlotte when no one else will and ministers to her in the hours before her family arrives (in opposition to Charlotte's female undoer, the malicious and cunning boarding school teacher Mademoiselle La Rue, this angel of mercy's name is "Mrs. Beauchamp") is similarly blessed, as "the most delightful sensations pervaded her heart" at the "encomiums bestowed upon her by a beloved husband" (p. 79). Clearly, Rowson is capable of alluding to heteroerotic attraction--it is just not what she is after in Charlotte's case.5
Charlotte is "disappointed" in the only "pleasure" she does expect, that of the liberal provisions promised by Mademoiselle La Rue at the party to which she is lured early on, where she meets Montraville. Here, Charlotte experiences a rare instance of clear determination: she "heartily wished herself at home again in her own chamber" (p. 24). The narrator then acknowledges Charlotte's "gratitude" at Montraville's praises of her and, it must be admitted, a certain amount of satisfaction in his "agreeable person and martial appearance" (pp. 24, 25). But her subsequent "blushes" are from shame, not pleasure, and her strongest sensation almost immediately becomes that of not knowing what to do. After Montraville gives her a letter, she turns to her teacher, asking, "What shall I do with it?" (p. 28). With every moment of indecision, La Rue steps in to direct Charlotte's path--"Read it, to be sure" (p. 31)--and it is thus and not through any overwhelming desire of her own that Charlotte is impregnated. She meets her lover to tell him she will see him no more, is persuaded by fits and starts to approach his carriage, and ends up literally fainting into it, whereby we are to assume that the fatal deed is done.6 The less Charlotte credits her own instincts, the more her behavior is described as a form of collapse, in which her future direction is determined by nothing more deliberate than her center of gravity.
To seduce is to "induce (a woman) to surrender her chastity."7 And yes, the reader anticipates Charlotte's defloration from her "blushes" and "sighs" and witnesses its effects in her subsequent condition. The word "passion" is even used a couple of times. But the sex itself exists only through its after-effects, andCharlotte's behavior in this regard is never explained. Not only, that is, do we fail to witness her "surrender," being left to deduce it from subsequent irrefutable evidence, but we never learn just how she is "induced" to do so. In fact, Charlotte does not so much surrender her chastity--in the sense of giving up under duress something she values--as lose track of it altogether, along with every other aspect of her being. Thus, whereas to be seduced is to put "private and individual needs ahead of others" (by giving in to one's reciprocal lust), Charlotte loses her virginity only when she loses the ability to experience need altogether.8 As the story develops, she becomes increasingly incapable of knowing what it is she feels, and she does what she feels she ought not, it turns out, not through an excessive respect for her desires, but rather through an increasing distrust of them. With "her ideas ... confused," she is soon allowing herself to be "directed" not only by La Rue, but by her "betrayer" Montraville, rather than by her own self-appraisal, according to which she longs to remain loyal to her "forsaken parents" (p. 48). In sum, it is in relaxing her sensitivity to her own impulses, not in giving in to them, that Charlotte loses her virginity and then her life.
Unlike her sister protagonist Eliza Wharton, who begins the novel *The Coquette* in constant appreciation of the effect she has on men, Charlotte rarely refers to her own ability to obtain power, or pleasure, from erotically charged social interactions.9 But she does spend a great deal of time in contemplation of another aspect of her being, namely, its terrifying absence of self-direction. Just before collapsing into her lover's arms, Charlotte asks of her "torn heart": "How shall I act?" without receiving an answer (p. 48). It may be possible to explain her habit of prostrating herself as a manifestation of something other than sexual desire, for while fainting and napping share with more licentious behavior the tendency to take place lying down, they also possess another quality in common that is more important to understanding Charlotte than lust. They both entail the loss of consciousness and with it any capacity for self-direction. Asleep or passed out,Charlotte has virtually no say over how her life unfolds. Awake, she fares almost no better. ***Charlotte Temple,*** despite appearances to the contrary and decades of critical assumption, is *not* really a novel of seduction, in the sense of being a document that provides sexual titillation under cover of pedagogic censure. Instead, far from depicting Charlotte's overweening desire, the novel portrays the fatal consequences of a woman's inability to want anything enough to motivate decisive action. Charlotte falls into compromising positions not so much because she yearns to as because she does not, in the words of her evil counsel La Rue, "know [her] own mind two minutes at a time," and what she loses when she "falls" (p. 44) is not, or at least not importantly, her virginity, but rather her independent agency.
Disorientation, therefore, rather than passion, leads Charlotte from her British boarding school to her lover's arms and from there to a transatlantic crossing, the outskirts of New York, pregnancy, childbirth among strangers, temporary madness, and death in the redeeming presence of her father. This reading helps make sense of the observation that since Anglo-American women, far from being ostracized for having had premarital intercourse, were marrying after conception in record numbers by the late eighteenth century, the novel's extraordinary popular appeal in the new United States cannot be explained by its veracity as historical transcript.10 As recent studies make clear, post-revolutionary Philadelphia, where the novel's first two American editions were published in 1794 shortly after the author's arrival from England the previous year, had a "sexual climate ... remarkable for its lack of restraint. Casual sex, unmarried relationships, and adulterous affairs were commonplace," and although such activity highlighted the predicament of extramarital pregnancy for young women, it also featured a frank acknowledgment in popular print media of the sexuality of women outside the elite. Her contemporary urban readers may have found Charlotte's struggle to maintain her chastity most important not as a reflection on her ability to regulate sexual desire but rather class status. For while women outside the elite were often depicted as explicitly and even joyfully carnal, those who wished to claim the status of a lady needed to subdue lustful urges in order to lay claim to the virtue that was theirs to safeguard in the new republic. Attitudes toward sexuality were thus key indicators of social standing. As the daughter of a rural commoner and a father who had married beneath him, Charlotte bore a class status that was as indeterminate as that of many of her readers, and her control over her virginity would determine, for a fascinated young American urban female reader in a similarly volatile class hierarchy, whether the heroine descended into Philadelphia's "naturally lustful and licentious" lower class or qualified as an "exemplar[] of moral integrity." Furthermore, that she managed to reclaim her virtue, in the guise of her father's forgiveness, even after being seduced, suggested a way out for those who found the requirements of female gentility trying, while the high cost of reclamation (namely, imminent death) reminded them of the risks involved.11
The pressure to "assume responsibility for sexual propriety" in a culture dedicated to sexual transgression provides but one example of the myriad difficulties facing a young woman of the early national period hoping to "possess her soul in serenity," to borrow Judith Sargent Murray's polemic of a decade earlier on "Desultory Thoughts."12 For even as certain valorized traits came to be associated with post-revolutionary womanhood, ranging from a duty-bound notion of rights to a public, but no longer politically useful, conception of virtue, women's behavioral options were increasingly limited. Female rights, while not ignored, were conceived of according to Scottish common sense notions of societal obligation, while men alone, following the alternate trajectory of Lockean natural rights philosophy, possessed liberty, the ability "to choose one's destiny." At the same time, virtue in the previously male-oriented sense of active self-denial for the good of the polis was feminized in early national period precisely because, as a holdover from classical republicanism, it no longer served a nascent liberal political sphere premised on competition.13
The savage irony of a notion of female rights developing after the Revolution only to foster an increased sense of duty to outmoded notions of sexual virtue is made even more severe when one compares it with the ideology of perpetual opportunity facing young men of the period. Jay Fliegelman has written about the late eighteenth-century Anglo-American "adaptation and secularization of the Puritan narrative of the fortunate fall" by which "God had 'allowed' Adam and Eve to fall to permit them eventually to return to an even more intimate relationship with their Father than that they had originally lost." This dawning cultural emphasis on man's capacity to learn, and hence to benefit, from his mistakes is nowhere more evident than in the ultimate report of a prodigal son returned, Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography. By substituting the term "errata" for sin, Franklin turns moral trespasses into printer's errors that can, in the words of the epitaph Franklin wrote for himself, be "Corrected and amended." As Fliegelman suggests, the Autobiography exemplifies the belief that a prodigal son who has perfected himself is more valuable as a testament to self-improvement than would be one who had never failed.14
Franklin hardly mentions women in the Autobiography, and elsewhere he uses them mostly to illustrate lessons for men. This is because pregnancy gives the lie to Franklin's philosophy. Illicit sexual activity may, for a man, be simply another printer's mistake. A man who impregnates a woman bears no tangible mark of the experience, except possibly venereal disease (no slight possibility in postwar Philadelphia). But an impregnated woman bears a mark that can only be erased at great physical and emotional cost, either through abortion or miscarriage. Pregnancy is a uniquely tangible sign of past activity, and it cannot be "corrected" without leaving record of itself. Unsanctioned pregnancy thus threatened the optimism of a newly developing moral and cultural system that emphasized man's capacity for self-determination. Prodigal daughters such as Charlotte were not offered the welcome their brothers received because it was impossible to reconcile their condition with the ideology of self-correctability that was reinforced by welcoming home a prodigal son. As exemplars of national virtue, women, like men, needed to learn, and learning required experimentation, but women's experiments were uniquely terrifying, since they did not possess the corollary privilege of having their mistakes expunged from the record. In such a climate, the secret wish to abdicate all decision-making must have had its appeal, even though, as Charlotte's story shows, it provided no real escape.15
The terrible consequences attendant on Charlotte's tendency to fall rather than step into events--her tragic indecisiveness, which made her a complete product of her surroundings, prey to nothing but circumstance--appealed to a female populace with increasingly limited capacity to experience themselves as independent, coherent beings in a post-revolutionary culture that made them the centerpiece of national identity even as it circumscribed their roles ever more closely. In her failure to become an agent, as opposed to an instrument of her destiny, Charlotte thematized, for the young American women who made her novel a household name, their difficulty in making contemporary theories of self-enfranchisement function in accord with equally powerful ideologies of womanhood that were an at best unwieldy fit with the mechanisms of agency in the new republic. Essentially, then, ***Charlotte Temple*** asks its American readers how women are to derive an integrated model of the self from the tortured cultural lexicon provided them.
In Charlotte, Rowson shows a woman who seems to fail at this task, only to commit, at the last minute of her life, a single decisive act: the handing over of her infant daughter to her father. This highly charged gesture suggests two contrary impulses. On the one hand, Charlotte literally makes her daughter the substance of her first autonomous act, investing her with a symbolic decisiveness unknown to her mother before this moment. On the other, that act is accompanied by a request for "protection" from the family patriarch, as if her daughter were to pick up right where Charlotte left off, leaving her fate to others to determine. "'Protect her,' said she, 'and bless your dying ...'" (p. 127). With this unfinished sentence, the reader is left hanging on the sounds of a wordless infant girl to find out how Charlotte would last have named herself. Will her daughter embody Charlotte's final courage and decisiveness or the meandering not-knowingness that led to her conception? Not until thirty-four years later would readers find out, in a posthumously published and similarly eponymous sequel,***Lucy Temple.*** By that point, the young female readers asking this question of the early editions of ***Charlotte Temple*** would already have had to answer it for themselves, making the latter novel an exercise in nostalgia, whereas the original played a crucial role in the self-formation of a culture.
Whatever her legacy, Charlotte's final "ability to act" does suggest some "new knowledge": as La Rue would say, Charlotte does at last know her own mind, and as a result, she experiences agency, the "fortitude to put it in execution" (p. 47).16 Of what exactly is the awareness that finally lets Charlotte take action composed? What kind of agency was available to a woman who had previously only seen herself as others saw her, or saw for her? And through what catalytic event could she come to experience it? Immediately before awaking to find her father at her side, Charlotte descends into a "phrenzy" that owes much to the evangelical tradition whose prioritization of affect as a means to understanding makes it an important precursor to American sentimentalism. Charlotte is no evangelical. Like Ellen in *The Wide, Wide World,* she loves her mother more than God, and her isolation is resolutely social, as opposed to spiritual, in nature. But she does proceed through something like conversion: the anxiety and alienation of a self distanced from its wished-for object drives her to a state Charles Chauncy would have been glad to label "enthusiasm," and her final return to her senses has all the earmarks of a work of grace, in that it seems impossible to explain without recourse to an intervening agent. Given the well-established historical links between evangelical and sentimentalist discourse and the almost uncanny way Charlotte's experience echoes accounts by female converts such as Sarah Pierpont, it seems useful to draw on one of the finest recent works on female conversion to come to an understanding of Charlotte's transformation. According to Susan Juster, published female evangelical conversion narratives from the late eighteenth-century United States reflected women's tendency to apprehend the world in terms of personal attachments, as opposed to men's relationship to an abstract order. For women, the challenge of conversion was to "disengage themselves from over-dependence on friends and family" enough to experience "individuation." Passing through the isolation of spiritual struggle, female converts emerged newly "empowered by recovering their sense of self through the assertion of independence from others." Certainly, Charlotte's progression from misplaced reliance on others, to being left "a prey to her own melancholy reflexions," to "the total deprivation of her reason," and to her final awakening makes sense in this frame, with the exception that most of the peopleCharlotte deemed friends turned out not to have her best interests at heart (pp. 103, 120). Moreover, in that the novel ends with Charlotte dictating terms to her father, however gently, it supports Juster's idea that evangelical women undergoing religious conversion obtained autonomy by passing through a period of alienation from those through whom they had formerly experienced life's significance. Torn from her country, her family, her schoolmates, her lover, and penultimately, any sense of her own reality (after giving birth, Charlotte "was totally insensible of everything. ... She was not conscious of being a mother, nor took the least notice of her child except to ask whose it was, and why it was not carried to its parents"), Charlotte returns to familiar faces able for the first time to set the terms, albeit not of her own, but of her daughter's, future course (p. 122).17
But does the clarity of purpose this act portends, while obtained through isolation, necessarily derive from the forced rending of attachments that has characterized Charlotte's entire course in the novel? It would seem more likely that the new ability she demonstrates when she hands her daughter to her father is how to acknowledge her need for others. Before this decisive act, Charlotte turned away from love both licit and illicit, neither awaiting her grandfather's imminent arrival at her school nor actively defying her family in a spirited if socially disastrous adventure with her beseeching lieutenant. Far from experiencing herself as more distinct from others than she did before her period of "incoherence," Charlotte's final act may suggest that she has made her previously tenuous grasps at connection with them a fundamental aspect of her autonomy. In that case, she, like Franklin, has learned from her mistakes.18
To suggest that Charlotte would have been better off had she acted on any form of preference, even sexual desire, than she was as a mere reflection of others' wishes for her is to see sexuality not only as a figure for agency but also as a potentially fundamental aspect of it.19 For Charlotte to move from being unable to act on any predilection, including that of a barely registered sexual yearning, to determining her daughter's guardian in the last moments of her life, suggests that the desire she once neither heeded nor subjugated underwent some form of transmutation in order to serve as the basis for a sophisticated moral agency. There is a tension in the novel, then, between understanding female desire as an impediment to autonomy (such that the seduction novel must warn against it in a fledgling democracy) and seeing desire as in some sense primary to autonomy (as I am suggesting Charlotte's final gesture should be read). The intensity of this struggle to understand the relationship between desire and independent action in the late eighteenth century can be seen in the first definition of "will" to appear in the fourth edition of Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary,* published in 1773, which does not appear in the first, published in 1755. Whereas previously Johnson was content to start off by calling will "choice," in the later edition he began by calling will "That power by which we desire, and purpose; velleity." "Velleity," in turn, is precisely what is left of will in the absence of subsequent action or choice; it is the "quality of merely willing, wishing, or desiring, without any effort or advance towards action or realization." Johnson's insertion of a definition of will that isolated desire from its execution demonstrates that he considered desire to be both will's fundamental impulse and insufficient to its exercise.20
This paradox, in turn, points to the difficulty of conceptualizing the self in a liberal polity. Locke defined the experience of selfhood as "perceiving that he does perceive," admitting the potentially infinitely regressive nature of self-awareness, given that each act of self-perception entails a new perceiving entity itself in need of witness for self-understanding to be complete.21 But because women were appointed guardians of features that threatened an ideology of male self-determination, post-revolutionary America had little use for what has been called "the constitutive disjunction of the self" into the perceiving *"I"* and the *"I"* as another object, perceived. Instead, self-possession was all: as the latter-day French *philosophe* Destutt de Tracy would exult, in a translation supervised by Thomas Jefferson for use in the United States, "individuality" is our "inalienable property."22 Learning from one's mistakes was well and good, but the important thing was that one rest assured in the enabling fiction that one did in fact own oneself--that one existed in a fixed and commanding position over one's myriad psychic impulses. Self-formation thus entailed subjugating those aspects of mental experience that did not mesh with a forward-looking, self-promoting, property-obtaining citizenry. Authors such as Rowson and readers such as those who made ***Charlotte Temple*** a hit in its first years of American publication were toying with a notion of the self that found little favor in other cultural channels, one in which human errata, rather than needing to be corrected to fit a pre-existing order, could serve as constituent components of a changed order, much as Charlotte's daughter becomes part of her father's world after Charlotteherself is gone. In this environment, female error suggests not a fault on the part of the agent so much as an insufficiency in her surroundings, and female desire does not portend disaster, but rather independent action, a quality in short supply as young women learned elsewhere how not to want.
If one understands Charlotte's failure to direct her own life in its relation to the behavior of other characters in the novel, one sees these divergent modes of negotiating between impulse and action embodied in distinct characters. Lest there be any doubt that this is a book about the making of choices, its first words have to do with whether a character prefers to walk or drive. The central terms in the novel's discussion of agency are two, and they are used again and again in the text: "inclination" and "resolution." Both are considered modes of willing during the period (Johnson's definitions of the verb "to will" include "to be inclined or resolved to have"). Where they differ, not surprisingly, is in their relationship to desire. To be inclined is to experience "incipient desire" or "disposition of mind," while to be resolved is to possess "fixed determination." The latter category, though it does not deny desire outright, is differentiated from the former by a more explicit focus on subsequent action and, correspondingly, by an emphasis on the regulation of potentially inconsistent impulses to make such action possible as well as beneficial. In short, resolution directs will from "velleity" to "choice," from the passions to the understanding, and from proclivity to explicit action, with the latter's implications for self-mastery. The struggle between the two terms in the novel extends from the protagonist's coming to terms with her own propensities, to the interactions between characters, to the narrative mode itself, in which appeals to the reader's sympathetic identification based on benevolent inclination alternate with calls to disciplined detachment based on steely resolve.
Characters in ***Charlotte Temple*** tend to one of three ways of resolving these two terms, only one of which brings satisfaction. The most successful individuals, who end the book alive, well, and free from lasting inner torment, tend to experience simultaneity of inclination and resolve. Charlotte's father, Mr. Temple, wants Lucy Eldridge for his wife. He discerns that despite his father's objections and the resultant decline he can expect in his annual income, Lucy will bring him earthly felicity otherwise unattainable, and he pursues her without hesitation. Similarly, much later on, Lucy, now Mrs. Temple, wants to give her daughter a birthday party, and she knows to go to some lengths to persuade her reluctant husband to allow her to do so, because the party will make everybody happy (if only everyone, including her daughter, would attend). These are cases where inclinations based on affect (loving the woman, yearning to please the daughter) and resolutions directing understanding to satisfy inclination (defying the father, persuading the husband) go hand-in-hand. There is no real tension, no danger, no potential negative consequence, to giving into impulse. Moreover, on the rare occasions where resolution and inclination are in conflict, these individuals are also capable of self-regulation; when, for instance, Mrs. Temple learns of her daughter's elopement, she insists that "I will wear a smile on my face, though the thorn rankles in my heart," in order to make her husband feel better, and she proceeds immediately to "the execution of so laudable a resolution" (p. 59). Having somehow managed to cultivate a passion for duty, these characters embody what one critic considers the novel's mission to "instruct young ladies ... in being content with one's lot in life," and while they lead peaceful lives, they make for extremely boring novels.23
Never fear, however, because these exemplars are inevitably paired with less benevolent twins who, while similarly inclined to follow their impulses, arrive at no such happy results for themselves or others. Their deleterious effects derive from two sources, rashness or sheer sadism--or both. Like Mr. and Mrs. Temple, Lieutenant Montraville knows what he wants and acts on his wishes, but in his case, the effects on those he meets are disastrous. Thus "generous in his disposition, liberal in his opinions, and good-natured almost to a fault," Montraville is nevertheless "eager and impetuous in the pursuit of a favorite object," and "he staid not to reflect on the consequence which might follow the attainment of his wishes" (p. 36), even though he realizes that Charlotte is too poor to marry. Montraville learns too late the difference between "momentary passion" (p. 88) and lasting love; for him, inclination is all.
Finally, there are persons, such as La Rue and Belcour, who glory in the suffering of others. Ironically, these are beings capable of great resolve, happy to put off the satisfaction of a ruinous impulse as long as the ruination will be all the more dramatic. Thus La Rue can feign indifference as to whether Charlotteaccompanies her on her nocturnal visit to the local regiment, and Belcour can (literally) lie in wait for Montraville's arrival, rather than accost Charlotte on the spot. Both know how to manipulate momentary impulse in the service of a greater end. It is significant, however, that Charlotte is finally undone not by these caricatures but by Montraville himself, who lifts her into the carriage at Chichester and leaves her alone among skeptical strangers outside New York. For pure evil, like pure good, is easy to recognize. It is those with good intentions but no capacity to regulate their outcome--those in whom inclination and resolve are at odds--that the novel trains its readers to detect, both outside and within themselves.
The problem is that even when, like Charlotte, the reader knows not to act on every impulse, disaster cannot necessarily be averted. Smart enough to doubt her inclinations but not strong enough either to defy or to indulge them, Charlotte ends up unable to form a resolution, and it is her fundamental inaction, rather than any particular inclination, that proves her undoing. Ironically, her strongest wish, had she merely obeyed, it, was to rejoin her parents. Had she trusted to impulse, as Mr. and Mrs. Temple did before her, she would have been fine. Thus the novel presents contrary, and gendered, models of deportment. For young women such as Charlotte, it seems to suggest a surer grasp on benevolent impulse, a quickness to action that can prevent the reader from falling into vacuous indecision. For young men such as Montraville the call to action is tempered by another to reflection, because impulse itself in such cases seems less certainly altruistic. In a book addressed to "the young and thoughtless of the fair sex," Charlotte's indecisiveness takes precedence over Rowson's less detailed representation of the male subject.
Charlotte has several methods for forestalling choice. Unable to figure out her own preference, she tends to act according to whether she thinks her actions will make others think well of her. For this reason, La Rue, ever alert to the best ways to manipulate others to her own ends, can mock Charlotte's reticence to meet Montraville by pointing out that the whole school will laugh at her: "You will bear the odium of having formed the resolution of eloping, and every girl of spirit will laugh at your want of fortitude to put it in execution" (p. 47). Second, Charlotte possesses a fatal optimism regarding the possibility of remediable action: a faith most tragically misplaced in her misunderstanding of the nature of chastity, but nicely anticipated in her observation early in the novel that, because the wafer on a letter from Montraville is not dry (she has unknowingly wet it with her tears), she might "read it, and return it afterwards" (p. 30). In the context of her attempt to decide whether to see the lieutenant again, Charlotte's opening a letter from him with the idea that she can make the letter look as though it hasn't been read (since the wafer is wet, she won't have to break a seal) serves as a metonym for the event to which the letter invites her--the loss of her virginity--whose consequence, she also fails to anticipate, is ineradicable. Both these habits of mind get Charlotte into trouble. But by far her greatest failing is her over-great faith in her own "stability," as demonstrated in such passages as "Charlotte had, when she went out to meet Montraville, flattered herself that her resolution was not to be shaken, and that ... she would never repeat the indiscretion" (p. 37) and "in her heart every meeting was resolved to be the last" (p. 42). At one point, she even exults: "How shall I rejoice ... in this triumph of reason over inclination" (p. 47). Charlotte is good at resolving, or at least planning to resolve, but "resolutions will not execute themselves," and she is incapable of granting any single impetus to action enough sway to direct her once and for all.24 Charlotteis not impetuous; she does not give in to inclinations once she senses that they might hurt her, but having come to the point of knowing not to do something, she is nonetheless incapable of doing something else, and this inability to come to any decision haunts her. At moments of great dramatic import, she is inflicted by a desire to be doing the opposite of whatever she is engaged in, such that "even in the moment when ... I fled from you ... even then I loved you most" (pp. 83-84), as she explains to her mother.
In a nation where individuality was seen as the ability to take action consistent with one's intent, for Charlotte not to know what she wants--or not to be able to act accordingly when she does know--is for her not to know who she is. And the novel brings the reader to a similar relationship to its words that Charlotteexperiences in relation to her own fluctuating psychic processes. To the degree that incompatibilities between "inclination" and "resolve" operate in the book as a mode as well as a topic, with appeals to appetite and stern correctives occurring simultaneously on the page, the reader becomes an unwilling participant in the processes he or she might hope to have contemplated from a distance. Characteristic of the late eighteenth-century American sentimental novel as represented by its best-selling volume is not only its much-denigrated appeal to convention, its seemingly manipulative and paradoxically quite cold machinery for evoking emotion in its spectators both inside and outside the text, but another, more genuinely performative kind of energy.25
Many critics deny such a possibility in their assumption that Rowson's narrative persona is seamlessly controlling.26 Such readings mistake a need for control with its achievement. That is, the very ostentation of the Rowsonian narrator's comforting asides might just as easily suggest an anticipation of loss such as that proposed by Julia Stern in her analysis of "the absent mother who occupies and directs the narrative frame."27 This alternative is supported by an oscillation in the novel's narrative mode, which shifts between the self-monitoring impulse characteristic of the sentimental novel's didactic strand and a self-losing, almost ecstatic impulse of submission to forces outside the self.
The narrative is rent by opposing impulses and seems unable to decide on its own course of action. Instead, it swerves without seeming rhyme or reason between appeals to disciplined detachment and appeals to sympathetic identification. At the very moment, for instance, that Belcour is abandoning the dyingCharlotte--a moment readers might be expected to empathize with her sad state--the description takes place at further and further removes:

* His visits became less frequent; he forgot the solemn charge given him by Montraville; he even forgot the money entrusted to his care; and, *the burning blush of indignation and shame tinges my cheek while I write it,* this disgrace to humanity and manhood at length forgot even the injured Charlotte; and, attracted by the blooming health of a farmer's daughter ... left the unhappy girl to sink unnoticed to the grave.[pp. 106-07, emphasis added]

Why does the narrator feel compelled to interject her own cheek at this moment? By doing so, she inserts another link in the perceptual chain separating victim from reader, as we now must witness the narrator watching Belcour watching (or failing to watch) Charlotte. She thereby exacerbates the scene's already voyeuristic aspect, creating a spectacle now "dependent not only on the implied spectatorship of the reader/viewer," nor even "on the express spectatorship of internal witnesses" alone, but on a third, explicitly embodied narrative presence.28 Her comment thus distances us even further from the events at hand and reinforces a sense of the remoteness of the events taking place that is at odds with any sympathetic identification with Charlotte. At the same time, the narrator provides the reader with an extremely uncharacteristic reference to her own body. As such, it mimics Charlotte's blush of shame and encourages the reader to reflect on what she, too, might have to "blush" for, thereby creating a sense of shared vulnerability with the protagonist. The Rowsonian narrator is thus at her most confessional at the very moment she puts us at the furthest remove from the details of her story. She appeals to our sympathetic and our censorious tendencies simultaneously and leaves us, like Charlotte, like the narrator herself, unable to do anything effective. Instead, we dwell in the kind of anxious self-doubt that Charlotte found so painful.29
A similar entanglement occurs in the last paragraph of the novel, when the dead Charlotte's father takes in the woman who could be said to have murdered his daughter:

* Greatly as Mr. Temple had reason to detest Mrs. Crayton, he could not behold her in this distress without some emotions of pity. He gave her shelter that night beneath his hospitable roof, and the next day got her admission into an hospital; where having lingered a few weeks, she died, *a striking example, that vice, however prosperous in the beginning, in the end leads only to misery and shame.* Finis.[p. 132, emphasis added]

Here the reader is treated to one last surrender to benevolent inclination ("he could not") over steely resolve ("had reason to"), only to be asked to relish it from a distance--to look not on Mr. Temple's kindness but on Mrs. Crayton's just desserts. The warmth of forgiveness is elicited, only to be trumped by the far more readily indulged satisfaction at the death of an enemy.
That American readers welcomed the opportunity to make Charlotte's struggle their own is indicated by the memorial they established for her in New York's Trinity Churchyard.30 Susanna Rowson could have asked for no surer testament that her "novel" had been received, at least in the United States, according to the plan laid out for it in her preface, as a template for the "conduct" of its readers, as opposed to a guilty pleasure meant to be forgotten as soon as finished (p. 1). It may have been the first American novel to take on antebellum sentimentalism's signature task: making imaginary engagement (reading) result in specific subsequent action (such as ending slavery). (In the most famous articulation of this ethos, President Lincoln is said to have credited Harriet Beecher Stowe with writing the book--*Uncle Tom's Cabin*--that started the Civil War.) In this sense at least, Rowson helped initiate American sentimentalism's most astounding accomplishment: causing the aesthetic to be re-conceived in implicitly political terms.31 Peering down at a presumably empty grave--or at least, we can assume, one that did not contain any fictional characters--also speaks to the ambivalence that lingers alongside Rowson's call to female action. Through its dissonant appeals to contrary readerly responses, the novel provides an instantiation, as well as an allegory, of the paradoxical nature of female subjectivity during a period in which women were expected to submit to codes limiting both pleasure and agency, and yet to conceive of their position as one they chose and from which they derived satisfaction.