

# The Coquette by Hannah Webster Foster

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## Introduction

The Coquette is a unique novel written by Hannah Webster Foster and published in 1856, about ten years after its author's death. What is unique and distinctive about this particular novel is that it is of an epistolary nature, which means that it has been written in the form of multiple letters. Another distinctive feature of the novel is the fact that it is based on a true story, which seems to have influenced the writer to a great extent. Towards the end of July of 1788, the news of the death of a woman proliferated in Massachusetts. Multiple articles capturing the news of her death appeared in newspapers and magazines shortly after her death. The incident was tragic, but the way people perceived it and reacted to it made Hannah Webster Foster realize something important, which led her to write this novel. She wanted to break the oppressive system under which women were suppressed and wanted to do away with the shackles of patriarchy. She attempted to do that in a very subtle manner by narrating the story of a woman in her novel, which will be discussed in more detail later in the essay.

## Analysis

The reason why her tragic death gained so much popularity was the fact that the deceased woman had lost her life at a local tavern waiting for her husband. This raised a lot of curiosity among the people because, in various articles, the existence of this so-called husband, who had never appeared, was questioned. The incident came to be widely known as the Elizabeth Whitman Mystery (the deceased woman was called Elizabeth Whitman.) From the clothing and belongings of the woman, it became obvious that she had come from an educated and respectable family and yet ended up at a tavern in the middle of the night all by herself. She did not have any of her friends or relatives to explain her situation. It seemed that all of her connections had somehow betrayed her and left her to die alone.

This incident occurred during the 18th century, a time period in which a lot of women were having extramarital sexual relations with other men and were looked down upon. This woman, however, seemed to be of good character but had somehow ended up at a tavern all alone. She could have been mugged or raped by anyone. Thus, this story became famous all around the area because it made women realize that they needed to keep themselves and their morality safe by taking protective measures.

The full title of the novel, *The Coquette, or The History of Eliza Wharton: a Novel Founded on Fact*, is not just factual details and explanations of the incident. Rather, there is much more to the novel than

that. The novel makes the reader realize the urgency of the prevailing danger that existed to women of the time period. The characters involved in the novel are shown to be communicating with one another through letters, and the whole novel can be viewed as a collection of letters being exchanged. This particular style of writing can only be pursued if everything is written from the perspective of the first person. This makes the reader associate with the story and its character to a much greater level, and the reader finds him/herself completely immersed in the novel. Thus, because of the distinct way that this novel is written, it leaves a lasting impact on the reader.

These letters, when read in the proper order, reveal an ongoing story that was very relevant and relatable to the people of the time period, particularly the women. There are seventy-four letters in this book, most of them written by and exchanged between Eliza Wharton, the protagonist, and her friend Lucy Sumner. The novel begins with the part where Eliza Wharton moves in with two of her cousins after hearing the news of her husband-to-be, Mr. Haly's death. She very openly and unabashedly admits that despite the fact that her parents had chosen him as a husband for her and that she cared for him, but as a friend. She admits to her friend Lucy in one of the letters that she was, in fact, not happy with this arrangement since she did not have any love for him.

This was a situation that many women of the 18th century often found themselves in. This is primarily due to the fact that arranged marriages were the dominant form of marriage, and often, the husbands of women were chosen by their family members. In the letters that she writes to Lucy confiding in her, she tries hard not to sound mean or petty by saying that she is actually relieved by Mr Haly's death and, in fact, excited to re-enter society as a single woman. Now, this also happens to be a feeling that takes over a lot of women of not just the 18th century but also the women of today. Women who are vocal about such feelings are considered to be "sluts" and selfish. However, Eliza's letters make the readers realize that feeling this way about any person is very common, and there is no harm in that. Furthermore, feeling a certain way about a person does not define you or your personality. Thus, this gives women dealing with similar problems that make them feel guilty about themselves some form of hope as well as satisfaction.

During this time, since Eliza is living with her cousins, who happen to be the Richmond, she realizes that two men are showing interest in her and seem to admire her a lot. Both these men write letters to their own friends describing the various characteristics of Eliza that they like, one of which happens to be intellect and intelligence. Throughout Eliza's letters, we can also tell that Eliza is the kind of woman who does not want to remain engaged in domestic chores all her life, serving her husband and her family. She wants to be something more than that and clearly has the capacity to do so. This is precisely what both the men like about her because it makes her unique from all the other women of her time.

These ideas highlight the link between Eliza's character and the feminist ideas of today. Women of the 21st century have gotten together and become unified to prove and promote the idea that they are just as smart, intelligent, and capable as men and can, therefore, do anything that men can. Since that seems to be the case, they do not want to be associated with the domestic realm or remain

confined within their households. Such ideas have also been upheld by a lot of men who admire strong women and want to work alongside them, not above them. This reflects how men's preference when it comes to women has changed over time, but such feminist ideas were prevalent during the 18th century as well. Though most men looked down upon women who had such perceptions about themselves, there were many men who supported them and engendered their feminist ideologies as well.

Throughout the novel, Hannah Webster Foster attempts to describe multiple scenarios that were commonplace in the time and context in which the novel was situated. These instances highlighted the subordinate and inferior position of women in society with respect to men. Through various examples, Foster also sheds light on the different kinds of expectations that society at large had for women. The women were expected to act a certain way, behave a certain way, and be engaged in certain particularly female-oriented activities. It can be argued that by writing this particular novel, the writer attempted to make the readers conscious of the kind of world that they were living in and the various forms of inequalities that characterized it. Her particular focus was, of course, on the position of women in the American society of the 18th century, and through the protagonist of her novel, people started viewing the women's position within the society from the perspective of the women themselves. They began to put themselves into their shoes and started imagining what it felt like to be confined to the home and denied a lot of opportunities and agency. This made the readers critical of the gender dichotomy that was prevalent in their society and made them question the dominant social norms.

Through Eliza's character, the writer tries to make a point that the desires and will of a person can oftentimes be inclined towards something they know is out of their reach (Engen, 2016). In the case of Eliza, she wanted to be free and actively engaged in society the way men were. She wanted to be independent and be able to make her own choices about her life and herself. Though in today's day and age, this does not seem something unreasonable, in 18th century America, it was considered to be out of the question for a woman to even have such desires. Women were considered to be sensitive, weak, passive, and docile beings who more or less belonged within the households. They were considered to be unintelligent, which is why their integration and participation within larger societal institutions such as politics and the state were considered unnecessary. They were believed to be unable to understand the complexities of the functioning of society because they were not as capable and as intelligent as the men were. Thus, this novel performed the important function of criticizing the stereotypes associated with women and their subordinate positions in society.

One of the ways in which this has been done is through two important characters, namely Reverend J. Boyer and Major Peter Sanford. Boyer happens to be a very rich, well-respected man, whereas Stanford is someone known for luring women into his charm and not being serious with them. Both of these men develop feelings for Eliza. Boyer proposes to her, but Stanford simply keeps flirting with her. At this point, Eliza makes the huge decision to marry Boyer on her own, against the wishes and advice of her family. However, she specifies to Boyer that she will only marry him when she feels like she is ready (Timbancaya, 2013). At the same time, she cannot help being attracted to Stanford,

which is why her family really looks down upon her and ends up leaving her. On the other hand, Stanford ends up leaving the city, having absolutely no consideration for Eliza. At this point, Aliza is left secluded and isolated, and she falls into a terrible state of depression, especially when she finds out that Stanford has now married someone else.

Stanford, however, makes sure that he is around Eliza all the time to make her jealous and realize that she made a huge mistake. This is a characteristic of not just the men of 18th century America but is something that is very common even today. Such promiscuous men are never looked down upon in our society; in fact, they are appreciated in certain cases. Thus, in this novel, the author has attempted to make the reader open their eyes toward these aspects of society. The reader is bound to ask: Why is Eliza judged and frowned upon by society while her only fault was being unsure about which one of the two men she wanted to marry? Why doesn't society condemn Mr Stanford for flirting around with Eliza when he had no intention to marry her? Why does everybody appreciate men like Mr Boyer while knowing that he is engaged to someone else and yet is trying to deliberately make Eliza jealous? These differences in the way society reacts toward men and women for performing similar actions are directly related to our ideas about men and women. They get translated into social norms, and it is these social norms that the writer is particularly against.

## Conclusion

Written in the 18th century, *The Coquette* was a very bold novel, highlighting an issue that nobody else had the guts to highlight. Yet, Foster was brave enough to write about it to take a stand for the women in society in an attempt to make space for them and let society let them breathe for once. She does that in a very subtle and seamless manner through various characters in the book and succeeds in making the reader (especially the male ones) analyze everything from the female perspective for once and look at things differently. They try to understand her position and what she must be going through, which makes them understand the rationality behind their ideas and actions.

## Works Cited

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