

An Early American Novel *The Coquette* and its Ideological Implication

“I do not hesitate to avowe that, although the women of the United States are confined within a narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked, now that I am drawing to the close to this work, in which I have spoken of so many important things done by the Americans, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply – to the superiority of their women”
(Tocqueville 1945 :214).

Prior to the American Revolution, women had been considered emotional human beings, weak creatures, and only responsible for domestic concerns. Afterwards, during the American Revolution the role of women as female patriots and warriors became visible which determined the country’s future. In spite of this fact, women were regared as still not official members of the public domain. *The Declaration of Independence* and the end of the war with Britain in 1783 were followed by the long process of nation-building. Women rioters, boycotters, and military supporters, who mobilized the men, had developed an awareness of their possibilities and power, and started to struggle for gaining more rights. In this repsect, we can remember Abigail Adams’s famous letter dated 1776 to her husband John Adams, where she asks him to “remember women” while passing laws (Adams 1963:369-71). The letter makes evident that men had unlimited power over women during the revolutionary decades.

Accordingly, the claim for equal rights was put in the agenda. Adams's letter can be considered the first feminist manifesto of the United States. Soon afterwards, Judith Sargent Murray, an American poet and essayist, in 1790 published her essay "On the Equality of the Sexes". The essay was about unhappy marriages, conjugal love, and the education of the female sex. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft, a British writer and supporter of women's rights, wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Wollstonecraft advocated a woman's moral commitment to the family, equal property, civil rights, and her participation in social and economic activities.

Abigail Adams, Judith Sargent Murray and Mary Wollstonecraft's approaches echo the worldview that at the end of the eighteenth century was being established in the Anglo-American region. The historical development of the century was the following: the domestic realm became a very important sphere, the place where a future virtuous citizen would be molded through education. Households run by women became a source of virtue, benevolence, and ultimately patriotism. This fact reinforced the importance of female education. As the domestic realm became important in the republic, female members of society acquired a basic civic responsibility: to shape the morals of their children and husbands. The household was the source of virtue and stability in government. As a result, a new model of the ideal woman, a "republican woman", emerged who was virtuous, intelligent, literate, self-confident, and independent. The new socio-economic approach, industrialization and capitalism also contributed to the formation of this new female ideology. The new nation required a new concept of womanhood, described best as "republican womanhood." The republican woman unified patriotism, values of domesticity, and social responsibilities. This new model is an example to other women to rediscover and reassess their own strength and power. The republican woman was an ideal of womanhood of fact and new American fiction.

In the late-eighteenth century, women writers applied to professional authorship and started to write sentimental fiction about women. The novels written by women are historical sources providing valuable information about the life of late-eighteenth century women in the United States. These novels about seduced women explicitly showed women's inferior position in public life. They had no legal rights of their own, less opportunities to receive a formal education, and lack of freedom to pursue their own interests. Lastly, they were subject to the sexual double standard that condemned women involved in illicit sexual intercourse. Strict civil moral condemned women if involved in sexual

relationship out of wedlock and isolated seduced women. These novels were a guide and moral tract after which women could fashion themselves in the new post-Revolutionary society. In addition to didactic fiction, warning women about civic morality and evoking sympathy for weak women, female writers took on other responsibilities: to assess the reality in much wider social context. Despite women's significance substantially increased after the revolution, female authors demanded more from the new republic. By portraying the truth and realism of the time, women authors covertly questioned the efficiency and fairness of the prevailing social and political norms and values. This fact strengthens the idea that sentimental novels of seduction are the forerunner of a new feminist ideology.

The purpose of the paper is to show the real-life processes going on in the United States achieved by means of investigating fiction and historical sources. For this, I refer to an American novel, not much known to contemporary readers, Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (published in 1797). Foster published her novel anonymously under the penname; it did not appear under the author's real name until her death. The novel was inspired by the biography and tragedy of Elizabeth Whitman who lived in New England and died nine years before the novel's publication. Eliza Wharton is Elizabeth Whitman's fictional counterpart. The attitude towards this novel as well as other sentimental novels of the time has not been uniform. Some critics maintain that novels of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries written by women lack seriousness, Leslie Fiedler describes these novels as "flagrantly bad best-sellers" (Fiedler 1960:93). However, some literary historians assert that the novels were very valuable for the citizens of the United States because they mirrored women's ideals in general and ideology about women. The writers, Susanna Rowson, Hannah Webster, Maria Cummins, Sarah Wentworth Morton, etc., were excluded from the canon of American literature. Aesthetically unsophisticated domestic novels and sentimental "romances" were not included in many anthologies. In addition, many modern scholars assert that the novels lack verisimilitude having no distinguished prose style. Overall, they are simplistic and deficient, whereas the characters are stereotypical. Nonetheless, from the beginning of the 21st century much emphasis has been put on the examination of these novels that are not only valuable historical sources providing important historical content and creating a general idea of the time when the novels were written, but also their literary merits are significantly high (Elliot 2002:162). Jane Tompkins maintains, however, that these novelists can be admired because they

transformed “the raw material of reality into art...and they help the modern readers to “recapture the world view they [the novels] sprang from and which they helped to shape”; they convey the values and spirit of their times (Tompkins 1985:12-13). The present paper is not to prove the high aesthetic literary quality of this fiction, but to show the surroundings and environment in which *The Coquette* was written: women’s rights, intelligence, and society’s attitude and readiness to improve women’s rights.

The educated female authors, writers and novelists fighting for women’s rights, Susanna Rowson, Judith Sargent Murray, Hannah Webster Foster, Mercy Otis Warren and many other, with their novels, personal diaries, articles and even schools established for female education reevaluated the old ideology about women. Warren emphasized good education for women that would prepare them for the future, a rational life and mutual love in matrimony. Warren as well as Murray believed in the equality of mental accomplishments of women and men, and that women could reach intellectual heights of men. Through their depictions of women’s lives, these writers generalized the life of an American woman and revealed to their readers the “right way” of living.

I expose the idea of “republican womanhood” in *The Coquette*. By focusing on two characters – Eliza Wharton and Mrs. Richman, I study them according to the idea of republican womanhood. Mrs. Richman is a model republican woman, an exemplar of republican virtue, rectitude and morality, whereas Eliza Wharton is a controversial and complex character full of paradoxes and oppositions. The question is the following: is Eliza a republican woman or not? Does her tragedy come from her personality or is she a victim of circumstances or a society not ready to receive a woman with an extremely independent spirit? I assert that Eliza is not simply a seduced woman, but a republican woman whom the readers of the novel greatly admire; she is more than a banal and fallen woman; she is a new model of a woman in the reality of the United States honored by Judith Sargent Murray, a writer and a theorist of the eighteenth century. Eliza breaks all the rules and codes of female life and through that way becomes “a cult heroine (Davidson 1986:149).

In order to understand the meaning of the basic concepts of that time, it is worth tracing the roots of certain terms to see how they influenced female ideology. In this case, I explore two concepts: republicanism and virtue. As I have already mentioned above, republican ideology functioned at the core of the citizen’s actions, while virtuous and moral persons became a cornerstone of the Republican state. American republicanism was inspired by Aristotelian, Machiavellian and Lockean thoughts. Classical republicanism paid attention to

civic virtue (Zagarri 1992:197, 203), and the personal role was emphasized. It was a civic and patriotic ideal. American republicanism added to them a liberal view of private property, economic freedom, and the equality of opportunities (Appleby 1984:18-21). Republicanism did not grant women an active political role in the republic. According to the idea of republicanism, the female sex could not guarantee the country's security. However, they did have the public obligation of raising virtuous citizens for the republic that marked a shift from traditional private duty to public duty. Upbringing and education in the household and mother's care were important for cultivating a private virtue, as family was the society in miniature, the microcosm of the wider world, where woman played a public benefactor's role, through refining male manners and serving to the public good. As for the word 'virtue', it derived from Latin word *vir* denoting man. The term "virtue" also refers to male public spirit and has a political meaning that is tightly connected with the republican ideology. It meant "the willingness of citizens to engage actively in civic life and to sacrifice individual interests for the common good" (Bloch 1987:38). According to this view, virtue is understood as personal – female and political – male. The word "virtue" in relation to women with its sexual meaning dates back to ancient times. Sexual prudence and chastity was associated with purity and piety for Christianity. After the Reformation period in America at the end of the eighteenth century, Protestantism emphasized pure and selfless women. Public virtue was possible for women but only as exceptions, for instance, women who were capable of courageous behaviour and were physically strong. Therefore, only in the case of crossing the boundary of femininity could women acquire public virtue. In literary sentimentalism, female virtue meant chastity. In sentimental novels, women had to be sexually pure and innocent. Women's behavior is understood as a civic responsibility.

Kerber defines a republican woman as the following: "The model republican woman was to be self-reliant (within limits), literate, untempted by the frivolities of fashion. She had a responsibility of the political scene, though was not active in it...her life was dedicated to the service of civic virtue: she educated her sons for it, she condemned and corrected her husband's lapses from it" (Kerber 1986:227–228). Women could serve the state by their roles as mothers and wives, by defining and shaping men's values, manners, morals, ideas, and characters in the new republic. Ruth Bloch, in *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture*, argues that "motherhood came to be viewed as a powerful vehicle through which women wielded broad social influence" (Bloch 2003:72).

Judith Sargent Murray formulated more radical views about women's independence and self-esteem. Her standpoint on women's independence went even further than the actual position of women in the republic. Murray's critical essays, "On the Equality of the Sexes," "Desultory Thoughts upon the Utility of Encouraging a Degree of Self-Complacency, Especially in Female Bosoms," and the book *The Gleaner* helped inaugurate modern feminism by advocating a sense of gender equality and female self-confidence. She addressed women as "rational beings" able to free themselves from the "marriage market" and matrimonial obligations. Women have all the intellectual powers that men possess, women are equally advanced intellectually and mentally as men, their capabilities "by nature equal" to those of men (Murray 2003:784-786). In Murray's view, only an educated woman can be responsible for herself, learn to "reverence herself", and be prepared economically and intellectually for future life (Murray 1995:47). Murray saw women who lack self-respect and self-determination as a failure to direct their lives reasonably. She pointed out that "a young lady, growing up with the idea, that she possessed few, or no personal attractions, and that her mental abilities were of an inferior kind" would find self-realization only in matrimony and "throw herself away upon the first who approaches her with tenders of love" (Murray 1995:48). For Murray, prerequisites of marriage must be mutual love and understanding. Only a self-reliant and intelligent woman can build a mutual relationship with a man; only a marriage based on love can be justified. Otherwise, women should stay alone. In addition, women have to learn how to live a single life, and only in the case of mutual and warm attachment can marital ties be made. Murray argued that feminist reform must begin in the family itself. Women's domestic equality would then pave the way for much larger forms of equality. In her view, America needed virtuous and wise women, who would take on a larger role in the home and in society. Murray's implicit assumptions are that "virtuous women will be rewarded; the governing term *virtue* has simply been redefined and the scope of the expected reward expanded to include not just a good marriage but greater legal and political power, too" (Davidson, 1986: 130).

I think that the idea of republican womanhood in *The Coquette* is more than an educated, chaste, and pure woman and it conveys rather vast concept. In the novel, the examples of republican womanhood are Mrs. Richman and Eliza Wharton. They are educated and virtuous women. Mrs. Richman successfully fulfills her basic functions and duties as a wife by managing domestic life and creating a supportive environment for her husband. Mrs. Richman, at the same time, "observes a political world with a rational eye" (Kerber, 1986:130)

without losing her female identity (Norton 1980:80). In addition, Mrs. Richman and her friends are not only confined to private domestic concerns, but also they create a society, a public world of debates where their ideas, feelings, and opinions are exchanged. The women freely express their political attitudes and interest in the public sphere. Mrs. Richman affirms the women's political identity, their patriotism, and concern for the country's prosperity and well-being. As she remarks, women, who are not allowed to take part in the political decision-making process, should not be only "interested" in political events, but also actively participate in them. Mrs. Richman goes even further than the doctrine of republican womanhood by urging active participation in political events and decision-making processes. In addition, Mrs. Richman describes women's function and contribution to the republic and implies the equality of the women's role to that of the men. Mrs. Richman's patriotic appeal echoes the famous passage from Abigail Adams' letter to her husband John Adams:

“...remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”

(Adams 1963:369)

From the letter, we can affirm that the female sex also has a claim to the public sphere and that their interest in polity and nation-building is as significant as men's. In this case, we can assume that Mrs. Richman, as well as Abigail Adams, exemplifies patriotic republican women and forgoes the feministic call for women's rights.

Since the model republican woman was a mother, Mrs. Richman, while assuring Eliza of the necessity of matrimony, explicitly points to the political function of marriage and childrearing as basic obligations of a woman to the republic. Mrs. Richman, in adhering to all these principles and expressing concern for her country, attains the highest virtues of the republican womanhood. That is why she is an exemplary fictional heroine and a republican mother for the writer.

Thus, we can assume that in the late-eighteenth century reciprocity and mutuality in matrimony becomes important. As Mary Beth Norton in *Liberty's*

Daughters: Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800 points out, the standard approach to matrimony is reconfigured, reassessing and questioning the importance of marriage for a woman's happiness (Norton 1980:235). She describes "egalitarian marital relationship" as one in which the parents lose influence over marriage and women gain the right to choose their future spouses. For Eliza, egalitarian marriage is based on mutual love, sobriety, fidelity, and admiration. Her drive for love and mutual affection coincides with Murray's appeal to women: "Females would become discreet, their judgments would be invigorated, and their partners for life being circumspectly chosen" (Murray 2003:786).

Foster's character Eliza is self-reliant and, after her father and fiancé's deaths, wants to live independently without restrictions. She wants to experience all the pleasures and use all the opportunities that life can offer. "You are indeed very tenacious of your freedom" (Foster 1986:30), a friend scolds Eliza. Eliza Wharton has no desire to give herself over into other man's hands, and she wishes "no other connection than that of friendship" (Foster 1986:26). "I am under no special obligation to him and I do not intend to form any immediate connection... I wish to enjoy my freedom" (Foster 1986:50). As Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in his book *Democracy in America*, girls before marriage are very independent and "surrender early or completely to their own guidance... [woman] is full of reliance on her own strength... an American woman is always mistress of herself" (Tocqueville 1957:198-200). However, according to the laws of coverture, a woman after marriage became dependent upon her husband (Davidson, 1986:111). Apparently, Eliza is aware of the rights of women after marriage and that is why she is striving to follow her own life independently avoiding every possible proposal for marriage. Alexis de Tocqueville and later Mary Beth Norton suggested that American women had less tasks and enjoyed more independence from their parents during their premarital years than in their matrimony. Eliza is aware that her amusements as a girl cannot become "the recreations of the wife and the sources of a married woman's happiness are in the home of her husband" (Tocqueville 1957:202).

On the one hand, Eliza is fascinated by the Richmans' conjugal relationship. She considers it the "most ardent affection" and dreams about similar marital life exclaiming:

"My eyes followed them through the window. 'Happy pair!' said I. Should it ever be my fate to wear the hymenial chain, may I be

thus united! The purest and most ardent affection, the greatest consonance virtue and wishes distinguish this lovely couple.”

(Foster 1986:14)

It is evident that the Richmans' partnership is Eliza's ideal and model of happy marriage. Nevertheless, on the other hand, matrimonial ties, domesticity, and “the women's sphere” seem “limited” and restrictive. Her letter to her friend questions the significance of domestic life and concerns for a husband:

“Marriage is the tomb of friendship. It appears to me a very selfish state. Why do people, in general, as soon as they are married, center all their cares, their concerns, and pleasures in their own families? Former acquaintances are neglected or forgotten. The tenderest ties between friends are weakened, or dissolved; and benevolence itself moves in a very limited sphere.”

(Foster 1986:24)

If we compare the two passages cited above, we can find that Eliza is a controversial figure. She admires the marriage of the couple and at the same time retains her freedom never associating herself with a married woman even though she seems enchanted by Sanford. From the very beginning, we observe that Eliza is in search of happiness and contentment; she looks for a way to pursue in the future. With respect to marriage, Eliza provides an example of Murray's model of egalitarian/equalitarian matrimony based on mutual love and affection only. Eliza does not want to marry Boyer, a clergyman, because she believes that she is not “calculated for that sphere”; she cannot submit to restraints and cares imposed by Boyer. In this respect, Foster truly sympathizes with her character. The author justifies Eliza's behavior by revealing Boyer and his friend's correspondence, where we can assume, what kind of life Eliza is destined for, if she marries Boyer. With her refusal to Boyer's proposal, Eliza opposes the “unequal prerogatives” of men and women in matrimony, men being able to choose their future wives or partners, whereas women are restricted. Eliza confesses that she will only marry if both her heart and mind are equally engaged. To Eliza, retirement, rural quiet life, and friendship are not sufficient to agree to matrimonial ties with an eloquent but self-important man. She prefers spinsterhood to a loveless marriage. Eliza says:

“What a pity... that the graces and virtues are not oftner united! They must, however, meet in the man of my choice, and till I find such a one, I shall continue to subscribe my name Eliza Wharton... Why were not the virtues of the one, and the graces and affluence of the other combine? I should then have been happy indeed.”

(Foster 1986:22, 53)

As Cathy Davidson comments, Eliza’s tragedy is that she meets no man who might be equivalent to General Richman; she is only offered unsatisfactory alternatives with whom she cannot imagine a future life. Eliza after all keeps her promise: she leaves her mother’s house and departs from her life as Eliza Wharton (Davidson, 1986). On the one hand, Eliza’s action is characteristic of an emancipated woman; in spite of friends’ care, love and tolerance even after her fall and seduction, Eliza follows her free will and decides to escape from the society, secluding herself in loneliness and abandonment. On the other hand, with her fall and coquettish behavior, Eliza slightly deviates from Murray’s model woman: Eliza is not able to realize herself; she does not find herself looking for it “in the first class of polished society” and in “fashionable amusements”; her self-reliance and self-determination are lost after the encounter with Major Sanford (Foster, 1986:27).

Eliza Wharton is an independent character with her “zeal of liberty;” she is an example of an archetypal quest hero who searches for her own place in society. She is Murray’s vision of Eve from “The Equality of the Sexes,” the image of which is nurtured by John Milton’s Eve in *Paradise Lost*, looking for knowledge, truth and self-distinction, motivated by a strong “desire of adorning her mind” (Murray 2003:789). Overall, the sphere where Eliza can implement desires is not found. Eliza fails on the way of self-realization and self-expression; Eliza is not able to realize her womanly existence and personal responsibility. As a result, her self-reliance and self-control are easily broken, and she is finally destroyed. “Oh, my friend, I am undone,” writes Eliza in despair (Foster 1986:105). Boyer refuses her and Sanford marries another woman. Public entertainment, visiting friends, and meeting people give her no pleasure anymore. “I am a poor solitary being” (Murray 1986:15), confesses Eliza at the beginning of the novel, and at the end, she seems to be more detached and isolated. Her frustration and disappointment in life are reflected in her “mental instability” and “physical infirmity” following her fall. Cathy Davidson, in *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*,

associates Eliza's sexual act with a "suicide and a decline into a figurative death that will soon slide into the real thing" (Davidson 1986:147). Eliza Wharton, at the age of thirty-seven, is quite aware of what she is doing in comparison with other heroines of the seduction novels who are confused. Eliza is aware of her circumstances, but lets Sanford deceive her and leaves the right path. The difference between Eliza and the typical heroine of the seduction novel, who truly loves her seducer, is that Eliza is only charmed by the aristocrat, yields to his blandishments and chooses the way of sin. Eliza has choice to be or not to be involved in a carnal relationship with Sanford, while she never mentions marriage or speaks of a future conjugal life with Sanford. Through her behavior, Eliza unconsciously breaks the dominated "double standard of sexual morality" of the late-eighteenth century which emphasized female chastity as an integral virtue. As Nancy F. Cott in "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850" puts it, female chastity was also considered "the archetype for human morality" (Cott 1978:223). This standard elevates male power; it allows men to seduce women without losing public esteem, while condemns women if involved in sexual relationship out of wedlock. Eliza breaks the dominated norms and codes of morality with her illicit sexual intercourse with Sanford. By leaving "the path of rectitude and virtue," she unintentionally rejects the idea of "passionlessness" and "the asexual view of woman" arising from female chastity that "erected a barrier between the sexes and greatly inhibited the indulgence of sexual feelings" (Bloch 1978:247). Thus, we can observe the rudiments of the emancipation of women through sexual freedom and the foundations for feminism (with modern understanding).

Despite her drive for independence, Eliza is not fully free: she is economically dependent on her mother and has no control over her own life; she is dependent on the society and the rules she fails to follow. Julia Stern describes *The Coquette* as a novel telling "the story of an outspoken republican woman who ultimately fails to be heard" (Stern 1997:130). Eliza Wharton's dilemma comes from her personality itself. In spite of her ultimate independence and self-reliance, she is not a firm and strong character with inflexible willpower and her tragic death is eventually caused by a clash between her unsteady spirit and her society's norms of female chastity and matrimonial obligations. Eliza's love affair breaks a sexual double standard, promoting gender equality in the matrimonial bond (Stern 1997:712). This act reminds us of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist appeal. As is known, Wollstonecraft did not reject marriage as an institution; on the contrary, marriage was a person's highest position. However, she emphasized partners'

equality in the social system where both sexes would have social and political privileges, personal freedom and equal legal right for sexual expression; women would retain dignity and independence in matrimony. If both sexes could have equal education, civic and political rights, women would reveal the same intellectual, moral and political mastery.

According to Hannah Webster Foster, the concept of republican womanhood is rather vast and is not confined to only model republican wives or mothers. With Mrs. Richman's character, Foster depicts the highest virtues of a married republican woman finding her own feminine identity through matrimonial bonds and domestic life. Mrs. Richman is a model republican wife and mother, a virtuous citizen of the republic. With her perfect and subtle behavior, Mrs. Richman is an idealized form of the republican woman. Eliza Wharton is Mrs. Richman's complete opposite. She can be viewed as a woman who is still on a quest for self-determination trying to find herself in spheres outside marital life. Notwithstanding Eliza's sin and fall, she acquires a level of republican womanhood that Judith Sargent Murray would approve of. Republican womanhood is more than a good wife and mother; it denotes independence and self-reliance, the search for truth in one's existence, and a place where one belongs. She is a new woman in eighteenth century American life and fiction. The enormous popularity and success of the novel can be explained by the fact that women found their covert desires in Eliza's behavior; Foster's fictional heroine validated the breaking of norms and rules of womanly existence that women could not experience in reality during the eighteenth century.

The history of the American novel starts in the eighteenth century just after the American Revolution. Already the revolutionary period prepared grounds for the female ideology that characterizes the eighteenth-century American literary tradition and its symbolism. Developments in economy, culture, and capitalism, followed by social transformation and Protestantism, influenced the attitudes towards women that profoundly determined the American female ideology at large. Women entered the public sphere and started to write about women. They received public acclaim and enormous success on the literary market. Women pursued the profession that was a sphere dominated by men. The end of the eighteenth century is marked by the decline in the rigid boundaries of female and male spheres. Many male professions were feminized, for instance, professional authorship that helped to legitimate female activities in public life.

Some critics maintain that the sentimental novels of seduction written by women, their portrayal of women victims of social standards, do not justify their behavior but encourage them to be strong and to resist the vagaries of men. Women's behavior is understood as a civic responsibility; a virtuous citizen is an example of society at large, can pass just laws, and defend his or her country. The scholars argue that the seduction plot is a metaphor of a much wider problem: the future of the new republic can be threatened by sinful citizens. Yet in the seduction novels, we have exemplary republican mothers who are aware of their civic responsibilities and reshape public life from within their households. With respect to domestic fiction, they suggest to the readers the ideals of benevolent, brave and powerful women, self-reliant, and self-determined females who are trying to function not only in the domestic arena but also to pursue their vocational interests and be independent. In their fiction, women assumed responsibility for the fortunes of the new republic, portraying female characters and instructing the readers in a righteous life. This fact validated women's function as benefactors and suppliers of public virtue. On the one hand, by depicting the reality of American middle-class society and the hopeless situation of a fallen woman and by giving exemplary lives of women, female writers inspired the audience to improve themselves, be virtuous, benevolent, and serve as models for the rest of the world. On the other hand, from the 1790s the same female authors thought their literature contributed to the enlargement of the scope of their sphere by advocating education, development and femal independence. By depicting unequal civic and social rights and strict standards of society, the authors of the novels tried to warn the readers about the expected disaster. Moreover, by portraying a fallen woman they voluntarily were shaping the traits of an emancipated woman that contradicted the existing ideology and proposed new values. Accordingly, we can assume that by advocating this kind of worldview these texts suggest their dual interpretation paving the way for a new understanding of *The Coquette* as well.

In addition to its historical and ideological implications, *The Coquette* has a literary value. In order to avoid sensationalism the writer employs an epistolary genre. The genre fits well in the idea of the novel itself, not showing Eliza's actual transgression but instead revealing her thoughts and views that follow her every step up to her fall. Undoubtedly, *The Coquette* is not a typical sentimental novel; it contains certain elements that go beyond the formula of the sentimental tradition. The plot is sentimental, but the characters, especially the main character, displays different traits. The protagonist is not foolish and weak

but extremely independent, self-reliant, and intelligent. Cathy Davidson argues that *The Coquette* is one of those novels which can be considered as the dawning of “America’s first full-fledged feminist movement” and the fight for female independence (Davidson 1986:135).

The term feminism did not exist until the twentieth century. But the idea of feminism dates back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Judith Sargent Murray, Mercy Otis Warren, Susanna Rowson, Margaret Fuller, and other theorists and writers spoke about women’s education, equal rights with men, equal citizenship, equal intellectual and vocational capabilities, economic independence, political and legal rights. The feminist writers tried to define female identity and alter the attitudes of society towards female sex in general and offer a completely different perception of womanhood. As Nancy Cott argues, their underlying principle was “that women had the same human intellectual and spiritual endowment as men, and therefore deserved the same opportunities and rights to advance and develop themselves” (Cott 1987:19).

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