

BAD REPUTATION: HOW SUSANNA ROWSON UPLIFTED YOUNG WOMEN USING  
SENTIMENTAL NOVEL *CHARLOTTE TEMPLE*

Senior Honors Thesis  
Submitted in partial fulfillment  
Of requirements to graduate from  
The Norbert O. Schedler Honors College  
And  
The College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

by

Darby Tanner

University of Central Arkansas  
Conway, Arkansas 72035  
03 December 2021

Thesis Committee:

Advisor:

\_\_\_\_\_

Lori Leavell, Ph.D.

Graduate Coordinator and Associate Professor of English

Reader:

\_\_\_\_\_

Glenn Jellenik, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of English

Director:

\_\_\_\_\_

Patricia Smith, Ed.D.

Associate Professor and Dean of the Schedler Honors College

Director:

\_\_\_\_\_

Ty Hawkins, Ph.D.

Chair of the English Department, Associate Professor of English

## INTRODUCTION

The sentimental novel has maintained consistent readership since the eighteenth century, yet the critical history of the genre in America paints a sordid picture. Referred to as everything from a “mass of trash” (Zinn 117) to “vulgar” and “effeminate” (Fordyce 265), novels more generally in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not have the best reputation. Some novels at this time were associated with a genre known as “sentimental literature,” which showcases didacticism, emotion, and above all the value of sympathetic connection. For the period’s critics of the sentimental novel, however, the genre displays excessive emoting, encourages bad morals, and distracts from more wholesome forms of reading. When it came to young readers, the stakes were especially high. Yet Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (first published in England in 1791, then in America three years later) was America’s first best-selling novel and remained the country’s top seller until Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852 (Davidson “Introduction” xxxi). How is it that sentimental novels like Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791) could be so widely read and yet historically undervalued?

Rowson’s target audience was the primary factor holding back *Charlotte Temple* from social acceptance in her time. Novels written by women, for women, were seen as dangerous in eighteenth-century society. This is not to say that only women read sentimental novels (otherwise, *Charlotte Temple* wouldn’t have sold as many copies) but there was quite a bit of concern in the period about women in particular as readers. In fact, much effort went into guiding women away from novels and toward conduct books. Encouraged over “dyspeptic” romantic novels, conduct books instructed women on societal expectations for proper behavior (Brown 9). James Fordyce’s *Sermons for Young Women* (1766), one of the most popular books of this kind, was often sampled in women’s magazines to instruct young ladies on chastity,

modesty, and marriage well into the late 1800s. While conduct books aimed to inculcate certain behavior in women, sentimental novels clued women into the realities of life. The primary plotline of *Charlotte Temple* — which follows a young woman who is seduced by male officer Montraville and taken to America only to find herself pregnant, abandoned, and impoverished — is as instructive as any conduct book. Readers are encouraged to empathize with Charlotte’s parents and to cry over their pain, to get angry with the errant Montraville, and to suffer alongside “poor Charlotte” (Rowson 6). In novels, there are characters for readers to root for and scenarios for young women to relate to. In conduct books, there’s dull, droning instruction, largely uninterested in how it places the world on women’s shoulders while failing to prepare them to navigate a world in which “artful” persons — such as Rowson’s Mademoiselle La Rue, who proves a false mentor to Charlotte, and Belcour, who behaves maliciously — may prey upon a young woman’s naiveté (57).

*Charlotte Temple*’s success is not only telling of what stories women were interested in reading at the time, but also reveals what writers of the time had to say about what made books worth reading. Critics argued about what made a novel “great” throughout the nineteenth century, and most publications agreed: the novel, above all else, needed to have a moral. A contributor to *The North American Review* in 1882 claimed that as long as “vice is punished and virtue rewarded” in a manner greater than “ordinary minds are capable of supplying,” a novel can be considered great (qtd. in Brown 8). As seen by Rowson’s popularity, novels with moral lessons appealed to many eighteenth-century readers, a trend that would carry into the nineteenth century. Yet critics of the time were reluctant to recognize the moral value of *Charlotte Temple*. Visiting Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville published his thoughts on American literature in his work *Democracy in America* in 1835, writing, “The only authors

whom I acknowledge as American are the journalists” (889). And yet *Charlotte Temple* is as much “a reflection of life” as any of the works of journalism and political pamphlets that Tocqueville admired (887). And it was right in front of him, sitting at the top of the American bestseller list. Of course, Tocqueville may have thought of *Charlotte Temple* as British literature, given Rowson’s time there. Even so, his neglect of Rowson reflects a larger phenomenon of critics either ignoring or denigrating Rowson’s writing.

For eighteenth and early nineteenth-century readers, what made *Charlotte Temple* worth reading may have been how well it empowered its reader, primarily young post-revolutionary women. Rowson published the book that *women* needed, not what critics wanted. Common readers desired a book that staged the drama that came with growing up and entering the realm of courtship. Equally important, they preferred reading material that wasn’t pedantic and marginalizing, that empowered and taught them to empathize, and, above all, that managed to entertain them past the first paragraph. In the story of Charlotte’s tragic life, female readers encountered a novel set on inspiring them to educate themselves and to use their voices to help other young women navigate the world. Such intentions, we might say, were precisely why certain works of fiction were considered dangerous in a patriarchal society.

### THE NOVEL’S REPUTATION, A HISTORY

Recently-established post-revolutionary print culture, sexist social expectations, transatlantic publishing, and strict parameters for how novels should look, tell stories, and paint characters all contribute to why the reputation of sentimental novels like *Charlotte Temple* have historically waxed and waned in the eyes of critics. Many scholars have addressed the sentimental novel’s place in history, with Jordan Alexander Stein and Cathy Davidson among

them. This thesis builds on their insights to explain *why* Susanna Rowson's novel, the most popular in the country for nearly a century, was discouraged for female readers.

The key aspects of the "great novels" — akin to what "Fielding had already done" in England (Brown 1) — were theorized by everyone from Alexis de Tocqueville to commentators contributing to periodicals throughout the nineteenth century. Most Americans eagerly anticipated the aforementioned "great American novel" later in the century because they grew tired of imported Byron (Brown 2). "Great" fiction ostensibly was so scarce in the new world that the aforementioned Frenchman de Tocqueville argued that "American literature" was nonexistent when he wrote *Democracy in America* (1835):

The inhabitants of the United States have then at present, properly speaking, no literature (889)... I do not question that they would have had a literature. Even as they now are, I am convinced that they will ultimately have one; but its character will be different from that which marks the American literary productions of our time, and that character will be peculiarly its own. Nor is it impossible to trace this character beforehand. (890)

Periodicals in the nineteenth century, including *The North American Review*, *The Century Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Nation*, published article upon article crying out for the "American Shakespeare" to reveal himself and produce a work that uniquely captured the American consciousness (Brown 1-2). Americans *were* writing, but much of what they produced consisted, as Tocqueville claimed, of religious texts and political pamphlets (Tocqueville 887). Even so, a reader of Tocqueville unfamiliar with American literary production in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, would assume that Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, and others had not taken up the pen. Why was it so difficult for American

novels, and novels in general, to be taken seriously? De Tocqueville claimed that distinct American settings and themes made for a great American novel, but I argue that there is another prevalent piece to this discussion that he omitted. While critics, aside from de Tocqueville, continually theorized what their ideal American novel would look like, only novels that fit the moral expectations of their society were truly taken seriously by critics, and the patriarchy was both implicitly and explicitly embedded in those expectations.

Before exploring the intersection of morality and gender, we first should consider how eighteenth-century changes in print culture shifted the literary market. Because novels were expected to look a certain way, any change to a book's physical production affected how the novel was viewed. In the introduction to *When Novels Were Books*, Stein emphasizes the intersection between the physical form of the novel and its reputation, claiming that improved printing technology pitted religious texts against fictional ones. When small American publishers were reliant on English presses for production, printing technology was severely limited due to "a shortage in type" (Tucker). Historically, Christian writers reserved the best materials and binding technology for their books. Because early Christians (1) vowed to "preserve" their "ancient writings" in the "most durable materials," (2) preferred to produce "large volumes of writings" for easy engagement in comparative studies, and (3) attempted to "shun pagan literature" by using "an entirely different form of book" from the pagans, their ancient printing practices set a precedence that prioritized Christian books over pagan scrolls (Tucker). This precedence bled over into the print culture of the eighteenth century; thus, printers routinely reserved bound books with continuous pages for "protestant confessional and soteriological writings" until better, faster printing technology allowed for more genres to experiment with the form (Stein "Introduction" 2). And once American presses could print domestically, it was much

cheaper to produce books in large quantities. Suddenly, these presses had enough supplies to transition novels from lackluster sewn codex bindings to the continuous, bound form (Tucker). And given that most Americans would have a limited book-buying budget, religious writers and novelists quickly saw the other as market competitors.

The transition of the novel into a new form angered the religious elite whose literary market was being cornered by secular entertainment. Not only did this updated look “generate an upswing” in novel reading, but the uptick in readership resulted in an audience who found that they preferred the fictional “experiences... of characters” over religious texts (Stein “Introduction” 9). To further illustrate the novel’s complicated reputation, the novel gained some respectability once publishers changed its form to look more like religious texts (Stein “Are ‘American Novels’ Novels?” 43). To scrounge up as many readers as they could, confessional and soteriological writers publicly criticized novels, shifting the novel's reputation from simple entertainment to “vulgar” and “effeminate” (Fordyce 265; Stein “Introduction” 8-9, 14, 19). Despite this fierce competition between novelists and religious writers, novels maintained a mass readership among both men and women. The novel’s reputation worsened during this literary scuffle, yet it did not doom novels forever. Novels weren’t the “mass of trash” that Thomas Jefferson, James Fordyce, and other writers tried to paint them as; instead, they had all the same character, beauty, and substance as traditionally revered religious classics (Zinn 117).

While Stein argues that the novel’s form complicated the novel’s reputation, gender plays the largest role in establishing its bad reputation (Baker 281; Davidson “Introduction” xvi; Stern 5, 23-24). In Britain at this time, the criteria for a “good” novel prioritized “formal merits and narrative thematics” over developed characters, who were considered mere vehicles for the theme and overall plot (Stein “Are ‘American Novels’ Novels” 44). Put another way, a book’s

physical presentation and how cleverly an author unravels the text's moral theme were more important to critics than the protagonists themselves. America appropriated these standards for their own literature after the American Revolution, and, in the case of sentimental novels that usually featured female protagonists, the moral of the story heavily intersected with the gender of the main character. Because women were expected to act according to religious expectation, a sentimental novel with a female protagonist was consumed differently by critics than other books. Instead of judging the quality of writing or unique themes, sentimental novels were wedged into a creative corner by society's gender expectations to be a submissive and modest woman (Fordyce 265-268).

Conduct books were marketed to young women as a surefire way to mold them into proper ladies. Because Protestant Christianity was so central to American culture, conduct books were typically written by male clergy members and inspired by Biblical scripture. Scottish Presbyterian minister and poet James Fordyce published the popular conduct book *Sermons for Young Women* in 1766, three decades before the publication of *Charlotte Temple*. He wrote on everything from the importance of religion to how women should speak to their friends. Plus, it's worth noting that Fordyce was an extremely popular writer among Americans despite his non-American heritage, further illustrating colonial America's reliance on British reading material. But the most important lesson that Fordyce's book teaches is this: women are responsible for *everyone* and *everything*, including a man's actions and emotions. In 1776, *Lady's Magazine* published an excerpt of Fordyce's book, titled "On the Character and Conduct of the Female Sex." Because the editors of these magazines were male rather than female despite their target audience's gender, the male editor made sure to relay directly Fordyce's teaching to women who may not have picked up his book themselves. Within the first line, Fordyce refers to young

women as the “credulous fair,” which is his way of calling them ignorant and naive. “Oh learn to trust your heart with no one,” he advises, clarifying that to “declare [your love] bluntly is both unwise [sic] and contemptible,” characteristic of “vulgar” and “uninstructed women” without “the restraints of religion” (265). He goes on to claim that to “talk away amongst... companions at school” is pert, petulant, and certainly fails to “enchant” the “male heart.” Instead, Fordyce recommends this course of action:

the male heart is enchanted with those women, whose conversation present the picture of simplicity and grace, of ease and politeness in a groupe; the spirit of whose conversation is a compound of sprightliness, sense, and modesty; who seldom dispute, and never wrangle; who listen with attention... It may likewise be observed, that if the company of women only is sought, the deportment will be in danger of sinking into too much softness. (265)

Here Fordyce accomplishes two tasks. First, he spells out the perfect woman for any men who might be reading. Second, this description of the perfect woman instructs female readers to bear the responsibility of conforming to men’s expectations of a perfect wife — an existence built on modesty and meekness. Yet even after he outlines the perfect woman, this woman still is not worthy of a man’s sole company. “Sinking into too much softness” implies that women can never elevate to a man’s status even when they exude their best attributes. Moreover, women who are not modest, sensible, simple, and attentive are corrupting of men. Only women who are chaste and meek are worthy of male companionship; however, too much company with women turns a man soft, “effeminate,” and ultimately worthless in society (265-268). Essentially, the moral state of both men and women is the responsibility of sensible women.

If the success of *Charlotte Temple*, which presented itself as didactic instruction to young women, is any indication, conduct books like Fordyce's *Sermons* were not the educational tools young women needed at the time. Consider Leonara, an eighteenth-century woman, who praised the editor of the *Lady's Magazine* for including Fordyce's excerpt in her 1776 letter to the editor. She hoped that the magazine would continue to include excerpts of this kind for the mutual benefit of young men and women because when women perused literature of this kind, their newfound modesty apparently improved the behavior of young men. On the surface, Leonara is obviously pleased with the conduct literature; however, she inadvertently proves that such books weren't effective instructional tools. She acknowledges that the young women of her time might "never have perused" the conduct book "in their present form," so it's lucky that they can get a glimpse of it in the *Lady's Magazine* (which, ironically enough, is alternatively titled the *Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to Their Use & Amusement*) (63). According to Leonara, it would seem that the only way to get young women of the eighteenth century to read conduct literature was to package it within a magazine "appropriated solely to their *amusement*." I would argue, then, that young women of the eighteenth century considered Fordyce-esque literature dry and uninteresting, disconnecting conduct literature from its target audience.

The problem with these books wasn't necessarily that they were religiously based. Most women weren't opposed to religion. In fact, a female contributor to *The Ladies' Repository* wrote, "Religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence" (112). Modern scholars like Carla Mulford further contextualize the limitation of women's education: "having neither a suitable education nor a foundation in social exchange sufficient to thwart the dastardliness of the contemporary social world" were peak problems for

post-revolutionary women (Mulford 7). Additionally, Mary Wollstonecraft argued that strict conduct “encourages women to behave artificially and renders them useless members of society,” and Mercy Otis Warren “sharply criticized [the] assumed ignorance of women,” furthering the resistance to teaching “men and women antiquated ideas” of “behavior and education” (qtd. in Desiderio 158-159). Female-targeted conduct literature was marketed as educational and instructive, but these books neglect basic education for women in the realms of history, the sciences, problem solving, or basic social skills (i.e. bodily autonomy and independent thinking). Plus, they were incredibly dull. Conduct-based content was more of a chore for young readers to get through than it was instructive and engaging. When prescribed educational tools are not working for students, most teachers will revise their methods to make lessons more engaging and, ultimately, memorable. In this sense, there must have been a more effective way to connect with young readers of the time. I argue that sentimental literature akin to *Charlotte Temple* was a better educational tool for teaching life lessons than conduct literature.

Despite the significant pressure to read conduct books, young women did not stop seeking out more interesting, relatable literature. A different contributor to the *Lady's Magazine*, denoted only as “C.R.,” published their thoughts on the limits of conduct literature in the 1777 issue “Thoughts on the FEMALE LITERATURE of the Present Age.” Here the author lauds these writings, which could certainly include novels, stating that allowing women to write not only helps the “rising generation” receive a “liberal and rational education,” but provides the world with more “useful,” “instructive,” and “amusing” books to enjoy on a variety of subjects (538). While we can't be sure that the writer is specifically referring to novel writing, it's quite plausible, especially as they reference the “female literature” of the time.

From conduct books to changing literary tastes, many aspects of literary culture determined *Charlotte Temple's* reputation over the past few centuries. Despite young women's interest in the genre, sentimental novels were not suitable for women to read. Sentimental novels fall into the genre of romanticism, which "clings most tightly to the notion of our desire's autonomy... bases authenticity and individuality on the strength and spontaneity... of one's desires" (Grant 19). And because the image of worthwhile reading material — conduct books — was largely based on the desire of commentators to establish an overwhelmingly male-centric society, novels were expected to comply with gender roles rather than break them in order to succeed. And as time progressed, *Charlotte Temple* "lost popular appeal" next to the emerging books that boasted "levels of ambiguity" attractive to post-World War I critics. The rise of New Criticism, which prioritized close reading of the text over considerations of historical and cultural context, "deemed works of past or present popular acclaim to be unworthy of literary" repute (Davidson "Introduction" xxxii).

Ironically enough, all of the reasons that made novels like *Charlotte Temple* critically undesirable during the first half of the twentieth century contribute to today's resurfaced academic interest in Rowson's fiction (Davidson "Introduction" xxxii). As a female author writing for women on both sides of the Atlantic, Susanna Rowson was an unlikely choice to become the nation's first bestselling author, and the fact that she *did* rise to the top cannot be emphasized enough, making her career a supremely interesting topic. Rowson uplifts young post-revolutionary women by subverting the cultural expectations regarding what women needed to read. Not only did she write an entertaining story focused on a woman's experience, but Rowson also educated all readers about the dangerous reality of living in ignorance. She rose to the top not only because her book had an engaging plot but also because she instructed young

women on topics that conduct books refused to touch. Rowson taught lessons about the danger of young women who blindly follow the guidance of authority figures without leaning on their own reason. Some critics may argue that it is Charlotte's responsibility to deflect advice that is contrary to her parents' instruction. But the book answers this dilemma by clarifying that Charlotte *should* have been in a good position to deflect Montraville's advances and La Rue's bad advice: she had loving parents who taught her good morals. Charlotte guiltily confided in La Rue after accepting Montraville's proposal to accompany him abroad, saying, "I have forgot [sic] all that I ought to have remembered" in doing so (Rowson 44). Charlotte's parents taught her to avoid making such rash decisions, especially those involving men. Thus, the novel is making the point that young women who have already received an upright education at home need to supplement their education equally to women lacking formal instruction. This supplement comes in the form of sentimental novels that depict the complex experiences of young women like Charlotte. And yet, as it stood, teaching women how to trust their consciences, how to independently process issues of peer-pressure and authority, and how to rely on their own intellect proved controversial.

#### CHARLOTTE'S ROAD TO THE READER

Breaking into a male-dominated landscape was Rowson's primary obstacle when publishing and promoting *Charlotte Temple*. Perhaps a conservative choice in the eyes of some readers, *Charlotte Temple* was an empowering novel for young eighteenth and early nineteenth century women. Written by a woman, focused on a female protagonist, published transatlantically, and grounded in sentimentalism, *Charlotte Temple* may have been an unlikely qualifier for greatness in the eyes of the custodians of American literary culture, yet it was a

massive success. If “typicality” and the “punish[ment of] vice” were the primary qualifications of what makes a novel worthy literature, Rowson’s fiction accomplishes these goals (Brown 6). *Charlotte Temple* is, by all accounts, a tragedy. It follows the likes of a young, postrevolutionary woman — Charlotte Temple — and her failed attempts to thwart her own ignorance, escape the throes of inappropriate romance, and dodge the misleading advice from a “designing, artful, and selfish” mentor (Rowson 57). Charlotte is only a schoolgirl of 15 when the novel opens in Chicester, England. Immediately, British officer Montraville swoops in to seduce the young girl away from her equally ignorant friends, loving family, and mentors, Madame Du Pont and the wicked Mademoiselle La Rue. Not for lack of trying (30, 42-43), Charlotte is swayed away from her intuition by La Rue and Montraville who all but steal her away to America. It is there where her tragedies truly begin. Severed from her support system, Charlotte succumbs to Montraville (57, 65). Soon pregnant, Charlotte comes to learn that a different woman has caught Montraville’s eye, leaving Charlotte abandoned in an unfamiliar world (61). Rife with guilt, she pleads for forgiveness from everyone she knows, especially her parents (79, 106). Due to malevolent interference from Montraville’s friend Belcour, her cries for help go unheard and her letters unanswered. It’s on her deathbed that she is returned to her loving parents, leaving a daughter in her wake, Montraville incriminated, Belcour killed by a vengeful Montraville, and La Rue on a downward spiral (115, 120).

*Charlotte Temple* thus focuses on the consequences of naiveté and bad advice. Living as a vulnerable young woman largely influenced by her mentors can be a dangerous reality. Once she invests the majority of her trust into older figures, she relinquishes trust in her previous moral education. Unfortunately for Charlotte, her mentors and advisers aren’t always looking out for her, but are, instead, prioritizing their own self interests. Despite multiple occurrences of

Charlotte scolding herself and promising that she “not intend to go” meet Montraville, Montraville and La Rue take advantage of their status and persuade her to ignore her instinct (Rowson 30). Once she questions her romantic involvement with Montraville, she cannot trust herself enough to resist bad advice. For example, when Charlotte first refuses to read Montraville’s mysterious love letter “without first giving it to” her mother, La Rue pushes her to “read it” and “judge for [her]self,” scaring her into believing that her mother would punish her for having it, pull her from school, and have her on “strict guard” (31). It’s clear that Charlotte’s mother gave Charlotte wise instruction in regard to the influence of older men, but did not give the same advice in regard to older, influential women. That is why Charlotte, whose every “inclination urges her to run,” was roped back into meeting Montraville “the ensuing evening” (43, 33). What’s worth recognizing here is that Charlotte was equipped with morally upright and instructive parents who instilled in her knowledge of appropriate behavior that theoretically would safeguard against being deceived by a disreputable — or simply immature — suitor. Charlotte knew that she was to confide in her mother if approached by a suitor (31). Despite knowing that course of action was “right,” Charlotte still fell into the trap of blindly trusting the authority of a mentor over her mother’s advice while away at school. Therefore, *Charlotte Temple* was a novel that readers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries needed, especially the educationally neglected young women.

Education was of paramount importance to young women in eighteenth-century America and Britain even if the subjects they were allowed to take were lacking compared to young men, which is why we find young Charlotte at a British boarding school in the opening sequence. The first chapter of *Charlotte Temple* is appropriately titled “A Boarding School” and is the perfect spot to begin exploring how education works in the novel. But first, let’s visit the opening

sequence, which features Montraville prowling outside of Charlotte's school with his "companion" Belcour to "take a survey of the Chichester ladies as they returned from their devotions" (9). The men were about to depart, but it's only when an "assemblage of youth and innocence" descended with Madame Du Pont, the head of the boarding school, that they were "naturally attracted" enough to take interest. Then Montraville made eye contact with a young woman who he had once "danced with at a ball" when she was thirteen, Charlotte Temple. Where she was once "only... a very lovely child" to Montraville, aging two years was enough to stir "devilish" feelings within him (9-10).

This opening scene is vital to the heart of the story because from the very beginning, the narrative positions Charlotte as passive. Montraville's perspective is front-and-center while Charlotte's brief eye contact is enough to send him into lustful scheming. While Montraville has his doubts about the morality of the romance, thinking to himself, "'Tis a romantic attempt, and should I even succeed in seeing and conversing with her, it can be productive of no good," he has the power, pride, and experience to leverage the situation in his favor (10). Montraville is never disillusioned to believe that his actions toward Charlotte are based on anything moral, but that distinction is not so clear to a naive schoolgirl such as Charlotte. For when Montraville hangs around the boarding school in the evening, he clearly desires to meet with her, having "spent three whole days in thinking on her and in endeavouring to form some plan for seeing her" (10). Yet he was going to leave the boarding school until he spotted two women "walk[ing] arm-in-arm" leave the premises. Before he knew of either of the women's identities, he sought to "compliment" them and "begged" to accompany them around town (11). Luck is with him that he finds Charlotte Temple under the "large bonnet" and that her companion is none other than a French teacher lacking scruples, Mademoiselle La Rue. Easily bribed and happy to lead her

student astray, La Rue promises to bring Charlotte back to him the following evening (11). It's worth noting that Charlotte has no dialogue or noteworthy actions throughout this entire scene aside from glancing at Montraville and blushing (9). The narrator provides no insight into why Charlotte blushes, immediately jumping to Montraville's vain conclusion that "pleasure at again beholding him might have occasioned" the blush and that "same vanity led him to wish to see her again" (10). Whether through dialogue, blatant action, or narratorial insight, Charlotte never has the opportunity to confess her true feelings in the moment, either positive or negative.

Rowson opens the novel with a scene where an educated and seemingly protected schoolgirl does not use her voice and seems to have little choice in whether she interacts with a much older male acquaintance. A letter is forced upon her by Montraville, and it's La Rue who vows to "bring her young charge" back to Montraville (11). When recounting the event in chapter six from Charlotte's perspective, Rowson uses the word "accosted" to describe Montraville's sudden appearance by the school's back gates (27). Even despite this strong language signaling Montraville as the primary aggressor against Charlotte, Montraville probably would have ended the affair before it began if not for the help of Mademoiselle La Rue. Before the "accosting," La Rue convinces Charlotte to accompany her out of the school after hours. But it's clear that the narrator excuses Charlotte from any fault. The narrator pins the questionable decision to leave the grounds with her teacher as a result of "the mind of youth" that "eagerly catches at promised pleasure" without thought on "the dangers lurking beneath those pleasures" until it's too late (27). The narrator is quick to label the school's headmistress Madame Du Pont as in "every way calculated to take care of young ladies," but after reading the opening passage, it seems that Rowson is emphasizing that the education Charlotte receives from this boarding school is fractured. Guidance is in the hands of an assistant (La Rue) who is not the person "of

delicacy and refinement” who Charlotte’s parents would “wish their daughter to copy” (26). The lessons La Rue departs to her students are much different from the lessons Charlotte’s parents taught her. What is a young girl to do in this situation? Any teenage girl away from her parents and placed under the charge of a woman “whose humanity overstepped the bounds of discretion” would leap at the chance of fun with older peers — especially when described so elegantly and enticing as La Rue describes her male friend (26-27). Charlotte is blinded by the promised “pleasure” and thinks nothing of “imprudence” (27). That is, not until Montraville “accosted” them, ruining Charlotte’s chance at fun. Charlotte wants nothing to do with strange older men. *She’s* the one “disgusted” by Montraville’s demeanor and disrespectful tone; in fact, she’s “astonished” that La Rue is so accepting of his impropriety. Each moment, Charlotte grows more “thoughtful and uneasy,” desperate to return to her bedchamber where she feels safe and protected, not unlike being under the protection of her parents.

This scene is the first glimpse readers have into Charlotte’s true mind on the subject of romance rather than Montraville’s assumptions. While she is obviously easily influenced by people in power, she also has her wits about her. Charlotte clearly understands how gentlemen are supposed to behave and what is appropriate to discuss with them. Her knowledge on the subject of propriety most likely comes from her parents — specifically, her mother — as well as conduct literature that was probably provided to her by authority figures. Despite these lessons, however, Charlotte succumbs to Montraville’s seduction and La Rue’s pressure. Even so, the narrator is correct in defending Charlotte. Charlotte is merely a child desperate for pleasure. A love letter is a surefire way to set a young girl’s imagination aflame, and shame is the quickest way to make her submit (28). If your beloved had the audacity to label you a “foolish little prude,” any young girl's pride would be crushed and her understanding of everything she’s

learned about proprietary would be thrown into confusion (30). Rowson uses her narrator to make clear that if Charlotte had a novel such as *Charlotte Temple* that depicted young women in morally gray situations — as her's with Montraville and La Rue — she would be better prepared to navigate them. We know that Charlotte's mother taught her to be cautious with men and filter her experiences through her mother. Conduct books teach similar lessons. Neither taught how Charlotte should trust herself and her instincts. Instead, she relies on the influence of older figures despite questioning their actions. Imagine what a young girl without morally upright parents would do? She would be in a much more vulnerable position than Charlotte already is at this moment.

Traditional education, such as studies of the sciences, arithmetic, religion, and the classics, was not the primary mode of education for early American women. Women were expected to manage the home, keep their thoughts to themselves, obey their fathers and husbands, and pursue “feminine amusements” like “dancing, drawing, and music” (Zinn 117). Historian Howard Zinn wrote on the “very invisibility of women” in his sweeping survey of U.S. history, stating that women are the “overlooked” half of American history, pointing to their “submerged status” in the face of “patriarchal sovereignty” (103). In other words, the systematic suppression of women's education directly benefited the male elite. For instance, women were banned from studying human anatomy, meaning that they had little chance of challenging sexist arguments based on biological differences between men and women (118-119). Teaching positions were one of the few places where women could grow intellectually; thus, women quickly “monopoliz[ed] the profession of primary-school teaching,” which dramatically increased female literacy rates. Consequently, these women could express themselves through writing and many became avid “health reformers,” abolitionists, and early feminists (117).

However, some women were not so lucky to hold those coveted teaching positions and were directly discouraged from teaching, reading, and writing outside of the classroom. Early American Anne Hutchinson, for example, was banished from her colony and eventually killed for daring to teach the Bible. John Winthrop, a Puritan lawyer and first mayor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, characterized Hutchinson as “a woman of haughty and fierce carriage, of a nimble wit and active spirit, and a very voluble tongue, more bold than a man, though in understanding and judgement, inferior to many women” (Zinn 108-109). Winthrop believed that her masculine traits made her a contemptible woman. In another case, early feminist and educator Emma Willard was condemned for countering Thomas Jefferson’s volatile opinions of novels. She argued that women were easy targets of manipulation and exploitation because their education had for far too long been focused on “the charms of youth and beauty” for the “taste of men” rather than a proper “formation of the female character” (117). Harriet Martineau’s book *Society in America* was further condemned by Jefferson, accusing her of “unsettling” women from “their true station” and “throw[ing] the world back again into confusion” (qtd. in Zinn 117-118). This passion for writing illustrates how “education itself became subversive of old ways of thinking” and was seen as especially threatening (117). As mentioned earlier, once women gained access to the educational realm, their literacy increased alongside their passion for developing their own opinions about the world and publishing them for all to see.

Education enables agency, which were both desperately needed for young women resembling Charlotte Temple. Cathy Davidson and Carla Mulford offer valuable commentary on Rowson’s love for education. Davidson is surely right that Rowson viewed her fictional texts as “part of the larger process of education” especially because Rowson “always considered herself a

teacher” (xxvii). And Mulford expands that point, arguing that *Charlotte Temple* was so successful because of Rowson’s experience writing about and educating young women (12). Thus, it’s no surprise that Rowson opened her highly-renowned Young Ladies’ Academy three years after the American publication of her novel. In complete control of the curriculum, she educated her female students in “music, recitation, and domestic economy” as well as what Davidson calls the “more progressive” subjects of “geography, mathematics, and science.” In fact, Rowson wrote her own versions of popular textbooks that held “special relevance for her female pupils” by incorporating references to and facts of female life across the world (xxvi). In turn, these textbooks, along with her novels, support the notion that women’s education was Rowson’s top priority. Not only did these resources clue her readers into the realities of the world, but they illustrated to the surrounding society that women “comprise a worthy audience for literature” in all realms of life (xxvi).

To return to the novel, Charlotte’s experience after she is carried to America highlights what it’s like to be rendered vulnerable to the elements without the proper education to take care of herself. Charlotte, who is soon abandoned by both Montraville and Belcour after finding a small home outside of New York, knew “so little of the ways of the world” that paying rent for the house Montraville placed her in was a reality of the world that she had never even “bestowed a thought on” (Rowson 102). The narrator explains that her “knowledge of human nature” is so “confined” that when she first arrives in New York, she attaches herself entirely to Montraville (65); therefore, when Montraville pursues a different woman, Charlotte’s complete dependence on him backfires and she falls into so much debt from medical expenses that “she saw no method of extricating herself” (101). Despite having some knowledge about proper conduct, as seen when she questions Montraville’s intentions from their first meeting, Charlotte admits that,

generally, she is illiterate in the ways of life and love. She writes to her parents, saying, “That I loved my seducer is but too true! I never once reflected that the man who could stoop to seduction... I vainly expected him to fulfill his engagements... I was conscious of having forfeited the only gem that could render me respectable in the eye of the world (80).

From this excerpt, Charlotte obviously did not fully understand the aspects of authentic love. On one hand, it’s clear she was taught that her virginity is precious like a “gem,” but on the other hand, she was not taught how to differentiate between high and low-quality suitors. Conduct books preaching of a woman’s “duty” and virginity as the “only gem that could render [women] respectable in the eye of the world” does not teach mutual respect in a romantic relationship to a young girl (79).

Charlotte implores her parents to teach her own daughter — “heaven forbid” she have a daughter — to “avoid [her] errors” (79). Interestingly enough Charlotte does not request her parents teach her potential son the same lessons. Instead, she wishes him to “lament [her] miseries” yet never “revenge” them as to not “wound the peace of his father” (79). Even in this instance, Charlotte’s words sound wise and informed, but it’s clear she lacks understanding of the breadth of the situation. It’s not merely a woman’s responsibility to avoid being taken advantage of. People of all genders are capable of falling under bad influences without proper education. In fact, more so the man’s responsibility to act reasonably and to avoid, as Belcour so eloquently put it, “tak[ing] advantage of” a woman’s “easy nature.” Unfortunately, Belcour cared nothing of responsibility, going on to implore that if Montraville had decided not to harass Charlotte, “some other [man] would” (87). As it stands, it’s admirable that even as Charlotte implies her son might try to protect her, she fears potential eagerness to “revenge” her by hunting down Montraville. Charlotte thus stoops to protect Montraville even as she nears death. “Wounding the peace” of

her “seducer” would be the lightest punishment Charlotte could ever bestow upon Montraville, yet she refuses to stoop so low. Even so, perhaps Charlotte’s continued respect for Montraville’s “peace” is a result of a patriarchal conduct book education that prioritized the well-being of men and piled the responsibility for sexual misconduct onto women. Or it could be that of her parents who — although protective of their daughter and implorative of her “duty” as a woman — equally fail to teach her to recognize the negative influences of older mentors and men with selfish intentions (79). Her mother informs Charlotte to run to her when any man approaches her, which is ultimately a lesson that further reduces Charlotte’s independent thinking. Returning to the start of the novel, La Rue shames Charlotte for this dependence, weakening Charlotte’s confidence in her education and, ultimately, rendering her even more dependent on La Rue and Montraville in the face of peer pressure (Rowson 30). Moreover, Charlotte recognizes that she does not have enough self-assurance from her schooling to protect herself from predators and does not completely understand what it takes to prevent such happenings.

Another lacking aspect of Charlotte’s childhood education is manifested as a complete “depriv[ation] of... friendly advice and consoling society” (85). “Perhaps, had she one kind friend to raise and reassure her,” Rowson writes, Charlotte “would gladly return to peace and virtue” (74). Charlotte repeatedly cites her loneliness in America as a foundation of her misery that contributes to her exponential grief, sickness, and ultimate acceptance of death. And what she fears more than sickness and death is that “no woman of character” would ever “appear in [her] company” again (65). The only people conscious of her situation and able to help her survive are Montraville, Belcour, La Rue, and Mrs. Beauchamp, but negative attributes including lust and pride infringe on their aid. Montraville claims he would cover her expenses, but Belcour blocks the flow of his finances to Charlotte, using the money on “all the intemperance of luxury

and lawless pleasure” as she sank further into depression and illness (Rowson 98). Had Charlotte not already been rendered completely dependent on Montraville’s sliver of goodwill, perhaps Belcour “reducing her to an entire dependence on him” would not have equated to her “complete ruin” (92). Charlotte’s complete lack of independence is a death sentence. When women are so ignorant of the world that they mistakenly slip into the contemptible role of a visibly pregnant mistress, almost every respectable friend, family member, and opportunity to improve themselves is closed off (77). Even Mrs. Beauchamp, who is one of the few characters to overlook Charlotte’s “infamy” and extend her friendship, feels brief embarrassment “at the thought of beginning an acquaintance” with Charlotte (96, 76). Beauchamp’s surrounding society makes her choice to reach out to Charlotte a brave task. To be sure, she’s taking a significant risk in associating with Charlotte.

Educationally lacking women — both in the realm of practical education and social education, like Charlotte — are used as tools by men like Belcour who care nothing about honor and everything about pride. They are not permitted to live as fully-realized people worthy of empathy. In Belcour’s eyes, Charlotte is the ultimate prize to flaunt in Montraville’s presence as a “triumph,” a beautiful, brainless object (95). Yet Charlotte can not consciously reduce herself to complete dependence on a man again after Montraville. Remember, she is never *completely* ignorant of honourable conduct and quickly learns of the dangers associated with complete dependence on others. “I will not be indebted to [Montraville’s] pity to redress my injuries,” she tells Belcour, “but I would have knelt and entreated him not to forsake my poor unborn” (96). However, she has no choice except dependence. Because Belcour and Montraville rob her of everything including her “innocence,” Charlotte is forced to beg for her child’s life, happy to let herself “sink unnoticed to the grave” as long as her child survives (98). Through her acts of

passivity and dependence, Rowson emphasizes that Charlotte is the victim of dependence, ignorance, and unflinching gender expectations, not the perpetrator (62); thus, Charlotte is “unfortunate” but “far less guilty” for her fate than La Rue, Montraville, and Belcour. She is merely “a poor weak girl” whom the “merciless world has barred the doors of compassion against,” as told by Mrs. Beauchamp (74). Charlotte, being so young and ignorant of the world, cannot be guilty of the abuse inflicted on her. Instead, Rowson emphasizes, if she had “one kind friend to raise and reassure her,” then she could have much more easily regained self-confidence and hope (74). For to be “deprived of honour, friends, all that was valuable in life,” Charlotte was “doomed to linger out a wretched existence in a strange land” (73). Dependence on prideful, selfish men brought Charlotte nowhere except to an “untimely grave” (73). Practical and social education, the novel guides us to understand, could have saved her from it.

Rowson herself was particularly in tune with education's ability to grant one agency. Despite a childhood rife with suffering that forced her as a teenager to “take on enormous responsibilities,” Rowson was known for her remarkable “intelligence” as a child, earning the nickname “Little Scholar” (Davidson “Introduction” xxii). From losing her mother soon after her birth to being “rendered... legally invisible” through marriage, Rowson’s life is itself representative of the “limitations imposed on women” (xix, xxiii-xxiv). Due to marriage laws, Rowson’s career was in the hands of her husband William Rowson, who is described as both “indolent and dissipate.” Though less famous than his wife, he was happy to take control of Rowson’s transactions with her publishers and, essentially, gorge on the “fruit of her labors” (xxiii-xxiv). Even worse, her publishers “by convention” paid her far less than her male counterparts, conveniently pushing the assumption that women were not career authors, but mere hobbyists, and thus shouldn’t be paid as much as male authors (xxiv).

Faced with limiting social conventions, a husband leeching off her success, and an intentionally sexist, profit-focused publishing industry, the only way Rowson was able to “claim personal freedom that few women of her time could imagine” was through self-actualization (Davidson “Introduction” xxii, xxiv). She was more successful than “any previous novelist — British or American” because she grew up having to confidently make decisions for herself. And through this early education, she refused to bend to the patriarchy’s crushing demands and successfully circumvented a life of limitations (xxvii). Rowson understood that she was unique in her ability to “maximize her talents” from an early age, as most women were not conditioned to possess the same resolve (xxii); thus, she wrote *Charlotte Temple* as a perfect illustration of the potential danger of ignorance and an unhealthy dependence on others.

Given this context of Rowson’s lifelong passion for women’s education, it’s clear that she wrote *Charlotte Temple* to engage young women in a conversation regarding their agency and paved the way for other advocates to write about the topic. Margaret Fuller, author of the first feminist text in America, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1843), advocated for a woman’s right to education. “To grant women room to discern life’s truths on their own,” Fuller writes, allows them to “protect themselves from danger that they otherwise wouldn’t have been prepared to duel” (307). Because this understanding of education’s power has persisted over centuries — with modern scholar Cathy Davidson writing that education (including “the complex intellectual and emotional activity of reading fiction”) “empowers the hitherto powerless individual” to take control of their own lives (“Ideology” 303) — it’s no wonder Rowson used fiction as an educational tool.

Next to the content of a book, the arguably most significant factor for Rowson’s success among readers was the recent development of mass-market publishing technology. Although

scrutinized, sentimental novels had a “wide reach” within the publishing market because of large structural changes to the industry at the time (White 267, 273). The novel was first published in England by William Lane at Minerva Press during the late eighteenth century, and his marketing prowess surely pushed *Charlotte Temple*’s selling from above average to epidemic rates (Davidson “Introduction” xxix). While updated publishing technology was partially responsible for *Charlotte*’s popularity, it was also partly a reaction to, as Davidson describes, “a new demand for books by a rising idle class that enjoyed increasingly higher levels of literacy (especially among women) and increasing amounts of disposable time and income” (xxix-xxx). As more women had disposable income, the more likely they were to purchase their own books and consume increasing amounts of literature.

However, not all women received a great enough increase in income to afford new books, and even of those who did, many were restricted to reading select books that fell within their budgets. Fortunately, Lane foresaw the issue of getting relevant stories into the hands of Rowson’s target audience (“someone who reads a novel for intellectual improvement” and “the simpler pleasures of the text”[(Davidson “Introduction” xxxiii)]; therefore, he took one step further to make books like Rowson’s accessible for that group. Circulating libraries, “from which books could be rented for a fraction of their purchase price,” made it all the more possible for women to read books that once would have been out of reach (xxx-xxx). Thus, *Charlotte Temple* could be read for mere cents “within a year of its initial British publication” (xxx-xxx). While America didn’t possess the same wide-reaching lending programs as Lane’s circulating libraries in England, Rowson’s American publisher Matthew Carey — dubbed “one of the most ardent pirates of... European books” — took advantage of Rowson’s rising stage reputation in Philadelphia by marketing the reprinted version “By Mrs. Rowson, of the New Theatre,

Philadelphia” yet giving none of the profits of the “thousand copies sold” to Rowson herself (xxx). As Davidson asserts, *Charlotte Temple* “signal[ed] a new era in the history of the book in America” where entertaining a mass audience was prioritized over marketing to one group of readers (“Ideology” 296). If Lane’s and Rowson’s publishing concerns included getting her work into the hands of curious women, Carey seems to have cared more about profits. Carey increased prices of new copies to 50 cents each, the amount of a week of wages for the typical working girl. Yet the establishment of a Philadelphia circulating library and many other pirated editions allowed even the poor American girls to borrow for a few pennies (Davidson “Introduction” xxx). Faster technology, especially by the time the Napier-Hoe Cylinder press was invented in 1829, drove down book prices to as little as a dime per copy — “a price that virtually all classes of American citizens could afford” (xxx). These various factors would inform subsequent printings of Rowson’s novel.

But affordability was only part of the puzzle. These women didn't want any old story. They wanted stories that reflected their lives, like *Charlotte Temple* with its meek (and “real”) main character, familiar settings, and direct address of readers. Publishing technology certainly played an important role for allowing readers to access the book to begin with; however, Rowson’s writing techniques — including marketing the story as “truth” and directly addressing her target audiences throughout the text — were important for keeping readers engaged. For example, *Charlotte Temple* was marketed as a true story during early rounds of publishing in Britain. Rowson’s “Preface” directly refers to itself as a “Tale of Truth... not merely the effusion of Fancy, but as a reality” (5). Researcher Spencer D. C. Keralis examines early editions of the novel, including a frontispiece portrait depicting Charlotte that elicited strong “affected” responses from readers (25). He argues that these editions “engaged” readers, regardless of “class

and education, gender region, and age,” who saw Charlotte as the “lovely, sweet-faced woman attired in the most elegant gown of the day” in the frontispiece (Keralis 27, 29, 39; Davidson “Introduction” xxix). The “thinly veiled” attempt to market the novel as only “slightly” fictional paired well with the frontispiece editions of the novel because they cleverly brought Charlotte — and her story — to life and carved a direct path into readers’ hearts (Rowson 5; Keralis 39).

While the custom illustrations contributed to the novel’s “diverse appeal” and enduring presence on people’s bookshelves (Davidson “Introduction” xiii), even later versions lacking the portraiture continued to capture the public’s attention. As Davidson put it, the fans of Rowson — who ranged from mechanics to waiting-maids to shopgirls — “manifested... a passion unprecedented in American fiction” when her book was published in America in 1794 (xiii). Because readers thought of Charlotte as a tragic hero, they mourned her as a real person, leaving “locks of hair, ashes of love letters, bouquets of flowers” and other “personal mementoes” in Trinity Churchyard where a tombstone lay with the inscription of Charlotte’s name. In fact, Davidson notes, the graves of “Alexander Hamilton and Robert Fulton never attracted as many visitors as did the tomb of Rowson’s fictional character” (xiv). A terrible tragedy befell Charlotte, and that same tragedy could happen to any of the readers. Rowson established a close proximity between her character and her readers so that they felt compelled to *care* about her story more than just be entertained by it. To care about someone’s story includes more than isolated reading, but shedding “tear[s] of compassion,” recommending it to friends, discussing it with peers, and reading the story as a cautionary tale not offered by the elite who want to control you, but by a person much like the readers themselves who merely wants to depict reality in an instructional manner yet inspire readers to remember the lesson (Rowson 99). Sympathy and love cross most boundaries, including those separating fiction from reality. These theories have

important implications for *Charlotte Temple*'s popularity as well as the overall reputation of sentimental literature because, ultimately, presenting Charlotte's tale as a true story about a recently living girl left readers distraught as if they'd lost a dear friend (Davidson xxix). Indeed, Rowson did everything in her power to deliver Charlotte's story directly to the women who sought guidance for their lives. While most of us will readily agree that we will never be able to know with certainty what an author's intentions were, this agreement usually ends on the topic of the author's intended audience. Whereas some of us may be convinced that writing for a specific audience is nothing but a marketing strategy, others maintain that reading, researching, and analyzing an author's intentions — including their primary audience — provides insight into the lesson they want readers to learn. In the case of Rowson, it's clear that she pinpointed young women as her primary audience. And the idea that women were a profitable audience for books further contributed to the rapidly evolving publishing industry. Because women were such an economic force in the industry, publishers published sentimental literature at an increased rate and prioritized its primary audience when marketing the books. For example, *Charlotte Temple*'s "Preface" is a personalized letter to her female readers that classifies the novel "for the perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex" (Rowson 5-6). If that inclusion did not make her target audience clear enough, Rowson embodies the role of narrator to address her young readers as "dear girls" for "to such only am I writing" (29). Similar interruptions of the plot are sprinkled throughout the novel to reassure her target readers and clarify her intentions. Carla Mulford contextualizes Rowson's writing, stating that Rowson's tendency to write on "issues of relevance to contemporary readers" allowed her both to amass a wide readership of those familiar with the contemporary issues as well as focus her attention on appealing to the specifically affected group of readers (11). For instance, urbanization and industrialization drastically shifted existing social

structures and caused young post-revolutionary women to be routinely swindled into factory work under the guise of leading a better life than what was available to them in their hometown. But instead of gaining access to “education, steady employment, and a living wage” as they were promised, these young girls suffered “dehumanizing toil” in factories akin to sweatshops. What better than the story of an impressionable Charlotte Temple could have spoken to the struggles of real people in Rowson’s time, such as these alienated and powerless factory girls? (Davidson “Introduction” xii).

While she wasn’t shy about directly addressing her target female audience, Rowson realized that many more people than just young women would read her writing, so she addressed concerned mothers, critics, and male readers as well. Considering how Rowson explicitly identifies “dear girls” as the primary audience of *Charlotte Temple*, the concerned mothers (i.e. “sober matrons” (Rowson 28) and “my dear madam” (67-68), critics (206), and male readers are, as Davidson clarifies, “only its secondary audience” (Davidson “Introduction” xvii). She directly addresses these secondary audiences only to “forestall” their assumptions, such as the “sober matrons” who believe she’s lessening the seriousness of “the faults of those unhappy women who fall victims to guilt and folly” or “critics who will fault the story for internal inconsistencies” (Rowson 67; Davidson “Introduction” xiii). Rowson’s tireless efforts to market *Charlotte Temple* to her target readers while simultaneously anticipating the concerns of critical audiences add weight to the claim that *Charlotte Temple* empowered early nineteenth-century young women to advocate for their agency and to trust themselves in a world that pushes them to dependence.

## THE EMPOWERED AUDIENCE

Though I concede that there are multiple cases in which Rowson appears to take a conservative side in the novel, I still insist that she did not write *Charlotte Temple* as a patronizing attempt/ploy to control young women. While Rowson acknowledges that “no woman can be run away with contrary to her own inclination” and must “pray for fortitude to resist the impulse of inclination when it runs counter to the precepts of religion and virtue” (29), Rowson’s moral speaks for itself: “vice, however prosperous in the beginning, in the end leads only to misery and shame” (120). The narrator places a healthy amount of responsibility on women for their decisions, but she’s clear that Charlotte represents “victims” deserving of “pity” (67). There’s merit in the theory that “an overt and covert cultural agenda” is encoded in” all texts, and the moral line is purposely blurred in *Charlotte Temple* (Davidson “Ideology” 296-297), so it does not necessarily follow that Rowson wrote the novel with the intention to please conduct book writers. Primarily, she wanted to publish her novel for young women without a distracting amount of criticism from conservatives.

It’s no secret that Rowson lures readers into her text by feigning the same conservatism presented in conduct books; in many cases, she isn’t faking those values. This concept is put forward by Jennifer Desiderio in her article recounting her time teaching Rowson’s novel *Sincerity* at Canisius College and her students’ discovery that Rowson always “underscored her lessons and morals,” making it difficult to glean whether she’s leaning toward feminism or traditionalism (151). “Though she was a novelist,” Rowson successfully lured young female readers of “conduct literature” to read *Sincerity* by placing it in a conservative periodical. *Sincerity*’s publication in the journal led students to question Rowson’s true beliefs. If Rowson wanted to steer readers away from conservative works like the conduct book, why publish in a

conservative publication? (153, 156, 159). The genius of marketing her novel in this manner ensured that it reached her target readership, who unexpectedly received a “caution” against marriage, “learning of its dangers and risks” through fictional letters from a progressive Rowson. Similarly, Ed White believes Rowson’s novels are purposefully ironic. While in *Charlotte Temple*, sentimentality is defined by transparency of morals, sentimentality in other novels like *The Inquisitor* and *Mentoria* present the genre as “every bit as ironic, every bit as mediated, as its assumed antithesis” (White 273). *Charlotte Temple* similarly attracts conduct-book readers to learn about the dangers of living as a woman, life without education, and the risks of complete dependence on a man. By masking her work as conservative, Rowson could better push readers to interrogate the morals presented in conduct literature by using similar publications to spread the message for her (Stern 157, 159).

From referencing the “innate modesty, which nature has implanted in the female breast” (Rowson 88) to revealing that “Belcour knew little of the female heart... [he had] no idea that a woman might fall a victim of imprudence” (73), Rowson pinpoints that the cultural assumptions about how women are supposed to act contribute to the risks of living as a woman lacking suitable mentors. Because it was assumed that women are born with “innate modesty,” they were automatically responsible for any acts of “imprudence” between the sexes. While it could be argued that Rowson’s writing here bears an uncanny resemblance to excerpts from Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women*, the key difference between the two is how they divide responsibility for virtuous living between the sexes (57). Where Fordyce deems women “contemptible” for engaging in supposedly inappropriate relationships with a consenting man, Rowson reframes the situation, viewing young women as “hapless victims of imprudence” (Fordyce 265; Rowson 57). Of course, she highlights that women can indeed be willfully immoral, such as with La Rue’s

lack of “discretion” for marrying Crayton and turning “poor Charlotte out to perish in the street” (Rowson 26, 119). But it’s crucial that Rowson does not blame Charlotte for being “robbed of innocence” or place responsibility on Charlotte for her mentors’ “stoopi[ing] to seduction” and leading her down a dangerous path (65, 80). Montraville, with the help of La Rue and Belcour, robs not just Charlotte’s sexual innocence, but her innocence in terms of her entire outlook of the world. Late in the novel, once Belcour reduces Charlotte “to an entire dependence on him,” even Montraville suffers the guilt of rendering a “mind once so pure as Charlotte Temple’s “ to “the total deprivation of her reason” (92, 109, 116).

Because Susanna Rowson presents Charlotte Temple as a model of ignorant sensibility, her novel emphasizes the need to educate young women on how they can be taken advantage of and blamed for their ignorance in a society that does not prepare them for a life without a man. When she lacks the “friendly advice” of wise mentors or the company of parents who stick beside her in “spite of her errors,” Charlotte is much more vulnerable to temptation despite her better judgment (Rowson 85, 56). Charlotte is a young woman who needs a wise female mentor to help her understand and combat the “harsh realities” of the world even when she is all alone. Hyper-aware of this need for a guiding maternal voice for young women, Rowson creates a narrator — a separate being from both Rowson and the protagonist — whose voice muffles the “patriarchal authority” housed in conduct literature and amplifies the female experience, standing in contradiction to the notion that female voices were not viable sources of proper conduct for young readers (Stern 3-4). As mentioned earlier, Rowson’s blatant use of direct address is not exclusive to the “Preface.” Because her goal was to educate women against making “the errors which ruined poor Charlotte” (Rowson 5-6), Rowson directly addresses them throughout her

work. By occasionally swapping the role of narrator with a maternal, guiding voice who directly addresses the audience, Rowson prevents any of her readers from misconstruing her intentions.

Rowson uplifts young post-revolutionary women by subverting the cultural expectations regarding the novel's worth. Not only did she write an entertaining story about a young woman, she educates readers about the dangerous reality of living as an ignorant woman in a patriarchal society. By crafting and selling Charlotte's tragedy, Rowson inspired female readers to educate themselves, use their voices, and pick up the pen to help other young women navigate the world. There is more to gain from sentimental novels than there is to be lost. Rowson's novel was unique in that it simultaneously entertains readers, regardless of age or gender, and teaches them vital life lessons, because *Charlotte Temple* keeps readers engaged with the moral that even the most "honest, lawful" girl can be reduced to "ruin" without proper education, agency, and moral guidance (Rowson 92, 103).

## Works Cited

- Baker, Anne. "Tempestuous Passages: Storms, Revolution, and the Status of Women in Rowson's Fiction." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 38 no. 1, 2011, p. 205-221. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/saf.2011.0012.
- Baym, Nina. "Women's Novels and Women's Minds: An Unsentimental View of Nineteenth-Century American Women's Fiction." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1998, p. 335. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.2307/1346104.
- Brown, Herbert R. "The Great American Novel." *American Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1935, pp. 1-14. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2920328](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2920328).
- C. R. "Thoughts on the FEMALE LITERATURE of the Present Age." *Lady's Magazine; or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to Their Use & Amusement*, vol. 8, Oct. 1777, p. 538. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=h9h&AN=35806948&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=h9h&AN=35806948&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- Davidson, Cathy. "Ideology and Genre: The Rise of the Novel in America." *History of the Book in American Culture*, American Antiquarian Society, Oct. 29, 1986.
- Desiderio, Jennifer. "'Oh That I Were a Man!': Susanna Rowson's Lesson on Marital Entrapment." *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, vol. 34, no. 1, June 2017, pp. 151-161. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edspmu&AN=edspmu.S1534064317100155&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edspmu&AN=edspmu.S1534064317100155&site=eds-live&scope=site).
- Epley, Steven. "Introduction." *Susanna Rowson: Sentimental Prophet of Early American Literature*, Northwestern University Press, 2016.

- Fordyce, James. *Excerpt from Sermons for Young Women* (1766). "On the Character and Conduct of the FEMALE SEX." *Lady's Magazine; or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to Their Use & Amusement*, vol. 7, May 1776, pp. 265–268. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=h9h&AN=35993931&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=h9h&AN=35993931&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- Fuller, Margaret. 1843. From *The Great Lawsuit. The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*, Edited by Lawrence Buell, Modern Library, 2006, pp. 301-320.
- Henderson, Desirée. "Windows on Writing: Susanna Rowson and the Scene of Female Authorship." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 49 no. 2, 2017, p. 149-169. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/sdn.2017.0014.
- Homestead, Melissa J., and Camryn Hansen. "Susanna Rowson's Transatlantic Career." *Early American Literature*, vol. 45, no. 3, Nov. 2010, pp. 619–654. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1353/eal.2010.0031.
- Keralis, Spencer D. C. "Pictures of Charlotte: The Illustrated Charlotte Temple and Her Readers." *Book History*, vol. 13, 2010, pp. 25–57. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/40930527](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40930527).
- Leonora. "On the Character and Conduct of the FEMALE SEX, and the Advantages to Be Derived by Young Men from the Society of VIRTUOUS WOMEN." *Lady's Magazine; or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to Their Use & Amusement*, vol. 7, Feb. 1776, pp. 62–64. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=h9h&AN=35993814&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=h9h&AN=35993814&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

- Mulford, Carla. "Susanna Rowson and Her Critics, Moving Beyond Charlotte Temple: A Foreword." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 38, no. 1–2, 2011, pp. vii–vii. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1353/saf.2011.0000.
- Rowson, Susanna. *Charlotte Temple* (1794). Edited by Cathy N. Davidson, Oxford University Press, 1986.
- . Davidson, Cathy N., editor. "Introduction." pp. xi–xxxiii.
- Stein, Jordan Alexander. "Are 'American Novels' Novels? *Mardi* and the Problem of Boring Books." *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Edited by Russ Castronovo, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 42–58.
- . "Introduction: Form and Format." *When Novels Were Books*, Harvard University Press, 2020. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/j.ctvscxtg1.
- Stern, Julia. "Working through the Frame: 'Charlotte Temple' and the Poetics of Maternal Melancholia." *Arizona Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4, Winter 1993, pp. 1–32. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=31h&AN=45865968&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America* (1835). The Floating Press, 2009, pp. 887–896. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=313783&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
- Tucker, David H., et. al. "History of Publishing." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Oct. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/publishing>.
- White, Ed. "Rowson's Arcs." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 38, no. 1/2, Spring–Autumn 2011, p. 267. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1353/saf.2011.0004.

Zinn, Howard. "The Intimately Oppressed." *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, HarperCollins, 2003, pp. 103-124.