

Eliza wharton vs the common woman



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The common woman in the late 1700s was clearly different from the common woman of today. Only recently has the idea of marriage been contemplated as something unnecessary to a woman's success in society. In Hannah Webster Foster's book, "The Coquette", the writer uses a distinct writing style and vivid details to contrast the common woman of the era with the main character, Eliza, in order to question the effectiveness of morality and the consequences of breaking social order.

Eliza Wharton is the main character in the 1797 epistolary novel by Hannah Webster Foster. Eliza is young, beautiful, intelligent, blunt, and adventurous. Eliza's inclination toward coquettish behavior goes against everything her mother (Mrs. Wharton), her best friend (Lucy Freeman Sumner), her other friends (Julia Granby and Mrs. Richman), and her "fiancé" (Mr. J. Boyer) encourage her to do. Throughout the course of the novel, Eliza describes her thoughts, feelings, dreams, desires, and struggles. More than anything, Eliza longs for the freedom that comes with singleness, and this desire ultimately leads to her end.

The epistolary, or letter, writing style provides a unique way to discover the characteristics of Eliza. Readers have the opportunity to discover Eliza's characteristics from the perspectives of several main characters. The majority of the letters (close to half) are written by Eliza, most commonly to Lucy. Lucy, Major Stanford, and Mr. Boyer are also key letter writers. On occasion, a minor character will write a letter to add to the storyline. Each letter builds on the previous. Some letters rewrite the same occasion, but from different perspectives, giving the reader a round view of Eliza. Readers can see not only how she sees herself, but how everyone else sees her. The

major example - letter forty is written from Mr. Boyer to Mr. Selby, his dear friend. Mr. Boyer describes the pain and agony he felt when he saw Eliza in her garden with Major Sanford, and his ending of their relationship because of it. Here he encloses his letter to Eliza, in which he laments his blindness to her ways and his disgust with Major Sanford:

...And a prepossession for Major Sanford, infused into your giddy mind by frippery, flattery, and artifice of that worthless and abandoned man. Hence you preferred a connection with him...What the result of your coquetry would have been, had I waited for it, I cannot say... I bid a last farewell to these fond hopes, and leave you forever! (864)

Previously, Mr. Boyer had been presented with the idea that Eliza was a coquette, but he refused to see her that way, despite the evidence presented by Mr. Selby. Here, Boyer corrects his perception of who he believes Eliza really is, based on his understanding of her actions. Boyer finally sees Eliza as a coquette, giddy, and faltering. Boyer is preparing for ministry, and the life of a coquette does not line up with his career or what a "common woman" is. With this in mind, Boyer makes his move to separate himself from her. He recognizes that he cannot pursue a woman who does not follow the moral lifestyle of a woman in that day.

Eliza's thoughts vary dramatically in her letter (41):

...I begged him to sit down...my motives were innocent, though they doubtless wore the aspect of criminality, in his view...He replied...my motives were sufficiently notorious! He accused me of treating him ill, of rendering him the dupe of coquetting artifice, of having an intrigue with

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Major Sanford, and declared his determination to leave me forever...There was too much reason in support...When I saw that he was gone...I fainted. (870)

Eliza, on the other hand, does not see herself as a coquette. Eliza simply does not want to be married yet, " Let me then enjoy that freedom which I so highly prize" (823). She considers marriage to be " the tomb of friendship" (830). She believes her motives of being involved with both men are completely innocent. She realizes that Mr. Boyer suddenly sees her differently, and she wants to " fix" his perception, but there is too much evidence against her. Eliza feels trapped by her own actions. She lost her " fiancé" because he believes she is a coquette, which is the exact opposite of the image she was going for.

In fact, Eliza has been quite blunt and honest with Boyer and how she feels about him. In response to a desire for marriage, Eliza tells Boyer, " You must either quit the subject [of marriage], or leave me to the exercise of my free will, which perhaps may coincide with your present wishes" (832). Eliza also openly tells Boyer that she would prefer friendship, " Well then, said he, if it must be so, let it be esteem or friendship. Indeed, sir, said I, you are entitled to them both" (830). She even went so far to cut off Boyer's letter writing of marriage, " In regard to the particular subject of your's [sic] I shall be silent. Ideas of that kind are better conveyed, on my part, by words, than by the pen" (843). Eliza makes it very clear to Boyer that she is not looking for marriage yet, but she will gladly accept him as a friend. Boyer does not take this to heart, which is why he sees her as a coquette and a promise breaker. Eliza's actions prove she does not cherish Boyer like he cherishes her, but <https://assignbuster.com/eliza-wharton-vs-the-common-woman/>

the loss of him proves to be too much, " When I saw that he was gone; that he had actually forsaken me, I fainted" (870), and even " I was insensible of my regard for Mr. Boyer, till this fatal separation took place. His merit and worth now appear in the brightest colors" (873). Eliza breaks at the loss of a man she did not seem to care about, which ultimately shocks everyone close to her.

Eliza is not as blunt with Major Sanford, and her friends are not pleased with this, continually talking of Sanford's " rake" behavior. Eliza even wonders aloud to Lucy, " But is it not an adage generally received, that a ' reformed rake makes the best husband'?" (846). Eliza is more receptive of Sanford, telling Lucy, " What shall I say about this extraordinary man? Shall I own to you, my friend, that he is pleasing to me? His person, his manners, his situation, all combine to charm my fancy; and to lively imagination, strew the path of life with flowers" (828). Sanford takes this attitude as interest from Eliza, but when she tells him in the garden that she is choosing to be with Boyer, he erupts. Sanford makes no move towards marriage with Eliza, but does not want her with anyone else. When Eliza realizes this trap, she makes her move, " I must leave you, said I. Where will you go? Said he. I will go and try to retrieve my character. It has suffered greatly by this fatal interview" (869). Eliza separates herself from Sanford once she realizes Boyer has left her, but in the end, Eliza ends up in the same circle as him, and even pregnant with his child.

At the beginning of the novel, Eliza tells Lucy she will not live the lifestyle of a coquette - a lifestyle looked down upon by society. She writes, " I believe I shall never again resume those airs, which you term coquettish, but which I

think I deserve a softer appellation; as they proceed from an innocent heart” (820). From the start, Eliza expresses her motive of innocence, but her actions portray a different one. Eliza, after Boyer leaves, prefers to stay to herself for fear of the gossip among the people. She does not want everyone to see her as a coquette. She believes she has made it clear what her intentions are, but the public does not seem to understand her.

Eliza lives in a time that pushes marriage as the ultimate goal for women. Marriage signifies completion, not only spiritually, but for the women who now have the opportunity to raise a family. Eliza’s closest friend suddenly “gave her hand to the amiable and accomplished Mr. George Sumner” (856). Even Sanford, a male, only wants to marry for money, “Whenever I do submit to be shackled, it must be from a necessity of mending my fortune” (829). Eliza’s free spirit challenges the idea of marriage for convenience. She certainly does not mind having suitors though, “Why should I refuse the polite attentions of this gentleman? They smoothe [sic] the rugged path of life, and wonderfully accelerate the lagging wheels of time” (866). Contrary to popular belief at the time, what Eliza is doing is not morally wrong. The only sin Eliza commits is when Sanford has “full possession” (897) of her. Before this, Eliza was simply entertaining the attractions of two different men. There were no sexual advances, which were considered highly immoral in that day. Eliza’s desire for simple friendship is pure, but she also voices a desire for social pleasure, “If I am to become a recluse, let me, at least, enjoy those amusements, which are suited to my taste, a short time first” (866). Eliza enjoys parties and social gatherings, and does not want to be stuck in a marriage that does not allow her to participate in these. Her fear is

that marriage will be a noose around her neck, similar to the attitude of Sanford.

Eliza Wharton is nothing close to the common woman of the day. Eliza defies standards of monogamy by entertaining two suitors. She defies the standard of mortality by sleeping with Sanford. She defies the common practice of marriage by refusing to settle down. She defies domestication by frequently attending parties and social gatherings. She defies the idea that a woman should be dependent on a man by being independent. Hannah Webster Foster effectively created a female character who defies social norms and questions the importance of morality in her day. That character - Eliza Wharton.