

WOMAN WORD: ANGLO-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITE THE NOVEL

THE VAGINA LETTER ASSIGNMENT

“Oh my friend, I am undone!”

—Hannah Foster, *The Coquette*

“I bet you’re worried. I was worried. . . . I was worried about vaginas.”

—Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*

The letter is a fascinating literary genre. It is a past document—it literally fixes history—and yet each time a letter is read, it becomes both active and present-tense. Letter writing is a private act and yet often becomes part of public discourse. It is a genre that crosses the factual with the fictional; it serves both individual and community functions; it’s pop culture as well as one of the highest forms of art; it carries the “trace” of the person who wrote it, in literal skin cells and in the form of handwriting; and it is a vehicle for dissent yet also a container of collective idea or civic will.

There is also a cultural psychology held within the letter, for it depicts human desire. Culturally, Americans demonstrate their on-going interest in the letter by making such books as Frank Warrens’ Post Secrets series a national sensation; by wanting to write, receive, and see various love letters (a current Warren knock-off is titled *Other People’s Love Letters*); by continuing to create mystique around stolen (or, rather, purloined) and lost letters; by holding on to shoeboxes of old letters long after the senders are either dead or long gone; by pouring money into archives that house “national letters” because we Americans see them as constituting a material repository of country, culture, and citizenship. Letters articulate nations. Letters articulate selves. And, fundamentally, letters articulate relationships—since almost every letter is a vehicle between two parties, a writer and a reader.

Thus, for this assignment, I ask that you write a letter—but not as you, yourself. Instead, I want you to follow a similar process to Hannah Foster and take a real-world woman (in Foster’s case, it was the infamous Elizabeth Whitman), gather information on her, and then create a fictional character who writes a letter about her anxieties and desires having to do with her vagina. More specifically, I ask that you interview a woman about her vagina (your beginning interview questions are below); that you then take the information you gather about the woman and her attitudes about her vagina; and that you then create a fictional individual from your woman who writes—believe it or not—a letter to her own vagina. In a way, Eliza Wharton sends letters to vaginas throughout *The Coquette*, although obviously, given her cultural context, she can’t name Lucy, Julia, Mrs. Richman, or her own mother as “vaginas.” Yet *The Coquette* is rife with women’s words on vaginas—it constitutes “women’s talk” in America at the end of the eighteenth century, and, quite specifically, that talk is about approving certain vaginas, suspecting others, outright rejecting a few, and, finally, forgiving some.

So, for this paper, you must:

DO A VAGINA INTERVIEW

Make sure to choose a woman to interview who you know well, although it doesn’t have to be someone who will be comfortable giving you the interview. The most important thing is that you not make someone feel pestered or pursued—for a vagina interview could, of course, come across as a form of sexual harassment. So ask someone who you have a certain amount of intimacy with: a mother, a sister, a friend, a girlfriend, a grandmother, perhaps a teacher or a professor (depending on your relationship), perhaps a minister (ditto on relationship), perhaps an employer (dittoing the ditto). Even though Eve Ensler interviews a six-year-old girl, I urge that you not ask anyone under sixteen, and if you do talk with someone that young, make sure you get permission from her caregiver (who could be, of course, your own mom or dad). Then, interview your woman about her vagina, beginning with the following questions, which are taken directly from Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues*:

If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?
 If your vagina could speak, what would it say?
 What does your vagina smell like?
 What does your vagina remind you of?
 What's special about your vagina?

After you ask these questions, please think of at least five more of your own and ask those as well. Try to follow-up all ten of your initial questions with secondary ones; get as much material as you can. (For example, after asking “If your vagina could speak, what would it say?,” you might follow up that question with “Would it speak differently to a lover than it would to a doctor? What would it say to drug companies? How about oceans? Babies? Bathtubs? Underwear? Tampons? Bicycle seats? What would your vagina say to you?,” etc.) “Why?” and “how?” are excellent follow-up questions to ask each and every time.

Type up your questions and the answers you receive; you'll need to turn in your interview with the assignment itself. As with all out-of-class assignments, this one should be spell-checked and clean.

WRITE A VAGINA LETTER

Once you've completed your interview, in order to write your vagina letter, you'll need to create a character out of the person you've talked to and ask yourself what situation would motivate your character to write such an odd letter. In other words, give your character a backstory—what's going on in her life? Does she write to her vagina because she's just lost her virginity? Because she's pregnant? Because she's been raped? Does she write to her vagina because she works as a prostitute? Because she's never had sex? Because she's going through menopause? Does she write to her vagina because she's joined a nudist colony? Because she's about to undergo a sex-change operation? Because her own daughter just got her first period? Make sure you have a reason—a context—for your character's letter and use that context as the basis for, the motivation behind, writing the letter. Obviously, Eliza's reason for writing all those letter about her vagina had to do with being 35 or 36 (she dies at 37) and unmarried—in other words, given her cultural context, she was over-the-hill and yet not interested in becoming a dreaded “spinster”; she was unable to work outside the home and have a “career,” unable to have a child outside of wedlock, unable to have a sexual life outside of marriage, and trying desperately to figure out a life for herself given all of these constraints. In other words, whatever backstory you come up with should be about your character's vagina in relation to its cultural context—Eliza's letters are a “vagina monologue” for the 18th century; your letter should be a “vagina monologue” for the 21st.

Once you've figured out your character's backstory. . .write your letter. Here's the thing: please write it long-hand, with a pen on actual paper. Because I can't specify how many pages your paper should be when it's hand-written, I ask that you aim for 1,250 words, which is approximately two pages, single-spaced, or four pages, double-spaced. And even though it's hand-written, I still expect you to spell-check yourself.

Do your very best not to write in mass generalizations or strings of clichés; “you're hot and bothered, vagina” or “it's been a long dry spell, dear vagina” or “I just want to make you happy, vagina” are phrases I ask that you avoid at all costs (to use yet another cliché). The best vagina letters will have attitude—will have a clear, compelling, unique voice—and will utilize both the interview itself as well as the writer's own creativity to create a vivid, detailed, descriptive story about a female character in some kind of crisis with or about her vagina. Don't be coy. Let the vagina know what's going on, what's up. And pull directly from the interview answers—that's your raw material, after all.