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# UNIT 1 : INTRODUCTION TO MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objective
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Key Points on Mary Wollstonecraft
- 1.3 Key Terms associated with Mary Wollstonecraft
  - 1.3.1 A Vindication of the Rights of Woman
  - 1.3.2 Reflections on the Revolution in France
  - 1.3.3 A Vindication of the Rights of Men
- 1.4 Woman's Voice at the Age of Enlightenment
- 1.5 Education Theory
- 1.6 Social and Cultural Background
  - 1.6.1 The Age
  - 1.6.2 Position of Women
- 1.7 Let us Sum up

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVE

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After going this unit, you will be able to:

- Know about the life and time of Mary Wollstonecraft.
- Get an insight of Feminism that Mary Wollstonecraft has portrayed.
- Know about the Human Rights and duties that has been elongated in this text.
- Get to know about the voice of women during the period of Enlightenment.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759- 1797) belonged to a circle of intellectuals in London who were active supporters of revolutionary ideals and fervor. Under the leadership of Richard Price (1723-179') they upheld the secession of the American colonies from British rule in 1775 and also supported the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789. The group was influenced by the idealist seventeenth century English philosopher John Locke. Locke's empiricism had led him to postulate that individuals are born free, are subject to reason and the law of moral behavior, Government by the state should be minimal and should be seen as a public service. The Lockean legacy of persuasion by an appeal to reason, I think, colors Wollstonecraft's own work. Her first publication was on the same subject to which she would return in 'Vindication', namely, the education of women. This was titled

Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (1787) and was followed by A Vindication of the Rights of Man (1790) in which she supported the cause of the French revolution. The text with which you and I are concerned was published two years after that. Wollstonecraft married William Goodwin, also a revolutionary thinker, in 1797. Her important books however predate their marriage. See what you make of the following account of Mary Wollstonecraft and her circle. These thinkers may be called the radical heirs of the Lockeian natural rights school. They used Lockeian arguments to demand full equality of civil and political rights and the abolition of all aristocratic privileges which interfered with the operation of equality of opportunity in the sense of careers open to talents. They were middle-class democrats with an individualist social and political theory (Charvet, 15). First, notice the way in which (it is said) the radicalism of Wollstonecraft and her group was tempered by Locke's commitment to reason and natural behavior. Next notice that a claim is being made for equality of opportunity based on equality of value. The underlying logic runs like this: all people -regardless of class or gender - are equally open to reason and therefore have an equal right to be treated rationally. Then keep an eye open for the equation being worked out between individual happiness and the good of society. Finally be alive to the way in which the class-specific nature of Wollstonecraft and her peers might have reduced their radicalism. This is a criticism you will meet in any discussion of Woolf as well, as 3.4.1 will show. For the moment though, I will try to examine the validity of these arguments against Wollstonecraft's context and text.

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## 1.2 KEY POINTS ON MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

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- Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was an English writer, philosopher, and advocate of women's rights. She was the major female voice of the Enlightenment. Until the late 20th century, however, Wollstonecraft's life, received more attention than her writing.
- The majority of Wollstonecraft's early works focus on education. She advocates educating children into the emerging middle-class ethos: self-discipline, honesty, frugality, and social contentment. She also advocates the education of women, a controversial topic at the time and one which she would return to throughout her career.
- In response to Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), which was a defense of constitutional monarchy, aristocracy, and the Church of England, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) attacks aristocracy and advocates republicanism.
- *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. In it, Wollstonecraft argues that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society, and claims that women

are essential to the nation because they educate its children and because they could be “companions” to their husbands, rather than just wives.

- Scholars of feminism still debate to what extent Wollstonecraft was, indeed, a feminist; while she does call for equality between the sexes in particular areas of life, such as morality, she does not explicitly state that men and women are equal.
- Wollstonecraft addresses her writings to the middle class, and represents a class bias by her condescending treatment of the poor.

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## **1.3 KEY TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT**

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### **1.3.1 A Vindication of the Rights of Woman**

A 1792 work by the 18th-century British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft that is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. In it, Wollstonecraft argues that women should have an education commensurate with their position in society, claiming that women are essential to the nation because they educate its children and because they could be “companions” to their husbands, rather than just wives.

### **1.3.2 Reflections on the Revolution in France**

A political pamphlet written by the Irish statesman Edmund Burke and published in 1790. One of the best-known intellectual attacks against the French Revolution, it is a defining tract of modern conservatism as well as an important contribution to international theory.

### **1.3.3 A Vindication of the Rights of Men**

A 1790 political pamphlet written by the 18th-century British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, which attacks aristocracy and advocates republicanism. It was the first response in a pamphlet war sparked by the publication of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), a defense of constitutional monarchy, aristocracy, and the Church of England.

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## **1.4 WOMAN’S VOICE AT THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT**

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was an English writer, philosopher, and advocate of women’s rights. During her brief career, she wrote novels, treatises, a travel narrative, a history of the French Revolution, a conduct book, and a children’s book. Until the late 20th century, Wollstonecraft’s life, which encompassed an illegitimate

child, passionate love affairs, and suicide attempts, received more attention than her writing. After two ill-fated affairs, with Henry Fuseli and Gilbert Imlay (by whom she had a daughter, Fanny Imlay), Wollstonecraft married the philosopher William Godwin, one of the forefathers of the anarchist movement. She died at the age of 38, eleven days after giving birth to her second daughter, leaving behind several unfinished manuscripts. The second daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, became an accomplished writer herself as Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.

After Wollstonecraft's death, her widower published a memoir (1798) of her life, revealing her unorthodox lifestyle, which inadvertently destroyed her reputation for almost a century. However, with the emergence of the feminist movement at the turn of the twentieth century, Wollstonecraft's advocacy of women's equality and critiques of conventional femininity became increasingly important. Today, Wollstonecraft is regarded as one of the founding feminist philosophers, and feminists often cite both her life and work as important influences.

### The Image of Mary Wollstonecraft



Mary Wollstonecraft by John Opie (c. 1797), National Portrait Gallery, London

Despite the controversial topic, the *Rights of Woman* received favorable reviews and was a great success. It was almost immediately released in a second edition in 1792, several American editions appeared, and it was translated into French. It was only the later revelations of her personal life that resulted in negative views towards Wollstonecraft, which persisted for over a century.

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## 1.5 EDUCATION THEORY

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The majority of Wollstonecraft's early works focus on education. She assembled an anthology of literary extracts "for the improvement of young women" entitled *The Female Reader*. In both her conduct book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and her children's book *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), Wollstonecraft advocates educating children into the emerging middle-class ethos of self-discipline, honesty, frugality, and social contentment. Both books also

emphasize the importance of teaching children to reason, revealing Wollstonecraft's intellectual debt to the important 17th-century educational philosopher John Locke. Both texts also advocate the education of women, a controversial topic at the time, and one which she would return to throughout her career. Wollstonecraft argues that well-educated women will be good wives and mothers, and ultimately contribute positively to the nation.

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## 1.6 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

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### 1.6.1 The Age

**Perhaps the most exhilarating description of this age is that given by Wordsworth.**

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive  
But to be young was very Heaven !  
O times In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways  
Of custom, law and stature, took at once  
The attraction of a country in romance !  
When Reason seem the most to assert her rights,  
When most intent on making of herself  
A prime enchantress - to assist the work,  
Which then was going forward in her name !  
(Prelude- ix, 108- 1 16)

The American Revolution had first alerted England to the stirrings of nationalism when the thirteen colonies had banded together to secede from England, hitherto the mother-country. 'It was a civil war, not a war between two nations, though when the battle-smoke subsided two nations were standing there erect' (Trevelyan, 554). The spirit of liberation was further strengthened by the French Revolution which had as its stated ideals liberty, equality and fraternity. If you look at the first extract from the Prelude where Wordsworth speaks of the newly-established French Republic - you will I think find that he is enthusiastic about the liberation of the spirit that he associates with the overthrow of the old order in France. The old order or ancient regime as it was known comprised the monarchy, the Roman Catholic Church and the aristocracy. At the same time you will notice the way in which Wordsworth is very clear that the spirit of revolution and the spirit of reason go hand in hand. On the level of theory many thinkers in Europe believed passionately in the alliance of these forces.

It was this belief in the power of reason to bring about social revolution that helps explain the proliferation of books on the subject of education since - if reason could accomplish so much - it was logical that people's minds should be trained to make them obedient to reason. Wordsworth's Prelude and Jean Jacques Rousseau's Emile

are both concerned with the theme of education and the training of the mind.

Wollstonecraft's 'Vindication' is at least in part a reaction to the latter since it is concerned specifically with the education of women as Rousseau's text is concerned with that of men.

### 1.6.2 Position of Women

It was Rousseau who had set out the following plan for the education of women, which is an indication of their position in society: 'For my part, I would have a young Englishwoman cultivate her agreeable talents in order to lease her future husband with as much care and assiduity as a young Circassian cultivates hers, to tit her for the harem of a Circassian bashaw' (Wollstonecraft, 95). In other words middle and upper-middle class women could aspire at the most to an education that would prepare them for a companionate marriage. This was a marriage in which the wife - as Rousseau suggests here - would be trained to be a pleasant companion for her husband just as in the Middle East women were trained to be members of a harem who would please the pasha (bashaw) or ruler.

Women writers in general and novelists in particular were yet to come. In other chapters of 'Vindication' it is clear that one of Wollstonecraft's problems is that she hardly finds any women writer whom she can cite with respect. She dismisses Hester Piozzi and Madame de Stael as undertaking supporters of Samuel Johnson and Rousseau, clear victims of conditioning by patriarchy and finds she has few role-models left to recommend. Catherine Macaulay and Mrs Chapone are the only two precursors on the theme of women's education whom Wollstonecraft can feature with dignity. The depressed condition of women then was marked by an enfeebling education, no career, no economic independence and no sense of a support-network with women achievers. Wollstonecraft's text in. I think, both an analysis and a casualty of this state of affairs.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Write a few lines on Mary Wollstonecraft, her birth and her life. (within 100-150 words)

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- 2) What was the position of women during the time of Mary Wollstonecraft
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- 3) Write a few lines about 'Education Theory'. (Within 100-150 words)
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## 1.7 LET US SUM UP

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This unit will give you an elaborative explanation about Mary Wollstonecraft, her writings and her life. This unit shall also put light on the condition of women during her time and the evolution of women. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was an English writer, philosopher, and advocate of women's rights. She was the major female voice of the Enlightenment. Until the late 20th century, however, Wollstonecraft's life, received more attention than her writing. After Wollstonecraft's death, her widower published a [\*Memoir\*](#) (1798) of her life, revealing her unorthodox lifestyle, which inadvertently destroyed her reputation for almost a century. However, with the emergence of the [\*\*feminist movement\*\*](#) at the turn of the twentieth century, Wollstonecraft's advocacy of women's equality and critiques of conventional femininity became increasingly important.

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## UNIT 2 : A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objective
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 A Vindication of the Rights of Man
- 2.3 A Vindication of the Rights of Women
  - 2.3.1 Its Constituency
  - 2.3.2 Its Content
- 2.4 Its contribution
  - 2.4.1 Immediately
  - 2.4.2 Subsequently
- 2.5 Let Us sum up

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVE

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After reading the following unit you will be able to:

- Get a knowledge about one of the most talked about works of Mary Wollstonecraft “A Vindication of the Rights of Man” and “A Vindication of the Rights of Women”.
- Analyse the reflections through which these vindications were written.
- Get an idea how Wollstonecraft provokes the middle class women to evolve and lead an independent and positive life.
- Know about her republican virtue and virtues she passes to other women as inspiration.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written against the tumultuous background of the [French Revolution](#) and the debate that it spawned in Britain. In a lively and sometimes vicious pamphlet war, now referred to as the "Revolution Controversy," British political commentators addressed topics ranging from representative government to human rights to the separation of church and state. Wollstonecraft first entered this fray in 1790 with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, a response to [Edmund Burke's](#) *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), the text which initially sparked this heated six-year printed exchange.<sup>[21]</sup> In his *Reflections*, Burke criticizes the view of many British thinkers and writers who had welcomed the early stages of the French Revolution. While they saw the revolution as analogous to Britain's own [Glorious Revolution](#) in 1688, which had restricted the powers of the monarchy, Burke argued that the appropriate



historical analogy was the [English civil war \(1642-1651\)](#) in which [Charles I](#) had been executed in 1649, because he viewed the French Revolution as the violent overthrow of a legitimate government. In *Reflections* he argues that citizens do not have the right to overthrow their government; because civilization, including governments, is the result of social and political consensus, its traditions cannot be challenged the result would be endless anarchy. One of the key arguments of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men*, published just six weeks after Burke's *Reflections*, is that traditions, specifically political traditions, have no authority to confer or deny rights; rights, she argues, should be conferred because they are reasonable and just, regardless of their basis in tradition.

([https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Feminism/Literature/A\\_Vindication\\_of\\_the\\_Rights\\_of\\_Woman](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Feminism/Literature/A_Vindication_of_the_Rights_of_Woman))

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## 2.2 A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN

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Published in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which was a defense of constitutional monarchy, aristocracy, and the Church of England, and an attack on Wollstonecraft's friend, Richard Price, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) attacks aristocracy and advocates republicanism. Wollstonecraft attacked not only monarchy and hereditary privilege, but also the gendered language that Burke used to defend and elevate it. Burke associated the beautiful with weakness and femininity, and the sublime with strength and masculinity. Wollstonecraft turns these definitions against him, arguing that his theatrical approach turn Burke's readers—the citizens—into weak women who are swayed by show. In her first unabashedly feminist critique, Wollstonecraft indicts Burke's defense of an unequal society founded on the passivity of women.

In her arguments for republican virtue, Wollstonecraft invokes an emerging middle-class ethos in opposition to what she views as the vice-ridden aristocratic code of manners. Influenced by Enlightenment thinkers, she believed in progress, and derides Burke for relying on tradition and custom. She argues for rationality, pointing out that Burke's system would lead to the continuation of slavery, simply because it had been an ancestral tradition.

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## 2.3 A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

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*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. In it, Wollstonecraft argues that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society, and then proceeds to redefine that position, claiming that women are essential to the nation because they educate its children and because they could be "companions" to their husbands rather than just wives. Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft maintains that they are human beings deserving of the same

fundamental rights as men. Large sections of the *Rights of Woman* respond vitriolically to the writers, who wanted to deny women an education.

While Wollstonecraft does call for equality between the sexes in particular areas of life, such as morality, she does not explicitly state that men and women are equal. She claims that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. However, such statements of equality stand in contrast to her statements respecting the superiority of masculine strength and valour. Her ambiguous position regarding the equality of the sexes have since made it difficult to classify Wollstonecraft as a modern feminist. Her focus on the rights of women does distinguish Wollstonecraft from most of her male Enlightenment counterparts. However, some of them, most notably Marquis de Condorcet, expressed a much more explicit position on the equality of men and women. Already in 1790, Condorcet advocated women's suffrage.

Wollstonecraft addresses her text to the middle class, which she describes as the "most natural state," and in many ways the *Rights of Woman* is inflected by a bourgeois view of the world. It encourages modesty and industry in its readers and attacks the uselessness of the aristocracy. But Wollstonecraft is not necessarily a friend to the poor. For example, in her national plan for education, she suggests that, after the age of nine, the poor, except for those who are brilliant, should be separated from the rich and taught in another school.

### **Excerpt from the Introduction**

After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy motions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization, which has hitherto taken place in the world, has been very partial. I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? profound conviction, that the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove, that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers that are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present

century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

In a treatise, therefore, on female rights and manners, the works which have been particularly written for their improvement must not be overlooked; especially when it is asserted, in direct terms, that the minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement; that the books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same tendency as more frivolous productions; and that, in the true style of Mahometanism, they are only considered as females, and not as a part of the human species, when improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction, which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural scepter in a feeble hand.

Yet, because I am a woman, I would not lead my readers to suppose, that I mean violently to agitate the contested question respecting the equality and inferiority of the sex; but as the subject lies in my way, and I cannot pass it over without subjecting the main tendency of my reasoning to misconstruction, I shall stop a moment to deliver, in a few words, my opinion. In the government of the physical world, it is observable that the female, in general, is inferior to the male. The male pursues, the female yields—this is the law of nature; and it does not appear to be suspended or abrogated in favor of woman. This physical superiority cannot be denied—and it is a noble prerogative! But not content with this natural pre-eminence, men endeavor to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration which men, under the influence of their senses, pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts, or to become the friends of the fellow creatures who find amusement in their society.

I am aware of an obvious inference: from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If, by this appellation, men mean to inveigh against their ardor in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be, against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind all those who view them with a philosophical eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine.

This discussion naturally divides the subject. I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties; and afterwards I shall more particularly point out their peculiar designation.

I wish also to steer clear of an error, which many respectable writers have fallen into; for the instruction which has hitherto been addressed to women, has rather been

applicable to ladies, if the little indirect advice, that is scattered through Sandford and Merton, be excepted; but, addressing my sex in a firmer tone, I pay particular attention to those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural state. Perhaps the seeds of false refinement, immorality, and vanity have ever been shed by the great. Weak, artificial beings raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature unnatural manner, undermine the very foundation of virtue, and spread corruption through the whole mass of society. As a class of mankind they have the strongest claim to pity. The education of the rich tends to render them vain and helpless, and the unfolding mind is not strengthened by the practice of those duties which dignify the human character. They only live to amuse themselves, and by the same law which in nature invariably produces certain effects, they soon only afford barren amusement.

But as I purpose taking a separate view of the different ranks of society, and of the moral character of women, in each, this hint is, for the present, sufficient; and I have only alluded to the subject, because it appears to me to be the very essence of an introduction to give a cursory account of the contents of the work it introduces.

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists. I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them, that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.

Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.

This is a rough sketch of my plan; and should I express my conviction with the energetic emotions that I feel whenever I think of the subject, the dictates of experience and reflection will be felt by some of my readers. Animated by this important object, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style—I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, nor in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart. I shall be

employed about things, not words and, anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation.

These pretty nothings, these caricatures of the real beauty of sensibility, dropping glibly from the tongue, vitiate the taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth; and a deluge of false sentiments and over-stretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, render the domestic pleasures insipid, that ought to sweeten the exercise of those severe duties, which educate a rational and immortal being for a nobler field of action.

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavor by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments: meanwhile, strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, the only way women can rise in the world—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry, they act as such children may be expected to act: they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for the seraglio! Can they govern a family, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?

<https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/british-literature-through-history/s06-05-mary-wollstonecraft-1759-1797.html>

### **2.3.1 Its Constituency**

This dual character of 'Vindication' is immediately apparent in its constituency. By definition - given the appalling contemporary position of women and their lack of education - it is largely men who comprise the circle to which 'Vindication' is designed to appeal. After all it is they -and here lies the bitter irony - who have to be rationally persuaded to grant women the rights which are their due. The text is dedicated to Bishop Talleyrand of France for whose work on education and on civil liberties Wollstonecraft has great respect. She writes to persuade him - and other like-minded men - that 'when men contend for their freedom and [demand] to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own freedom and [demand] to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own happiness, it ... [ is] inconsistent and unjust to subjugate women, even though you firmly believe that you are acting in the manner best calculated to promote their happiness' (Wollstonecraft, 1 1).

Wollstonecraft's text is addressed to women in the sense that it concerns their rights and education. It is an open question however to how sympathetic her early women readers found this text.

I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and happiness consists, I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body. ... [and] to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being regardless of the distinction of sex... (Wollstonecraft 5).

How persuasive do you think Wollstonecraft's first women readers found her? I wonder if they found her hatchet-job on the education they had received helpful because it tried to be diagnostic or hard to take when it was prescriptive. Unlike the theorists at whom you and I will look, Wollstonecraft cannot rely on a ready-to-hand audience of women such as Woolf or Showalter can and do marshal. I think this lack of a readymade constituency makes Wollstonecraft perhaps more consciously against the grain than she might otherwise need to and this in turn makes her perhaps a thought more prescriptive than persuasive. What do you think?

### **2.3.2 Its Content**

The thesis of Chapter VI is clear from its title which states that an early association of ideas has upon the character. Consequently, says Wollstonecraft, education is integral to the development of individual identity so that this dependence of the mind on associations and impressions needs the rigorous discipline of education if it is to be anything other than slavish. This need for education is even more compelling in the case of women than it is for men. Women do not have the subsequent access to a career or to business that men have and are hence more bound in an irrational way to first impressions. Untutored as women's minds are, they exist in a state of ignorance and slavish dependence on external circumstances and associations. Far from seeing the world in the clear light of reason women are condemned to the enfeebling darkness of bondage to external reality. When women are young and ought to be rationally educated they are taught only superficial graces to please their future husbands. Conversely when they are adults and mature, they are again fobbed off with useless trivia and encouraged to be immature of understanding.' ...females who are made women of when they are mere children, and brought back to childhood when they ought to leave the go-cart forever, have not sufficient strength to efface the super inductions of art that have smothered nature.' This hypothesis is heavily dependent on contemporary philosophy specifically on that of Locke and (more immediately) David Hartley. Hartley (1705-57) sought an explanation for the problems of the mind in the force of reason. His theory of the association of ideas developed the argument that linkages between external circumstances -made by the mind - shaped the identity of an individual. As the opening pages of Chapter VI of 'Vindication' suggest, Wollstonecraft lies heavily on the primacy of reason and on associations. She sees reason as an integral part of nature, including human nature. Wollstonecraft outgrows, I think, the paradigm of the eighteenth century when she uses associationist psychology as the groundwork of her revolution for women's rights. Wollstonecraft builds on this groundwork with data from two sources. The

first is contemporary literature.

The cultural stereotypes generated by literature are shown up in all their impoverishment. The Restoration cult of the rake is shown to do unlimited damage. The Restoration represented in theatre as being a licentious person at heart who conceals his emotional hollowness by using wit as a means of economic and emotional advancement in the world. Ultimately the reformed rake is shown to make the best husband. He preserves his composure and wins the hand of the rich and virtuous heroine. Further, the novel of the age of sensibility had further complicated matters, by re-using the stereotype of the rake with a perverse twist. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48) is a novel which portrays the endurance of its virtuous heroine through a series of oppressions climaxing in her self-sacrificial death. *Clarissa's* father is tyrannical and her society and suitor alike are hypocritical. When Lovelace the rake appears. He seems to both *Clarissa* and the reader to offer a welcome escape. Despite his attractiveness he, too, however is exploitative and contributes to the confusion and the destruction of the heroine. Wollstonecraft quotes Lovelace as an instance of the destructive potential within the figure of the rake. Why does contemporary literature strike Wollstonecraft as pernicious to the cause of women? One reason I think is that whether in its creation of stereotypes or in stray remarks such as that of Pope - it seems to her to promote unthinking antipathy and hostility to women as a reflex action. The more important reason I suspect is related to the second source of her data namely her observation of ordinary life, this causes her to reflect on how easily men and women form incorrect ideas of each other and of their roles in life. Look at this extract:

Men look for beauty and the simper of good-humored docility: women are captivated by easy manners; a gentleman-like man seldom fails to please them; and their thirsty ears eagerly drink the insinuating nothings of politeness, whilst they turn from the unintelligible sounds of the charmer-reason, charm he never so wisely.

Quite a few points seem to be hammered home here. Indeed the extract seems to me to be the essay in miniature. First there is the question of gender-stereotyping which results in a culture generating the images by which it deludes itself. Encouraged by social conditioning (perhaps on account of faulty culture-conditioning and education) both men and women look out for the wrong things in each other. Men \* look for a veneer of attraction that covers docility. Women, more prone to deception on account of their faulty education and on account of poor-quality literature look for men with the appearance and manners of gentlemen but not men of any real worth. I Next the gaps in both the system of education and in literature stand revealed by the test of actual-life experience. Finally women are deafened both by bad education and bad literature to the call of reason which means that knowledge of reality is both denied to them and therefore denied by them as well.

Think for a minute - if you would like to understand this argument in another way - of *Pride and Prejudice* (1817) written within twenty years of Wollstonecraft's text. It

offers the reader some clear examples of the way in which gender- stereotyping deludes and damages men and women. There is Mr.Bennet who 'captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humor which youth and beauty generally give marries an unbelievably silly woman who destroys the happiness of others.' There is Lydia who - fooled by an appearance of smartness thanks to his uniform - is seduced by Wickham. A defective education is thus the root cause of many social and personal problems. Indeed the novel I think is a good illustration of Wollstonecraft's thesis.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is your idea about 'A Vindication of the rights of Man'?

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2. What is your idea about 'A Vindication of the rights of Women'?

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## **2.4 IT'S CONTRIBUTION**

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### **2.4.1 Immediately**

Since the immediate context of 'Vindication' is that of revolution, it must be examined with this in mind. Please allow me the space for an extended quotation to support this statement.

For Mary Wollstonecraft, and those of her contemporaries who were concerned with I the status of women, women's rights were seen in the context of human rights in 1 general. Men and women alike must be involved in revolution. The ideals of liberty



and equality were thought to apply to both men and women. If fraternity made all men brothers, then men must recognize that they had sisters as well. Socialism and feminism were, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, inextricably linked; and Mary Wollstonecraft was a pioneer of such joint ideals. The practical attempts communal living, the visions of a new society where labor and power were evenly distributed, all those social experiments which came after the 'Vindication' had, as their common theme, the prospect of all human beings living in friendly equality with each other. In order to eliminate existing inequalities, distinctions of wealth, of class and of gender must all be equally abolished. (Wollstonecraft vii) What are the points being made here about the immediate impact of the text? First there is the sense that Wollstonecraft's concern for women's rights is a subset of the issue of human rights. Women's rights are to be seen not in a compartment of their own but as part of the ongoing movement for general human emancipation of which the American and French Revolutions are other examples. Next there is the related point of the nexus between the campaign for equality in gender-based issues (feminism) and class-based issues (socialism). Then there is the sense - and this ties up with all that has gone before - that by definition there cannot be one kind of revolution without another taking place as well. For instance, one of the great concerns of Romanticism which is to literature what the French Revolution is to history is the setting up of an ideal society where all distinctions will be wiped out and all will labor for common happiness. People from completely different cultures - Coleridge, Thoreau and Gandhi - have shared this vision and it is one that has to include equal opportunities for women.

I have mixed feelings about this approach to feminism. On the one hand, I agree that it is integral to any social utopia and has to be seen as a part of the ongoing struggle for human rights and liberation. On the other hand I wonder if this merger does not lose feminism its cutting-edge. What do you think?

#### **2.4.2 Subsequently**

Wollstonecraft's crusade for an enabling education for women continues to be a major theme in feminist theories if by education we mean not just a classroom led examinations but the broader notion of social conditioning. In her own country, 1870's saw an explosion in the field of women's education with the founding public schools for women and the establishment of women's college & in London, Oxford and Cambridge. It was precisely this constituency of the educated middle class women which was represented and used by Virginia Woolf.

To my mind though there is a large area of women's experience which Wollstonecraft does not discuss: the area outside marriage: Wollstonecraft's sense of the norm is that of a middle-class woman being better trained so as to be a mm fitting helpmeet. In other words her ideal is still that of the companionate marriage. But what about areas of experience that lie outside this ideal? What about cultures where this is not the norm but the exception? And here I am not thinking of the

career-woman for whom subsequent theories have space. I'm thinking of the subsistence-level uneducated woman who is very often - on the Indian subcontinent - -- the breadwinner in her family.

Ultimately how does Wollstonecraft's theory work for you? Does it give you enough leverage to open new and exciting areas of experience or is it too much a product of its own time and place to do that?

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- 3. What is the contribution of the two Vindications in the world of English Literature?

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- 4. Write about the prime content and constituency of 'The Vindication of the Rights of Women'?

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- 5. What is the major theme of Wollstonecraft's Feminist theory?

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## 2.5 LET US SUM UP

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This unit deals with two of the earliest works of Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft's crusade for an enabling education for women continues to be a major theme in feminist theories if by education we mean not just a classroom lad examinations but the broader notion of social conditioning. Feminism has always been a very complex phenomena during the early 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. There were a myriad of Women writers who actually stood against the autocracy that happened to take place in the lives of women and one of the most convenient ways were by writing. Wollstonecraft has justified the place of women in the society through her works.

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## UNIT 3 : HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE DUTIES THEY INVOLVE

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objective
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The text
- 3.3 Writers Who Have Rendered Women Objects Of Pity, Bordering On Contempt
  - 3.3.1 Rousseau
  - 3.3.2 Further illustration by Rousseau
  - 3.3.3 Wollstonecraft's Debate
- 3.4 Wollstonecraft's verdict
- 3.5 Rousseau's answer
- 3.6 Wollstonecraft's Opinion on A Modest Woman
  - 3.6.1 Wollstonecraft further says
  - 3.6.2 A long footnote quoting Rousseau
  - 3.6.3 End of Rousseau's Footnote
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 Unit End Questions
- 3.9 Let us sum up
- 3.10 Suggested Readings/Attributions

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVE

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After going through the following unit you will be able to:

- Know what are the rights and duties human beings should involve.
- Analyse the simplest truths in the human world through this essay.
- Analyse the laws and virtue that the society binds.
- Analyse the prejudices that the human society lives upon with Wollstonecraft's opinion to eradicate it subtly.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Mary Wollstonecraft says, "The desire to dazzle by riches (the surest route to pre-eminence!), the pleasure of commanding flattering yes-men, and many other complicated low calculations of stupid self-love, have all joined forces in overwhelming the mass of mankind and making 'liberty' a convenient label for

mock patriotism. For while rank and titles are held to be of the utmost importance, before which genius ‘must hide its diminished head’ [quoted from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*], it is almost always disastrous for a nation when an able man without rank or property pushes himself into the limelight”. This talks a lot about how Wollstonecraft highlights the presence of Knowledge above everything else. This part covers a lot of issues and also talks about the duties that a humans are ought to perform that will establish a mindful society.

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## 3.2 THE TEXT

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In the present state of society it seems that we have to go back to first principles in search of the simplest truths, and to fight against some prevailing prejudice for every inch of ground. Let me clear my way by asking some plain questions: the answers to them will probably appear to be as obviously right as the axioms on which reasoning is based; but when they are entangled with various motives of action they are flatly contradicted by men’s words or their conduct. What does man’s pre-eminence over the lower animals consist in? The answer is as clear as ‘A half is less than the whole’; it consists in reason. What acquirement raises one being above another? We spontaneously reply: virtue for what purpose were we given passions? Experience whispers the answer: so that man by struggling with his passions might achieve a degree of knowledge that the lower animals can’t have. So the perfection of our nature and capacity for happiness must be measured by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge that distinguish the individual and direct the laws that bind society; and it is equally undeniable that, taking mankind as a whole, knowledge and virtue naturally flow from the exercise of reason. With the rights and duties of man thus simplified, it seems hardly necessary to illustrate truths that seem so incontrovertible. But such deeply rooted prejudices have clouded reason, and such spurious qualities have taken the name of ‘virtues’, that it is necessary to track the course of reason as it has been tangled in error....so that we can set the simple axiom alongside the deviations from it that circumstances bring. Men generally seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices that they have taken in they can’t tell how, rather than to root them out. Only a strong mind can resolutely form its own principles for a kind of intellectual cowardice prevails, making many men shrink from the task or do it only by halves. Yet the imperfect conclusions that are drawn in this way are often very plausible, because they are built on partial experience, on views that are correct as far as they go but narrow. Going back to first principles, vice [see Glossary] in all its native ugliness slinks away from close investigation; but shallow reasons are always exclaiming that these arguments ‘from first principles’ ‘prove too much’, and that a given course of conduct is ‘expedient’ even if it is rotten at the core. Thus expediency is continually contrasted with simple principles, until truth is lost in a mist of words, virtue is lost in forms [= ‘in mechanical rules of conduct’], and the tempting prejudices that claim the title ‘knowledge’ suppress real knowledge. The most wisely formed society is the one whose constitution is based on the nature of man—that statement, in the abstract, strikes every thinking being so forcibly that it

looks like presumption to try to prove it; but we do need to prove it, or reason will never be able to make prescription [see Glossary] relax its grip. And yet urging prescription as an argument to justify depriving men (or women) of their natural rights is one of the absurd sophisms that daily insult common sense. The bulk of the people of Europe are only very partially civilized. Indeed, it's an open question whether they have acquired any virtues in exchange for the innocence they have lost, comparable with the misery produced by the vices that have been plastered over unsightly ignorance, and the freedom that has been traded away in exchange for glittering slavery. The desire to dazzle by riches (the surest route to pre-eminence!), the pleasure of commanding flattering yes-men, and many other complicated low calculations of stupid self-love, have all joined forces in overwhelming the mass of mankind and making 'liberty' a convenient label for mock patriotism. For while rank and titles are held to be of the utmost importance, before which genius 'must hide its diminished head' [quoted from Milton's *Paradise Lost*], it is almost always disastrous for a nation when an able man without rank or property pushes himself into the limelight. When such a scheming obscure adventurer works to get a cardinal's hat, longing to be ranked with princes or above them, by seizing the triple crown worn by Popes the events involved in this bring unheard-of misery to thousands of people. So much wretchedness has flowed from hereditary honors, riches, and monarchy, that men of lively sensibility have been reduced almost to blasphemy in their attempts to justify God's management of the world. They have represented man as independent of his Maker or as a lawless planet darting from its orbit to steal the celestial fire of reason; and the vengeance of heaven....punished his boldness by introducing evil into the world. Impressed by this view of the misery and disorder that pervaded society, and weary from contending with artificial fools, Rousseau fell in love with solitude; and in his optimism he worked with uncommon eloquence to prove that man is naturally a solitary animal. Misled by his respect for the goodness of God, who certainly for what man of sense and feeling can doubt it gave life only in order to give happiness? He considered evil as....the work of man; not aware that he was exalting one divine attribute at the expense of another that is equally necessary to divine perfection. [Jean-Jacques Rousseau, mentioned many times in his work, had died fourteen years before the present work appeared.]. Constructed on the basis of a false hypothesis, Rousseau's arguments in favor of a state of nature are plausible; but they are unsound, because the assertion that a state of nature is preferable to the most perfect civilization there could be is in effect a charge against supreme wisdom. The paradoxical exclamation: God has made all things right, and evil has been introduced by the creature whom God formed, knowing what he was forming is as unphilosophical as it is impious. The wise Being who created us and placed us here....allowed it to be the case and thus willed it to be the case that our passions should help our reason to develop, because he could see that present evil would produce future good. Could the helpless creature whom God created out of nothing break loose from his providence and boldly learn to know good by practicing evil without his permission? No. How could Rousseau; that energetic advocate for immortality, argue so inconsistently? If mankind had

remained forever in the brutal state of nature, which even Rousseau's magic pen can't paint as a state in which a single virtue took root, it would have been clear....that man was born to run the circle of life and death, and adorn God's garden for some purpose that couldn't easily be reconciled with his [God's] attributes. But if the whole divine plan was to be crowned by rational creatures who would be allowed to rise in excellence through the use of powers given to them for that purpose; if God in his goodness thought fit to bring into existence a creature above the brutes, one who could think and improve himself; why should that incalculable gift be openly called a curse? (A gift? Man was enabled to rise above the state in which sensations gave him the sort of comfort that lower animals are capable of, of course it was a gift!) It might be regarded as a curse if our time in this world was the whole span of our existence; for why should the gracious fountain of life give us passions and the power of reflecting, only to embitter our days and inspire us with mistaken notions of dignity? Why would God lead us from love of ourselves to the sublime emotions aroused by the discovery of his wisdom and goodness, if these feelings weren't launched so as to improve our nature (of which they are a part) and enable us to enjoy a more godlike portion of happiness? Firmly convinced that no evil exists in the world that God didn't intend to occur, I build my belief on the perfection of God. Rousseau strains to prove that all was right originally; a crowd of authors argues that all is now right; and I claim that all will be right. True to his first position which is nearly a state of nature, Rousseau celebrates barbarism, and in his praise of Fabricius [said to be one of the founders of ancient Rome] he forgets that the Romans in conquering the world didn't dream of establishing their own liberty on a firm basis, or of extending the reign of virtue. Eager to support his system, he condemns as vicious [see Glossary] every effort of genius; and in praising savage virtues to the skies he raises to demigod status people who were scarcely human the brutal Spartans, who in defiance of justice and gratitude sacrificed in cold blood the slaves who had served them well. [In 424 BCE the Spartans murdered two thousand helots, i.e. slaves serving as soldiers in the Spartan army. Thucydides wrote: 'The helots were invited to select those of their number who claimed to have most distinguished themselves against the enemy, so that they could be freed. The object was to test them, thinking that the first to claim freedom would be the most apt to rebel. About two thousand were selected and rejoiced in their new freedom; but the Spartans secretly killed each of them.'] Disgusted with artificial manners and virtues, Rousseau didn't sift through the subject but simply threw away the wheat with the chaff, not pausing to consider whether the evils that his ardent soul indignantly rejected were consequences of civilization or vestiges of barbarism. He saw vice trampling on virtue, and seeming-goodness taking the place of the real thing; he saw talents bent by power to sinister purposes; and he never thought of tracing the gigantic harm back to arbitrary power, back to the hereditary distinctions that clash with the mental superiority that naturally raises a man above his fellows. He didn't see that it takes only a few generations for royal power to introduce idiotism into the noble family line, and that it holds out baits to make thousands idle and vicious. [MW adds harsh words about the crimes that bring people to royal status, and about

the feeble passiveness of ‘millions of men’ who have let the royal criminals get away with it. She continues:] when the chief director of a society is instructed only in how to invent crimes, or in the stupid routine of childish ceremonies, how can it not be the case that the society has a poisonous fog hovering over it? [MW’s ‘instructed in’ is ambiguous: she may mean that that’s all he is taught, or that it is all he knows.]....

In circumstances as good as they could possibly be, it would still be impossible for any man to acquire enough knowledge and strength of mind to perform the duties of a king who has been entrusted with uncontrolled power. Think how knowledge and strength of mind must be violated when the sheer fact that the man does become a king poses an insuperable bar to his acquiring either wisdom or virtue, when all his feelings are stifled by flattery, and when thoughtfulness is shut out by pleasure! Surely it is madness to make the fate of thousands depend on the whims of a weak fellow creature whose very position in life puts him necessarily below the poorest of his subjects! But one power should not be thrown down in order to raise up another. Man is weak, and all power intoxicates him; and the way power is misused proves that the more equality there is among men and thus the less power of men over men the more virtue and happiness will reign in society. But this raises an outcry: ‘If we don’t have absolute faith in the wisdom of antiquity, the church is in danger or the state is in danger’. Those who are roused by the sight of human calamity to be so bold as to attack human authority are reviled as despisers of God and enemies of man. These are bitter libels, yet they were levelled at one of the best of men (Dr. Price), whose ashes still preach peace, and whose memory demands a respectful pause when subjects that lay so near his heart are discussed. [Richard Price, who died a year or so before the present work was published, had greatly influenced Mary Wollstonecraft. He had been reviled for his writings on the French Revolution. His *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* is on the website from which the present text came.] Now that I have attacked the ‘sacred’ majesty of kings, you won’t be surprised when I add my firm conviction that every profession whose power depends on large differences of rank is highly injurious to morality.

A standing army, for instance, is incompatible with freedom because strictness and rank are the very sinews of military discipline; and despotism is necessary to give vigour to enterprises that have one person in charge. A spirit inspired by romantic notions of honor a kind of morality based on the fashion of the times can be felt by only a few officers, while the main body must be moved by command, like the waves of the sea; for the strong wind of authority pushes the crowd of subalterns forward, they scarcely know or care why, with headlong fury. [Then as now, ‘subaltern’ mainly meant ‘junior officer’, so the ‘main body’ presumably refers to the main body of the officers. The rank and file are not being talked about here.] ·And armies are harmful in another way·. Nothing can damage the morals of the inhabitants of country towns as much as the occasional residence of a set of idle superficial young men whose only occupation is gallantry, and whose polished manners make vice more dangerous by concealing its ugliness under gay ornamental



drapery. An air of fashion, which is really a badge of slavery, showing that the soul doesn't have a strong individual character, awes simple country people into imitating the vices when they can't catch the slippery graces of social polish. Every military body is a chain of despots who obey and give commands without using their reason, and become dead weights of vice and folly on the community. A man of rank or fortune whose connections guarantee that he will rise has nothing to do but to pursue some extravagant whim; while the needy gentleman who has to rise 'by his merit', as they say, becomes a servile parasite or a vile pander [= 'pimp', or perhaps merely 'person whose job it is to satisfy his superiors' desires'.] Sailors, the gentlemen of the navy, can be described in similar terms, except that their vices [see Glossary] are different and grosser. They are more positively indolent [= 'wholly idle', 'idly idle'] when they aren't performing the ceremonials required by their rank, whereas the insignificant fluttering of soldiers could be called 'active idleness'. More confined to the society of men, sailors acquire a fondness for humor and mischievous tricks; while soldiers, who are often in the company of well-bred women, are infected with a 'sensitive' whiny way of speaking. But whether someone indulges in the sailor's horse-laugh or the soldier's polite simper, mind is equally out of the question. [This next paragraph refers to the Anglican Church, of which MW was a member. A patron was a person, not himself a cleric, who had sole control over who became the well-paid rector or senior parson of a parish; and a curate was a junior parson who did most of the parish work and received a tiny fraction of the rector's income.] Let me extend the comparison to a profession where there is certainly more mind to be found than in the clergy. They have better opportunities for improvement, but rank almost equally cramps their faculties. The blind submission to forms of belief that is imposed at college serves as a training for the curate who most obsequiously respects the opinion of his rector or patron or he does if he means to rise in his profession. There can hardly be a more striking contrast than between the servile, dependent manner of a poor curate and the top-of-the-world manner of a bishop. And the next phrase: the respect and contempt perhaps meaning: the little respect and great contempt they inspire makes the work they do in their separate functions equally useless. It is important to understand that every man's character is to some extent formed by his profession. A man with a good mind may reflect his profession only in superficial ways that wear off as you trace his individuality; while weak, common men have hardly any character except what belongs to their profession.

As society becomes more enlightened, therefore, it should be very careful not to establish bodies of men who are bound to be made foolish or vicious by the very constitution of their profession. In society's infancy when men were just emerging out of barbarism, chiefs and priests must have had unlimited influence because they tapped into the most powerful springs of savage conduct hope and fear. Aristocracy is of course, naturally the first form of government. But clashing interests soon get out of balance, there is a confusion of ambitious struggles, and what emerges is a monarchy and hierarchy. This appears to be the origin of monarchical and priestly power, and the dawn of civilization. But such combustible materials can't be held

down for long; and foreign wars and uprisings at home give the ·common· people a chance to acquire some power, which obliges their rulers to gloss over their oppression with a show of right. Thus as wars, agriculture, commerce, and literature expand the mind, despots are forced to use hidden corruption to keep the power that was initially snatched by open force.<sup>3</sup> And this lurking gangrene is spread most quickly by luxury and superstition, the sure dregs of ambition. The idle puppet of a ·royal· court first becomes a luxurious monster or fastidious pleasure-seeker, and the contagion that his unnatural state spreads becomes the instrument of tyranny. [In this context, ‘luxury’ and its cognates refer to extreme and dissipated pursuit and enjoyment of sensual pleasures.] It is the plague-carrying purple ·of royalty· that makes the progress of civilization a curse, and warps the understanding until men of good sense doubt whether the expansion of intellect will bring more happiness or more misery. But the nature of the poison points out the antidote; if Rousseau had climbed one step higher in his investigation—or if his eye could have pierced the foggy atmosphere that he was hardly willing to breathe—his active mind would have darted forward to contemplate the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization, instead of taking his ferocious flight back to the night of sensual ignorance.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What have you understood about the “Human Rights and the Duties They Involve”?

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2. What happens when the society becomes enlightened?

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### **3.3 WRITERS WHO HAVE RENDERED WOMEN OBJECTS OF PITY, BORDERING ON CONTEMPT**

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#### **3.3.1 Rousseau**

I shall begin with Rousseau, giving a sketch of the character of women in his own words and interspersing comments and reflections. My comments will all spring from a few simple principles, and could be derived from what I have already said; but his argument has been constructed with so much ingenuity that I think I have to attack it in a more detailed manner, and make the application of my principles myself rather than leaving it to the reader. Sophie, says Rousseau, should be as perfect a woman as Émile is a man, and to make her so he has to examine the character that nature has given to the female sex. He then proceeds to argue that woman ought to be weak and passive because she has less bodily strength than man; from which he infers that she was formed to please him and be subject to him, and that making herself agreeable to her master is the grand purpose of her existence. Still, to give a little mock dignity to lust he insists that when a man goes to a woman for pleasure he should not use his strength and should depend on her will.

#### **3.3.2 Further illustration by Rousseau**

So we deduce a third conclusion from the different constitutions of the sexes, namely: The stronger should be master in appearance but should depend on the weaker in fact.... This is because of an invariable law of nature, which goes like this: Nature gives woman a greater ability to arouse desires in man than it has given man to satisfy them; so it nature makes the man dependent on the good pleasure of the woman, and forces him to try to please her in his turn, in order to obtain her consent that he should be stronger. On these occasions, the most delightful circumstance that a man finds in his victory is to be unsure whether she has yielded to his superior strength or whether her inclinations spoke in his favor. The females are usually artful enough to leave this in doubt. Women's understanding in this matter corresponds exactly to their constitution: far from being ashamed of their weakness, they glory in it; their tender muscles make no resistance; they pretend to be unable to lift the smallest burdens, and would blush to be thought robust and strong. What is the purpose of all this? Not merely for the sake of appearing delicate, but....also to prepare the way for being feeble whenever that suits their purposes.

#### **3.3.3 Wollstonecraft's Debate**

If Rousseau is right about woman's duty if pleasing man is the iron bed of fate that her character should be made to fit, stretching or contracting it regardless of moral

and physical distinctions then it does indeed follow that woman ought to sacrifice every other consideration to make herself agreeable to man. But I think it can be shown that practical rules built upon this ignoble base would undermine the purposes of even this life ·as distinct from the after-life·; and that gives me room to doubt whether woman was created for man. ·This means, of course, that I don't accept every sentence of the Bible as literally true. But· if the cry of 'irreligion' or even 'atheism' is raised against me, I will simply declare that if an angel from heaven told me that Moses' beautiful, poetical account of the beginning of the world cosmogony and of the fall of man is literally true, I still couldn't believe what my reason told me was derogatory to the character of the Supreme Being. And having no fear of the devil before my eyes, I venture to call this a suggestion of reason, instead of resting my weakness on the broad shoulders of the first seducer of my frail sex. Once it has been demonstrated that man and woman aren't and oughtn't to be constituted alike in temperament and character, it follows of course that they should not be educated in the same manner. In pursuing the directions of nature they ought indeed to act in concert [= 'their sexual intercourse ought to be a collaborative joint enterprise'], but they shouldn't be engaged in the same employments: the final goal of their activities should be the same, but the means they take to accomplish them, and thus their tastes and inclinations, should be different. Men depend on women only because of their desires; women depend on men because of their desires and also because of their needs. We could survive without them better than they could without us. For this reason, the education of women should always be relative to men. To please us, be useful to us, make us love and esteem them, educate us when we are young, take care of us when we are grown up, advise us, console us, make our lives easy and agreeable— those are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy. Whenever we lose touch with this principle, we run wide of the mark and all the precepts that are given to them contribute neither to their happiness nor to ours. Girls are from their earliest infancy fond of dress. Not content with being pretty, they want to be thought to be pretty.... They are to be governed by talking to them of what 'people will think' of their behavior; this thought this control-device works with them almost as early as they are capable of understanding anything that is said to them. But it....doesn't have the same effect with boys. They don't care much what people think of them, as long as they can pursue their amusements without interference. Time and care are necessary to get boys to be motivated by the thought of what 'people will think'. This first lesson, wherever girls get it from, is a very good one. As the body is in a way born before the soul, our first concern should be to care for the body; this order body first, then soul is the same for both sexes, but the object of that care is different. In the male sex it is the development of bodily powers; in the female sex, the development of personal charms. I'm not saying that either strength or beauty should be confined exclusively to one sex, but only that the priorities for them should be reversed in the two sexes. Women certainly need enough strength to be able to move and act gracefully, and men need enough address [see Glossary] to be able to act with ease. Here then we see a basic propensity firmly established; all you ·as a parent· need to do is to go

with it and regulate it. The little girl will doubtless want to know how to dress up her doll, to make its sleeve knots, its flounces, its head-dress, etc. She needs a lot of help from members of the household; so much help that it would be much more agreeable to her to do all this for herself. That provides a good reason for the first lessons that are usually taught to these young females: in which we seem not to be setting them a task but doing them a favor by instructing them in something immediately useful to themselves. They nearly all learn with reluctance to read and write, but they very readily apply themselves to the use of their needles. They imagine themselves already grown up, and think with pleasure that such qualifications will enable them to decorate themselves.

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### 3.4 WOLLSTONECRAFT'S VERDICT

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This is certainly an education only of the body; but Rousseau isn't the only man who has indirectly said that merely the person [see Glossary] of a young woman without any mind is very pleasing. To make it weak and what some may call 'beautiful', the understanding is neglected and girls are forced to sit still, play with dolls, and listen to foolish conversations; the effect of habit is insisted on as an undoubted indication of nature. I know it was Rousseau's opinion that the first years of youth should be employed in forming the body, though in educating Emile he deviates from this plan. But the body-strengthening on which strength of mind largely depends is very different from the body-strengthening that enables the person to move easily. Rousseau's observations....were made in a country where the art of pleasing...how MW went on: ...was refined only to extract the grossness of vice. He did not go back to nature, or his ruling appetite disturbed the operations of reason, else he would not have drawn these crude inferences. What she seems to have meant: ...was developed only so as to make vice more elegant. He wouldn't have drawn these crude conclusions if he had gone back to nature and his thinking about it hadn't been disturbed by his dominating sex-drive. In France boys and (especially) girls are educated only to please, to manage their persons, and regulate their exterior behavior; and their minds are damaged at an early age by the cautions some worldly, some pious that they are given to guard them against immodesty. In past times, the confessions that mere children were obliged to make, and the questions asked by the confessors (I have good authority for this), were enough to impress a sexual character i.e. to reinforce the society's idea of femininity in the girls, and its idea of masculinity in the boys. The education of society was a school of flirting and art [here = 'the skillful management of the other sex']. At the age of ten or eleven even sooner, indeed—girls began to flirt, and to talk (without being reprov'd for it) of establishing themselves in the world by marriage. In short, almost from their very birth they were treated like women, and were given compliments instead of instruction. Compliments weaken the mind. When society treated girls in this way, it was assuming that nature acted like a step-mother when she formed this after-thought of creation. Not allowing them understanding, however, it was only consistent to subject them to authority independently of reason; and to prepare them

for this subjection Rousseau gives the following advice:

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### **3.5 ROUSSEAU'S ANSWER**

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As well as being active and diligent, girls should be early subjected to restraint. This misfortune, if that's what it is, is inseparable from their sex; and if they ever throw it off they will suffer evils much crueller than that. They must throughout their lives be subject to the most constant and severe restraint, which is that of decorum; so they must get used to it early, so that it won't hit them too hard later on. They should also get used to the suppression of their caprices, so that they will be readier to submit to the will of others later on; even if it is work that they are most fond of, they should be sometimes compelled to lay it aside. If their upbringing is too permissive, their basic propensities will give rise to dissipation, levity, and inconstancy. To prevent this abuse, we should teach them above all things to restrain themselves properly. Our absurd institutions reduce the life of a modest woman to a perpetual conflict with herself, though it is fair that this sex should share in the sufferings arising from the evils it has caused us.

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### **3.6 WOLLSTONECRAFT'S OPINION ON A MODEST WOMAN**

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And why is the life of a modest woman a perpetual conflict? Because this very system of education makes it so. Modesty, temperance, and self-denial are the sober offspring of reason; but when sensibility is developed at the expense of the understanding, such weak beings must be restrained by arbitrary means [i.e. not by nature but by rules devised by humans], and so be subjected to continual conflicts. If you give more scope to their activity of mind, nobler passions and motives will govern their appetites and sentiments; and this government will be less conflicting because it will come from within the woman rather than from outside....

#### **ROUSSEAU**

Women ought not to have much liberty. When something is permitted to them, they are apt to indulge in it excessively. Addicted in everything to extremes, they are even more carried away in their diversions than boys.

#### **WOLLSTONECRAFT**

Well, slaves and mobs have always gone to excesses in that way once they have broken loose from authority. The bent bow straightens with violence when the hand that is forcibly holding it is suddenly relaxed; and sensibility, the plaything of outward circumstances, must be subjected to authority or moderated by reason. Rousseau continues, this habitual restraint makes women tractable in a way that they'll need throughout their lives: they are constantly under subjection either to the

men ·who are their partners or husbands· or to the opinions of mankind, and they are never permitted to set themselves above those opinions. The most important qualification in a woman is good-nature or sweetness of temperament. Formed to obey such an imperfect being as man is often full of vices and always full of faults she ought to learn even to suffer injustice and to bear her husband's insults without complaint. This is for her sake, not his: if she becomes stubborn and hostile this will make her husband worse.

### **3.6.1 Wollstonecraft further says**

.The being who patiently endures injustice and silently puts up with insults will soon become unjust, i.e. unable to tell right from wrong. Anyway, the factual premise is wrong: this is not the true way to form or improve the temperament; for in general men have better temperaments than women because they are occupied in pursuits that interest the head as well as the heart, and the head's steadiness gives a healthy temperature [MW's word] to the heart. People of sensibility seldom have good temperaments. The formation of the temperament is the cool work of reason, which brings helpful skill to bear on bringing together jarring elements. I never knew a weak or ignorant person who had a good temperament, though the constitutional good humor and the docility that fear causes in the behavior is often called 'good temperament'. Note: 'causes in the behavior' because genuine meekness reaches the heart or mind only as an effect of reflection. The simple restraint arising from fear produces a number of unpleasant moods in domestic life, as many sensible men would agree after finding some of these gentle irritable creatures to be very troublesome companions. Rousseau goes on to argue:

### **3.6.2 A long footnote quoting Rousseau**

Researches into abstract and speculative truths, the principles and axioms of sciences in short, everything that tends to generalize our ideas is not the proper province of women. Their studies should concern points of practice; it is for them to apply the principles that men have discovered, and to make observations that direct men to the establishment of general principles. All the ideas of women that aren't immediately relevant to points of duty should be directed to the study of men, and to the attainment of the pleasant accomplishments that have to do with taste. Works of genius are beyond the capacity of women, who don't have enough precision or power of attention to succeed in sciences that require accuracy; and physical knowledge belongs only to those who are most active, most inquiring, and understand the greatest variety of things in short, it belongs to those who are best able to make judgments about how sensible beings relate to the laws of nature. A woman who is naturally weak and doesn't carry her ideas very far does know how to make judgments about (and form proper estimates of) the movements that she gets started in order to aid her weakness; these movements are the passions of men. The mechanism she employs is much more powerful than ours, for all her levers move

the human heart. She must have the skill to incline us to do everything that she needs or wants and that her sex won't enable her to do herself. So she ought to study the mind of man thoroughly, not abstractly the mind of man in general, but concretely the dispositions of the men she is subject to by the laws of her country or by the force of opinion. She should learn to discover their real sentiments from their conversation, actions, looks and gestures. She should also work out how to communicate by her own conversation, actions, looks, and gestures the sentiments that are agreeable to those men, without seeming to intend it. Men will argue more philosophically about the human heart, but women will read the heart of man better than they do. It is women's role to form an experimental morality, so to speak, and to reduce the study of man to a system. Women have more wit, men have more genius; women observe, men reason. The two together give us the clearest light and the most perfect knowledge that the human mind is capable of attaining unaided. In one word, from this source we acquire the most intimate acquaintance with ourselves and with others that we are capable of; and that is how art has a constant tendency to perfect the endowments that nature has bestowed. The world is the book of women. (From Rousseau's Emile).

### 3.6.3 End of Rousseau Footnote

I hope my readers still remember the comparison I made between women and officers. But if bodily strength is (with some show of reason) something men boast of having, why are women so foolish as to be proud of weakness, which is a defect? Rousseau has provided them with a plausible excuse that could only have occurred to a man whose imagination had been allowed to run wild in a search for ways of making impressions of the senses seem more refined to give him a pretext for yielding to a natural appetite without violating a romantic sort of modesty that gratifies his pride and his libertinism. Women, deluded by these sentiments, sometimes boast of their weakness, cunningly obtaining power by playing on the weakness of men, and coming to have, like Turkish generals, more real power than their masters. But this involves sacrificing virtue to temporary gratifications, and sacrificing a life worthy of respect to the triumph of an hour.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Write a short note on Mary Wollstonecraft within 8-10 lines.

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2. What idea does '*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' give you as a reader? Explain within 10-12 lines.

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3. What does Rousseau have to tell about this text? Elaborate within 5-6 lines.

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4. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, what are the rights and involved duties of Mankind? Illustrate within 10-15 lines.

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5. What is a women's role to form an experimental morality? Write within 6-8 lines.

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### 3.7 GLOSSARY

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- VINDICATION: The action of clearing someone of blame or suspicion.
- UTOPIA: an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect.
- SPURIOUS: not being what it purports (appear to be or do something) to be; false or fake.
- OBSEQUIOUSLY: obedient or attentive to an excessive or servile degree.
- COMBUSTIBLE: able to catch fire and burn easily.
- GANGRENE: localized death and decomposition of body tissue, resulting from obstructed circulation or bacterial infection.
- PLAUSIBLE: (of an argument or statement) seeming reasonable or probable.
- COSMOGONY: the branch of science that deals with the origin of the universe, especially the solar system.
- WHINY: having a drawn-out, high-pitched, unpleasant sound.
- WHIM: a sudden desire or change of mind, especially one that is unusual or unexplained.

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### 3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) What are the few prejudices that persist in the human world?

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- 2) Elaborate the opinions of Rosseau and Mary Wollstonecraft separately.

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3) What is an idea of a woman or a ‘Modest Woman’ in the opinion of Mary Wollstonecraft?

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### **3.9 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit, you will be able to know about one of the most revolutionary feminist writer i.e. Mary Wollstonecraft. She was by far one of the most talked about feminist and she was known for her feminist writings. This poem ‘Vindication of the Rights of Women’ deals with several chapters that highlights about the rights and liberation of women. In the first chapter of this essay, the duties and tasks of mankind has been illustrated in an elaborative manner give a complete meaning to the essay. This text will also give you insights about the feminism Wollstonecraft wants to portray.

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### **3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS/ATTRIBUTIONS**

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Mary Wollstonecraft

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