

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

Wollstonecraft doesn't waste a whole lot of time in getting to the point in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She says from the get-go that humanity's greatest gift is its ability to reason. And since men and women are born with the same ability to reason, women should enjoy just as much education, power, and influence in society as men do. The only reason women don't seem as smart as men, she says, is because they aren't given the same education. The one thing she's willing to admit is that men might have an advantage in physical strength. But in a modern civilization, this advantage shouldn't really mean anything. For a gentleman living in Wollstonecraft's time, there were very few (if any) occasions in life where he would be called upon to use all of his strength.

Once she gets into her argument, Wollstonecraft goes after some writers who have claimed that women's education should focus solely on making young women pleasing to men. In other words, popular opinion in Wollstonecraft's time states that women shouldn't busy themselves with too much reading or studying. They should focus on dressing nicely and being quiet.

Wollstonecraft tears these arguments to shreds, saying that they end up causing a lot of social problems. For example, how can people expect a woman to raise children well if she has no education and no ability to reason? Further, how can women be moral and virtuous if all they're ever taught is how to *look* moral and virtuous? This kind of education focuses only on appearances and makes women totally superficial.

As the book continues, Wollstonecraft argues that education should be available equally to both boys and girls regardless of how wealthy their families are. That's why she thinks that there should be a national public school system that is free for children up to a certain age. That probably sounds familiar; it's a lot like today's public school system.

Wollstonecraft closes the book with one last flurry, summing up all the arguments she's made and showing once and for all that there's no possible way to support the oppression of women without being a bully and a tyrant. In the end, Wollstonecraft states that a future with educated women will be much brighter than a future without them

Introduction

- Wollstonecraft begins *Vindication* by saying that she's been feeling depressed lately. After looking at the history of humanity, she has decided that men and women are either very different or history has been extremely unfair to women.
- In the end, she decides that the lack of good education for women is the biggest cause of misery in the world.
- For the most part, Wollstonecraft believes that women's poor education teaches them to be superficial and ignorant, which only makes life more miserable for their future husbands and children.
- Wollstonecraft admits that it looks as though men are physically stronger than women. But she insists that in a modern civilization, physical strength shouldn't count for much.
- Women should therefore be treated just as well as men because they have just as much intelligence.
- She already knows that men will criticize her argument by saying that giving women the same education as men will make them too "manly." Wollstonecraft argues that reason and logic don't favor one gender over the other, though.
- Wollstonecraft warns her female readers that she's going to speak to them directly and rationally, which might offend some women who are used to being addressed with all kinds of silly politeness.
- Wollstonecraft admits that women's education has become a more widely discussed topic in her time. But she's disappointed that this education always

focuses on making women as pleasing as possible to men instead of developing their rational minds.

- It is clear to Wollstonecraft that women have been unnaturally stunted in their development by a society that tries to keep them as weak and ignorant as possible. In the end, she's confident that rational argument will prove that it's in everyone's interest for women to receive better education.

Chapter 1

The rights and involved duties of mankind considered

- If we're going to make a solid argument for anything, Wollstonecraft says, we need to begin at the very beginning at look at our most basic assumptions.
- Her first (and most important) assumption is that the power of Reason (and Reason alone) is what places humankind above the rest of the natural world.
- Her second biggest assumption is that virtue and moral goodness are what make one human being better than another.
- Her third and final assumption is that God gave us passions and temptations so that we could gain knowledge by struggling against them. Therefore, the qualities of Reason, Virtue, and Knowledge are our starting points.
- Reason is supposed to help us overcome our prejudices by looking at things more objectively. Unfortunately, most men use reason to justify prejudices instead of overcoming them.
- Europe is especially bad when it comes to prejudices.
- A quick look at the society of Wollstonecraft's time would show you an irrational and unfair world, where a small group of people was rich and powerful simply because they'd been born into the right family (like kings, queens, and other royalty). This is the very reason why people were trying to agitate for democracy all over the world while Wollstonecraft was writing *Vindication*.

- Wollstonecraft mentions Jean Jacques Rousseau as an example of someone who became so fed up with the injustice of the modern world that he turned away from it and lived in solitude. Pay attention to this part of the book, because Wollstonecraft is going to have lots to say about Rousseau as we go on.
- Wollstonecraft disagrees with Rousseau's belief that humans should return to their natural state and start acting more like animals again. She insists that God gave humanity reason and civilization in order to improve life, though she admits that many humans have abused these gifts.
- Wollstonecraft doesn't just disagree with tyranny in government. She also disagrees with any part of life where one person demands blind obedience from another. That includes schools and workplaces. In other words, a teacher or a boss always needs to be able to justify their decisions to their students and workers. As you can imagine, there are a lot of teachers and bosses out there who don't feel the same way.
- At the end of the day, every human being should have the power to question the decisions of another human being on rational grounds. It is *never* okay for one person to tell another: that's just the way it is, so do what you're told.
- Wollstonecraft suspects that in the early days of humanity, the biggest and strongest people tended to rule over the others. But now we've evolved into the age of reason, which means that brute strength is no longer a valid basis for power. People need to get people to agree with them through rational arguments.

Chapter 2

The prevailing opinion of a sexual character discussed

- There are many men who have argued over the ages that women don't have enough mental strength to become morally good on their own: they need the guidance of men. But Wollstonecraft believes that if women have souls, then they must have the same rational powers as men. The only other option is for

men to claim that women don't have souls, which even the worst misogynists in the world would hesitate to argue.

- The biggest challenge to women's education seems to be the belief that women should be kept innocent like children and taught nothing other than the skills for pleasing their future husbands.
- Wollstonecraft agrees that to some extent, young children should be kept innocent. But the same can't be said for women. There comes a time for all human beings when they should be encouraged to think for themselves.
- She thinks that parents should prepare their children for the day when they begin to think for themselves. But she also admits that to some extent, people are always products of the societies they live in. So all education should strive toward making the individual as independent a thinker as possible.
- Wollstonecraft blames the men of her time (especially Jean Jacques Rousseau) for promoting a type of education that makes women completely useless as members of society.
- Rousseau thinks that men are so perfectly rational that women should follow their guidance. But Wollstonecraft argues that many (if not most) men are just overgrown children.
- In the current system, women are only able to learn about the world by looking at the surfaces of things. They are never taught how to figure out larger patterns from individual observations, so they all just end up being superficial and shallow. The same is true of military soldiers, who are taught only how to follow orders and who don't have any core reason or virtue guiding what they do. They live on the surface of life, according to Wollstonecraft.
- Wollstonecraft brings us back once again to the decision we have to make. Either women are so weak that they need to be guided completely by men, or they are rational people who are capable of thinking for themselves.
- Here, Wollstonecraft wants to clarify that she doesn't want to reverse the order of things and place women above men. She just wants women to have the independence they need to develop their minds fully.

- Even though it might anger some men, Wollstonecraft believes that women were made for something more than making men fall in love. Yes, there's a time for thoughtless love when a person is young. But those years should also be spent preparing for the more important and mature years of life, when reason is most important.
- Wollstonecraft next critiques the work of a guy named Dr. Gregory, who has written a book on how he chooses to raise his daughters.
- For starters, Dr. Gregory instructs his daughters to learn how to dress nicely. This actually seems like the most important thing in his books. Wollstonecraft finds it strange that Dr. Gregory thinks that liking dresses is "natural" for women, since this presupposes that the soul (a completely intangible thing) somehow possessed a love for dress before it entered a human body.
- The truth is that women like to dress nicely because looking good is where they get their power in society.
- The second piece of advice Dr. Gregory gives his daughters is for them to hide their true emotions whenever they can. It's a woman's duty not to let her frustrations show.
- The truest bond between men and women, according to Wollstonecraft, is not love. It's friendship. Love is something Wollstonecraft connects to sex and romance. But friendship is a bond between two people who respect one another's intellects. Besides, the shine wears off on love fairly quickly, but friendship lasts a lifetime.
- If we went nowhere after we died, then Wollstonecraft would agree that the only point of life is to pursue pleasure. But she believes in an afterlife, and therefore thinks that we have to spend our time on Earth doing the right thing.
- If Dr. Gregory's advice is right, then a woman's purpose in life ends the moment she gets married and has children. There is nothing left for her to accomplish.
- The truth is that we won't really know what women are capable of until we offer them all of the same social respect and education that we offer to men. In Wollstonecraft's time, society was still a long way from achieving this goal.

- If men are truly superior to women, then let them prove it by giving women an equal playing field. In a worst-case scenario, you're still going to wind up with a bunch of women who are better than they used to be.
- Men have about as much right to oppress women as kings have to oppress men. And when Wollstonecraft was writing this text, men were definitely turning against the idea of political oppression. Notice here how she's capitalizing on a political movement for democracy by applying the same logic to women's rights.