*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft

***A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*** (1792), written by the 18th-century British [proto-feminist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proto-feminist" \o "Proto-feminist) [Mary Wollstonecraft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Wollstonecraft" \o "Mary Wollstonecraft), is one of the earliest works of [feminist philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_philosophy" \o "Feminist philosophy).The book was written against the tumultuous background of the [French Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Revolution" \o "French Revolution) In it, Wollstonecraft responds to those educational and political theorists of the 18th century who believed that women should not receive a rational education. She argues that women's education ought to match their position in society, and that they are essential to the nation because they raise its children and could act as respected "companions" to their husbands. Wollstonecraft maintains that women are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men, and that treating them as mere ornaments or property for men undercuts the moral foundation of society. M**ary Wollstonecraft** was an English writer, philosopher, and advocate of [women's rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_rights" \o "Women's rights). She is regarded as one of the founding [feminist philosophers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_philosophy" \o "Feminist philosophy), and feminists often cite both her life and her works as important influences.

Some of the major themes of Wollstonecraft’s book are:

1. Rational Education
2. Feminism
3. Sensibility
4. Republicanism
5. Class

**Analysis of Chapter-1 (“The Rights and Involved Duties of Mankind Considered”)**

In this first chapter Wollstonecraft tackles some of the major reasons why women are subjugated: prejudice, lack of education, lack of ability to take on a profession, their own silliness and eschewing of reason, and a governmental structure that does not yield enough power to the people. Through society's mandate that they render themselves attractive before all else, women become ridiculous, immoral, and worthy of disapprobation. Women have a soul just as men do, and if the soul is unsexed, as she argues, then both sexes have a capacity for reason and should endeavor to exercise it.

Wollstonecraft mentions Jean-Jacques Rousseau, her intellectual contemporary (more or less; he died in 1778 when she was 19) and one of the major philosophical voices from the Age of Reason. Rousseau expostulated several views on women that were very distasteful to Wollstonecraft, and multiple times throughout the Vindication she lambastes him. As the scholar Catriona MacKenzie writes, "Her targets are, first, Rousseau's claim that women are by nature inferior to men with respect to those capacities that ground equality—namely reason, independence, and virtue—and second, his claim that women's equality would subvert the social order." She may agree with Rousseau to some extent that women are sillier and more rational than men, but she argues that this is because society has molded them in such a fashion and has denied them the capacity to reason like men.

Similarly, Wollstonecraft critiques Rousseau's conception of female virtue, which he believes is founded on modesty, not reason, and grants some of his assumptions but critiques the inferences he draws from them. Public virtue must be founded on private virtue, but the way women are raised will subvert that goal, she argues. In contrast, his advice, as MacKenzie writes, "is more likely to produce infidelity or at least sham infidelity, than genuine fidelity because it focuses women's whole attention on 'corporeal embellishments' rather than on attaining genuine virtue." Wollstonecraft writes that Rousseau's "ridiculous stories, which tend to prove that girls are naturally attentive to their persons, without laying any stress on daily example, are below contempt". She scoffs, "I have, probably, had an opportunity of observing more girls in their infancy than J. J. Rousseau" , adding that she understands what usually becomes of young girls inculcated with these repressive ideas of modesty and virtue.

Wollstonecraft's frequent critique of Rousseau is that he simply wants women to grow up learning that their attractiveness is what matters, since to him they are incapable of reason and truly equal education is inappropriate. In chapter five she will go into depth regarding the writers whose work is problematic, but the fact that Rousseau is mentioned in this first chapter and in nearly every other one demonstrates the central role he plays in her social and philosophical critique. He is a figure to challenge, subvert, and even negate. In taking on the premises of one of the famous philosophers of her time, Wollstonecraft is entering the debate at the highest level and establishing herself as a figure to be reckoned with.

Finally, one more point of discussion for this first chapter includes the discussion of kinghood, power, and freedom. Wollstonecraft is writing nearly one hundred years after John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, political philosophers whose theories of social contract had recently come to the fore quite conspicuously in the American Revolution and the French Revolution. There is an implicit, and at times explicit, utilization of the tenets of democracy and the social contract in the the book. Wollstonecraft criticizes absolute power derived from some arbitrary fount; for Locke and others, this was royal lineage, whereas for Wollstonecraft this is gender. Men have no right to tyrannize over women, she argues, based on their gender, whatever natural physical superiorities men may enjoy. Their claim that they are reasonable and rational while women are incapable of being rational is specious because the soul is notgendered and virtue is relativerather than qualitatively different by gender. The governmental danger of tyranny via aristocracy or monarchy has a social parallel in men’s tyrannical use of power over women.

Wollstonecraft’s opening questions and answers reveal her debt to Enlightenment thought—“Reason” is elevated above all else. She also establishes the basis for her coming argument, which is that all human beings are capable of virtue, which is only attainable through knowledge.Wollstonecraft’s anti-monarchical, republican political commitments are obvious here; they are never far in the background of her arguments about individual and societal virtue. In fact, she holds that “despotism” lurks in any profession in which people must be kept in line by means of authority instead of reason, and this has poor consequences for people’s character.

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.