

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman



PENGUIN CLASSICS

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English author Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the few women philosophers of the time. As a spokesperson for women's rights, she argued for the Enlightenment ideas of equality to be extended to women. She wrote many works on this subject, including *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Mary, A Fiction* (1787), but it was *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that some say became the "feminist declaration of independence."

You may read the entire book if you wish, but for purposes of the class, we will only be reading and discussing the following sections: Dedication, Introduction, and chapters 2-5, 9, and 12. After reading each selection, please answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper in complete sentences using your opinions and reactions, the greater historical context of the time period, and quotes from the book itself.

DEDICATION (p.65)

1. Wollstonecraft's main argument is that education is necessary to show the virtue of women. Explain what education could do to change men's view and treatment of women and even women's view and treatment of themselves?
2. Explain what Wollstonecraft means when she says, "They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent."

3. What is the connection between the tyranny seen in absolutist monarchies at this time and the tyranny seen in men? Wollstonecraft even says, "...tyranny, in whatever part of society it rears its brazen front, will ever undermine morality."

INTRODUCTION (p. 71)

4. Explain the following quote: "...men endeavor to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration which men pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts..."

5. Wollstonecraft is critical at times of women for the role they play in their own oppression: "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." In her view, how do women harm their chances of being treated as "rational creatures"?

CH. 2

6. Are women's "feminine" traits the product of nature/biology or are they instead the outcome of social conditioning? Explain using quotes from the chapter.

7. Are women, including mothers, to blame for the women's degradation at this time? Explain what you think and what Wollstonecraft thinks?

8. Wollstonecraft refers to women as to how they are treated as being "in a state of childhood" and refers to their "docile blind obedience" and "ignorance." What role does this mentality play in the treatment and view of women?

9. Explain the role of women's outward appearance in how they view themselves and how men view them, especially in the following quote, "...should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives."

10. Of what value is it of men and society to render half of the human race as "useless members of society"? If there is no value, then why do they do it?

11. What is the result psychologically on women if "the business of their lives is gallantry; they were taught to please, and they only live to please"?

12. What is Rousseau's view on women and how they should be treated and educated?

13. Wollstonecraft uses language to show how women are viewed in society and by men, like their "spaniel-like affection" and that they were "created to be the toy of man, his rattle." What is implied about these comparisons? What is Wollstonecraft trying to do with these comparisons?

CH. 3

14. According to Wollstonecraft, how do men and women compare in their abilities intellectually and physically?

15. How does Wollstonecraft feel about the clothes that women are expected to wear? Explain.

16. Wollstonecraft refers to slavery and a “slavish dependence” numerous times. What is her intention with this language?

17. Wollstonecraft calls for a “revolution in female manners.” What are the manners that she is opposed to, and what sort of change would she like to see? Who would lead this change?

CH. 4

18. How is marriage viewed differently by women and men, and how does this impact how these two sexes view their role in society?

19. According to Wollstonecraft, what is the problem with dolls, dresses, novels, music, and poetry?

20. According to Wollstonecraft, have men created this state of dependence in women in order to make themselves more important and powerful? Explain.

21. How is men’s dominance over women similar to a nation’s colonization of foreign lands?

22. In what ways are women treated and/or act like prostitutes at this time, according to Wollstonecraft?

CH. 5

23. Explain the following quote, “So far from being ashamed of their weakness, they glory in it; their tender muscles make no resistance; they affect to be incapable of lifting the smallest burdens, and would blush to be thought of robust and strong.” For what purpose is all this?

24. What does Rousseau say about women, education, and marriage?

25. At the time, what was the focus of education? Wollstonecraft says that she would like to see the system of education “exploded,” so what would she like to see it replaced with?

CH. 9

26. Do you agree with Wollstonecraft that “Men are not aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious weakness they cherish, by only inciting women to render themselves pleasing”? Explain.

27. “How much more respectable is the woman who earns her own bread..., than the most accomplished beauty!” Who respects this woman in Wollstonecraft’s time? Is this her wish for society? Explain.

28. How would better educated women be better citizens, more faithful wives, and more reasonable mothers?

CH. 12

29. Wollstonecraft calls for public education to be “directed to form citizens.” If that is not the case at the time, then what was the purpose of education for men and for women?

30. What is wrong with women being confined to merely domestic pursuits? Wollstonecraft says that “it is plain from the history of all nations” that this does not work. Explain.

CUMULATIVE QUESTIONS OVER THE BOOK

31. Who was the intended reader of this work: women, men, or both? Explain.

32. How much of Wollstonecraft’s arguments about women, men, and society are still relevant today? Explain.

ESSAY:

In a 3-5 page essay, respond to the following question in essay format:

Compare Wollstonecraft’s ideas with the greater political and social philosophical movements of the time period, specifically in terms of the rising tide against absolutism, slavery, and for equality, reason, and the state of nature. How was her work a representation and extension of the greater movements of the time? Use quotes from the book to back up your arguments.