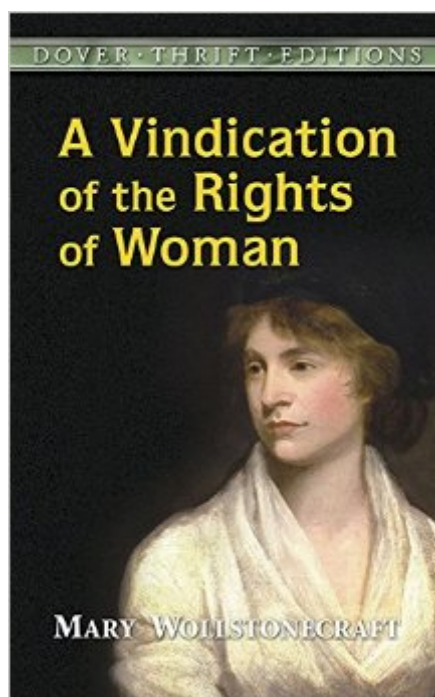


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A Vindication Of The Rights Of Woman (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

In an era of revolutions demanding greater liberties for mankind, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was an ardent feminist who spoke eloquently for countless women of her time. Having witnessed firsthand the devastating results of male improvidence, she assumed an independent role early in life, educating herself and eventually earning a living as a governess, teacher and writer. She was also an esteemed member of the radical intellectual circle that included William Godwin (father of her daughter, novelist Mary Godwin Shelley, and later her husband), Thomas Paine, William Blake, Henry Fuseli and others. First published in 1792, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* created a scandal in its day, largely, perhaps, because of the unconventional lifestyle of its creator. Today, it is considered the first great manifesto of women's rights, arguing passionately for the education of women: "Tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former want only slaves, and the latter a plaything." No narrow-minded zealot, Wollstonecraft balanced passionate advocacy with a sympathetic warmth — a characteristic that helped her ideas achieve widespread influence. Anyone interested in the history of the women's rights movement will welcome this inexpensive edition of one of the landmark documents in the struggle for human dignity, freedom and equality.

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Customer Reviews

I picked this book up in Boston waiting for my wife to order coffee and was instantly enamoured with

the author's prose. At times I wondered if I was reading an essay or poetry. Regardless, Mary Wollstonecraft summarizes the plight of women very well and the reader (whether male or female) gets a palpable sense of its injustice. She concludes that since the literate male giants like "Rousseau" bolstered the prevailing thought that men were made to reason and women to feel it is hardly surprising that women were oppressed. From birth women, in the manner of pets, are trained in refining their "sensibilities" pursuing frivolity in "proper manners and etiquette" and stylish dress to the exclusion of cultural and intellectual development. Her only purpose to marry and become slave to the whim of her man's pleasure. Her drudgery and mindless existence is punctuated only by her childish outbursts. In such a state she is hardly capable of independent living let alone thought and utterly unfit as a mother. This state of affairs not only degrades women but men of reason and society at large since domestic affairs ultimately spill upon the fabric of society. The baleful consequences of such forced behaviours are a romantic temperament reinforced by reading novels of the day instead of science or history the latter deemed "boring" since the women lack the capacity to understand it. Such women being deprived of intellectual stimulation focus on vanity which further corrupts their soul making them envious, bitter and mean. Any woman who dares to challenge this state of affairs is ostracized almost to the same extent as a woman who has lost her "reputation". Mary Wollstonecraft's writings are rife with social and political commentary which is refreshing. She is particularly critical of the upper class and their perpetuation of oppression.

As I read this book, I find myself comparing the author's examples of the treatment of women by their fathers/husbands with the way women are today treated by the media. Mary discusses how women are to be kept ignorant of all knowledge and only to be valued for their physical charms (almost every ad on TV/in print). The examples of her contemporaries that she quotes are frighteningly familiar. Why is this so? Who determines that the education of females is not relevant to society. Sure they are allowed to go to school now, but they are still treated with amazing patronization and condescension? The amount of my (intelligent) female friends that insist they are dumb/ignorant/stupid/an idiot is disturbing. Maybe now females are allowed to learn, they should also be allowed self esteem. I think I got sidetracked. This book is a complex and well written argument for the emancipation and education of women. It is as true today as much as it was 200 years ago. It is, however a slow read as the language is couched in the vocabulary of the late eighteenth century and many of the terms are unfamiliar.

This book has Wollstonecraft's *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN* and a through

Background, Debate and Criticism section. This book gives one everything needed to understand Wollstonecraft's personality strengths and weaknesses according to authors from her time; a complete debate on the subject of women's rights from multiple authors (from different time periods); and an intense review by several other authors (within the last 25 years) on Wollstonecraft's success/failure. Every article in the book has been published independently of this book. This work also contains several journal articles.

If you need to read this for a college or high school class, or as part of a women's studies project that you are doing for some other purpose, then I'd like to assure you that it won't be all that painful. You may even enjoy it and wish that you'd found this book sooner, all on your own. I was only assigned to read parts of it, but I finished the book by choice. It's interesting and well written. Some of the language and nearly all of the issues that are brought up are inflammatory. In class discussions I compared the book to "Fight Club," and was nearly laughed out of the room, but I am at least partly serious. It does have the edge of a social visionary who wanted to shake things up and blow old fashioned society out of the water. No soap bombs, though, but that's only a technicality. If you have any choice in the matter I would suggest that you choose this book over stuffier works by less forward thinkers. I swear that reading it won't hurt that badly.

It is interesting to teach this book and track how students respond to this book, and how differently male and female students respond to the issues Wollstonecraft raises and discusses. We contextualize the book, and then extract it from its time and place and try to place the issues in our own time and place. A lot of great questions can be raised as we contemplate how far we have and have not come, and what can or should be done about that. . .and who shall do it. It is also an arresting exercise to ask students to apply different literary theories as they discuss this text. The idea is to encourage them to step out of their own shoes and into someone else's as they consider these issues. And it gives great opportunity to ask students to try to separate themselves from their own assumptions and stereotypes about gender and gender behavior, and reassess the issues in Wollstonecraft's time and place, and in light of today's assumptions and stereotypes, which can be harder to quantify than some presume.

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