

# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

*Mary, A Fiction: Sentimental & Autobiographical novel*

Second Year Prose- ✓

Al-Dahhak

# *Mary, A fiction: Autobiography*

- At the time of writing *Mary*, Wollstonecraft's model was Rousseau and his writings in the aftermath of the French Revolution.
- Rousseau believed that "experience was the basis of all knowledge, and that the creation of fiction is an experience in life that went beyond confession and self-justification, to attempt to shape the author's life itself in a perpetual act of creation, a continual quest for self-awareness."

# *Mary, A fiction: Autobiography*

- Wollstonecraft confesses in a letter written in Sept 1787, after she had finished the novel, to autobiography:  
"Spite of my vexations, I have lately written a fiction which I intend to give to the world; it is a tale, to illustrate an opinion of mine, that a genius will educate itself. I have drawn from nature."
- So, Wollstonecraft states she has written a tale derived from nature (reality) which reflects her own opinion and her self-education.

# *Mary, A fiction: Autobiography*

- There are also many instances which show *Mary* to be an autobiographical novel, some of these are:
  - The title of the novella is 'Mary' Wollstonecraft's own name;
  - Mary's parents in the story are drawn to resemble Wollstonecraft's own;
  - The intimate friendship Mary has with Ann in fiction is an imitation of that Wollstonecraft had with Fanny Blood in real life;
  - The story includes Wollstonecraft's own views on education, sensibility, marriage, women...etc.

# Mary, A fiction: Autobiography

- Wollstonecraft wished to "externalise in fictitious history her inner emotional experience."
- She believed that the best way to write an autobiography is to be objective. She achieves this by using the omniscient narrative voice (third person point of view). In this case, she distances herself from her story.
- She had to arrange her emotional experience into an orderly sequence, provide plot and incident, and shape her feelings into the character of her heroine to see herself from a distance. So she uses the omniscient narrator while merging it at times with the feelings and thoughts of the heroine.

# Mary, A fiction: Autobiography

- There is a variety of **autobiographical forms** in the novel which are displayed through Wollstonecraft's merging of the narrator's voice with the heroine's.

1) **Confession**: In autobiography, the narrator tends to use a confessional tone, allowing the reader to enter the mind and heart of the character, listening to its secrets and confessions. Examples of confessional passages are: Chapter 8 "She had, indeed... Turn." Ch. 23 " Surely life is a dream...";

2) **Fantasy**: Chapter 4 : "Her benevolence indeed...";

# Mary, A fiction: Autobiography

- 2) **Fantasy**: In autobiography, we have passages of dreams or fantasy, whims the narrator wishes for...etc. Example: Chapter 4 : "Her benevolence indeed...";
- 3) **Self-justification**: As in most memoirs and autobiographies, the narrator tends to offer self-justification for sins, wrongdoing, unhappy incidents...etc. By justifying its deeds, the narrator appeals to the readers for sympathy and forgiveness. Example: Ch. 23 "Too well ..."

# Mary: a sentimental novel

- *Mary* is also a sentimental novel; it belongs to genre that was common in the second half of the eighteenth century where novels focused on feelings, sentiments, nature...etc. *Mary* reproduces the following ideas and motifs that were common to sentimental novels of the period:
  1. **the entwining of feeling with bodily illness and mental affliction:** In sentimental fiction, it is common to find characters that suffer from psychological, emotional, and physical problems at the same time. The point is to show that with sensitive souls, the body aches and falls ill. Examples: chapter 5: "This ill-fated love...", ch 27: "Oppressed..", "There we shall meet...");



# Mary: a sentimental novel

2. criticism of the dirt and moral looseness of London: Since sentimental fiction focuses on feelings, it is commonly associated with nature, purity and simple life. London at the time was the hub of entertainment, pleasure and, at times, immoral activities. This is something that a sentimental novella like *Mary* condemns and exposes. (ch 1: "While they resided...");

# Mary: a sentimental novel

3. the inadequacy of words to any true expression of emotion: Again, in sentimental fiction, one cannot express themselves clearly and fairly through words. The agony, strong feelings and sentiments, suffering...etc, falls short of finding sufficient expressions and words to be fully described. It is customary for characters to say that language betrays them or words cannot describe what they feel...etc.  
(ch 16 "such a crowd...")

# Mary: a sentimental novel

4. **the fragmentation of the sentimental narrative:** Since the character cannot express itself in words, it is also possible to find fragmentation in sentimental fiction; broken sentences or words are a reflection of the character's confusion, agony, suffering, disturbed feelings...etc. You will find in such passages the use of dash or parenthesis between sentences and fragments of sentences. (ch 8 "This dear friend...";
5. **Worldly happiness can only ever be imperfect, and it's only in heaven that one can feel it.** The pessimistic outlook in sentimental fiction results from the gap between hopes and reality. In other words, this is the romantic idealist view that aims for perfection in this world and is shattered by the impossibility of achieving that. (ch 31).

# Mary: a radical novel

- *Mary* is also a radical novel. It goes against the mainstream writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, presenting ideas that the majority disagree with. In one way or another, Wollstonecraft and her writings are considered the prototype of early feminism.
- The novel traces the causes of a woman's condition to its roots without offering solutions.
- If sensibility is the cause of *Mary's* decline, then it is attributed to individual and social causes beyond her control, some of which are the following:

# Mary: a radical novel

- 1) **unhappy childhood:** Mary grew up in a family where she was neglected, all care and attention given to her brother. She wanted to feel the warmth of her parents' love, but didn't succeed in this. (ch 2)
- 2) **Subjected to a forced marriage:** Mary is forced into a marriage to a man she never met or accepted. Her father agreed on this marriage with someone he had issues with (legal and financial). So to settle it all, Mary marries the son of that man and all is fixed. Mary is shattered by this marriage, and feels it is a burden or prison she cannot escape.. (ch 5, 6, 18, 22).

# Mary: a radical novel

- 3) **Seeking a friend in Ann for empowerment and compensation, and taking this bond as a substitute for marriage.** Mary, crushed by her unhappy childhood and later forced marriage, seeks peace of mind and soul with someone who understands her and is faithful to her. This is her friend, Anne. This friendship empowers her and offers her compensation for her lost love. She replaces her marriage with this friendship. Female friendship, in other words, acts as a female community of power which supports women against injustice. (ch 11, 15, 19)

# Mary: a radical novel

- Wollstonecraft's novella portrays the attempt to escape the prison of imagination by supporting it with the arguments of its author.
- Wollstonecraft **uses the form of sentimentalism to criticize sentimentalism**, which causes her work to collapse in upon itself at times. In the very process where Wollstonecraft tries to present a woman of feeling and active virtue, she reveals the limitations of sensibility.

# Mary: a radical novel

- Her portrayal of the heroine as sentimentally captivating is soon foiled by her critique of sensibility. However, neither aim is gratifyingly fulfilled.
- And it seems this was typical of polemicist writers of the late eighteenth century who failed to unite experience (personal) with politics (public) issues.
- Yet the value of Wollstonecraft's piece is that it leaves an 'imperfect record of the imagination's quest for wholeness in life and art'.



# Mary: a radical novel

- With this, we end our discussion of the novella *Mary* by Wollstonecraft. Due to the exceptional circumstances we find ourselves in, I will end the course with this novella only. You will receive one final file which offers guidance on the exam and what you need to bear in mind when preparing for the exam.