

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT



- Life and Career
- Novel: *Mary, A Fiction*

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Mary Wollstonecraft's life

- Mary Wollstonecraft's life was romantically short and dramatically ended.
- She had a varied life where she travelled, worked as a teacher and governess to provide for her family, wrote polemical works on the education and the rights of women, was a mistress, a mother and wife...etc.
- She died from childbirth in 1797 at the age of thirty eight. She had a powerful and original imagination.

Mary Wollstonecraft's life

- She wrote her novel *Mary, A Fiction* in 1787 when she was an impoverished governess at the house of an Irish landlord. She had a miserable family life, with a drunkard father and a helpless mother. She had to work to support herself and her family.
- This was followed by her most controversial work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and a second novel *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798).

Wollstonecraft's Political Writing

- Today Wollstonecraft is best remembered for venturing into the most 'masculine' of all late-eighteenth-century genres, political writing. By political writing we mean writing that criticizes social phenomena, power relations...etc, in the aim of finding solutions or better conditions.
- She introduces her *Vindication* by voicing her critique of sensibility:

Wollstonecraft's Political Writing

"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. I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity... will soon become objects of contempt."

Wollstonecraft's Political Writing

- Wollstonecraft sought to expose the foundation of "sensibility" in a construction of femininity that cast women as delicate, instinctive, charming and mentally weak. She wants women to be treated as human beings, as citizens with rational powers, rather than weak objects of desire.
- What she aims to do here is to "*denaturalize* the association of women with the virtues of sensibility; in effect, to undo the project that Richardson and his followers had been involved in pursuing."

Wollstonecraft's Political Writing

- What does the critic mean by 'denaturalizing' the association of women with sensibility?
- Conduct literature, which we covered in the early lectures of this course, was mainly written by men who wanted women to feel that they are 'naturally' weak and dependent on men. That's why women got used to associating themselves with images of femininity created in conduct literature (images of weakness, silence, passivity...etc)

Wollstonecraft's Political Writing

- For a political writer like Wollstonecraft, there is nothing called a naturally weak woman. This is all a construct. So she aims in her writings to break this association and to show women that they are strong and have the same faculties men have (rational powers and wit).
- This means to break the project of writers like Richardson who invested in feminine passivity and weakness, in feminine sensibility.

Wollstonecraft's Political Writing

- She insisted that the ideal of female delicacy was associated with states of mental and bodily weakness, which caused women to become objects of pity; men pitied women for losing their beauty and charms when they grew older. Since they were brought up as objects of pleasure and beauty, their rational powers were not cultivated. If beauty was lost, nothing else remained.
- Wollstonecraft insisted on the primacy of reason and the need for proper liberal female education.

Why novel writing?

- Wollstonecraft's political *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was considered 'unladylike', and this, Wollstonecraft feared, could result in her message not reaching those who most needed to hear it. This political writing could convey her intellectual insights but not her emotions.
- By writing *Mary*, she set out to reformulate the insights of her vindication in a genre she felt certain would articulate her own emotions and attract a female audience - the sentimental novel.

Mary, A Fiction: Sentimental Novel

- The sentimental novel of the eighteenth century arose partly in reaction to the austerity and rationalism of the Neoclassical period (where they paid attention to rules and symmetry). The sentimental novel celebrated feeling above reason.
- The assumptions underlying the sentimental novel were Jean-Jacques Rousseau's doctrine of the natural goodness of man and his belief that moral development results from experiencing powerful sympathies.

Mary: an ideological tool

- Mary Wollstonecraft used the form of the novel as an ideological tool to address the wrongs of women. She received backlash for her revolutionary thoughts: she was criticized and depicted as an “unsex’d female”, “hyena in petticoat”...etc.
- Her novel provides a critique of sensibility, investigating its value and social consequences, exposing the practical limitations of sensibility.
- Note: the preface is copied in the next three slides (bold font).

Mary: Preface

"IN delineating the Heroine of this Fiction, the Author attempts to develop a character different from those generally portrayed. This woman is neither a Clarissa, a Lady G, nor a Sophie. It would be vain to mention the various modifications of these models, as it would to remark, how widely artists wander from nature, when they copy the originals of great masters. They catch the gross parts; but the subtle spirit evaporates; and not having the just ties, affectation disgusts, when grace was expected to charm."

Mary: Preface

"Those compositions only have power to delight, and carry us willing captives, where the soul of the author is exhibited, and animates the hidden springs. Lost in a pleasing enthusiasm, they live in the scenes they represent; and do not measure their steps in a beaten track, solicitous to gather expected flowers, and bind them in a wreath, according to the prescribed rules of art.

These chosen few, wish to speak for themselves, and not to be an echo even of the sweetest sounds or the reflector of the most sublime beams. The paradise they ramble in, must be of their own creating or the prospect soon grows insipid, and not varied by a vivifying principle, fades and dies."

Mary: Preface

"In an artless tale, without episodes, the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers is displayed. The female organs have been thought too weak for this arduous employment; and experience seems to justify the assertion. Without arguing physically about possibilities in a fiction, such a being may be allowed to exist; whose grandeur is derived from the operations of its own faculties, not subjugated to opinion; but drawn by the individual from the original source."

Mary: Preface

- Both title and preface avoid the word 'novel'. Wollstonecraft is reluctant to identify her work as a novel because she criticizes the novel as a genre, and takes it, along with conduct manuals, to be responsible for the weakness and helplessness women in the eighteenth century embodied. Novels infused women with feelings of sympathy, sentiments, romance, images of femininity which, for Wollstonecraft, only serve to make women incapable of using their minds and acting as reliable citizens.

Mary: Preface

- Wollstonecraft introduces her novel to the readers by voicing her resistance to the patriarchal canon: 'This woman is neither like a Clarissa, a Lady G-, nor a Sophie'. This sentence contains reference to heroines of sentimental fiction: Clarissa and Lady G by Richardson). Those characters are a dramatization of the image of passive femininity created in conduct literature for women. So Wollstonecraft presents her Mary as a woman of rational powers not weakness.
- The preface also claims a special status for art where sensibility mediates between fiction and life: "Those compositions...springs".

Mary: Preface

- Her statement anticipates Romantic narrative art, wishing to “externalise in fictitious history her inner emotional experience”. In other words, Wollstonecraft wants to bring out her turmoil and agony to the surface in the form of the novel.
- Mary, the heroine of the novel, is a prisoner of her own sensibility, the causes being social and psychological.

Mary, A Fiction

- Before examining the life of the heroine, Wollstonecraft introduces us to her parents and sets a contrast between the frivolous life of Eliza, mother, and the artless life of Mary. (Chapter One)
- Eliza's life is full of entertainment, dance, and superficial pleasures. Her marriage, concerns and reading are exposed as direct consequences of the flawed education she receives. Her education is typical of the traditional education women in the 18th century received, which Wollstonecraft was critical of: teaching them music, dance, etiquette...etc. Eliza, like many other women, grew as a superficial, silly, ignorant woman. All she cares about is her beauty and finding a good husband. She doesn't use her mind or rational powers.

Mary, A Fiction

- In chapter one, we also have an image of the hierarchical male-female relationship in marriage. The husband, Edward, only cares about his food, sports and flirting with women. He spends most of the time outside, while his wife's domain is indoors, with the house daily routine.
- So we have a male space (outdoors) and a female space (indoors). The woman is subject to the desires and orders of the husband.

Mary, A Fiction

- The woman who has nothing but the house to spend her long hours in indulges in novel reading: **"When she could not any longer indulge...when she watered it with her tears. Alas! Alas!"**
- Sentimental novels are mocked, a female reader is satirized this time by a female, not a male, writer. Notice how Wollstonecraft refers to novels as insipid pieces that teach nothing but tears and feelings to ignorant readers.

Mary, A Fiction

- Wollstonecraft even mockingly tells her readers she is capable of writing them novels that would make tears flow down and ruin their makeup, which they care most for: **"If my readers would excuse ... and not interrupt her."**
- Far from helping to inculcate religion or morals, sentimental novels have become part of the problem: they have turned into a fashionable commodity treated with the least seriousness by readers.

Mary, A Fiction

- The narrative account of Mary's life dramatizes Wollstonecraft's views of sensibility.
- Mary possesses not only thinking powers, but also many of the attributes of a creature of sensibility like compassion and capacity for feeling. Chapter 2: "Her sensibility prompted her...distress."