

What is
wollstonecrafts
critique of rousseaus
theory politics essay



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This paper will look at the theories of Mary Wollstonecraft toward the rights of females and equality. Wollstonecraft is considered a pioneer for both feminist thought and an advocate for equality. As such her writings are a critique on most writings of the ' Enlightenment era', however, this essay will take a look at Wollstonecraft's critique on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theories and in particular theories on education and female's place in society.

Rousseau's political philosophy heavily influenced the French Revolution and much of his work was agreed on by Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft however, asks why Rousseau's theories on education of the whole person can't be expanded for women also. She also questions Rousseau's writings on the place of women and why it is that their natural potential isn't allowed to unfold. As Rousseau's ideas on both education and a woman's place in society are found intertwined in his writings, this paper will first show Rousseau's ideas followed by Wollstonecraft's theories. Finally this paper will look deeper into both Enlightenment writers' ideas on what education is, who should be educated and if Wollstonecraft's notion of education is in fact transcending to that of Rousseau's.

In Rousseau's novel *La nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and his educational quasi-novel *Émile* (1762) Rousseau idealizes domestic woman and ' their place in society'. In *Du contrat social* (1762), he takes it one further and compares the family, based on domestic affection, as the model for the state. Showing how through education a man can overcome the corrupt environment and be the best citizen he can be. Writings on the place females in society at the time was a controversial topic and Rousseau does well to stay on the ' social norm' side.

It is easy to see Rousseau's attitudes on gender as well as education when reading *Emile*. *Emile* is written in the form of a fictional father's guide to the education and development of a fictional son (Emile). *Emile* is a portal for Rousseau's arguments much like *The Republic* is for Plato. Rousseau argues that the best upbringing for a young boy must, along with developing his intellect and ability to live in a virtuous society, also allow for his masculine drive for independence. Rousseau feels that only when men develop fully, uncorrupted by society, but also educated to get along with other such excellent, educated men can they reach their natural excellence. Rousseau writes that if men are properly educated they are capable of being all at once passionate, creative and able to exist within civilized society's restraints. This is, however, a delicate balance and in order to maintain it they need both to be free of women's distractions while they are at work, and secure in the knowledge that their womenfolk are safely at home, ready to soothe and please whenever visited there.

In Book V, Rousseau talks about the education of Emile's wife to be, Sophie. It is this that sparks Wollstonecraft's reply. Rousseau writes, "When once it is proved that men and women are and ought to be unlike in constitution and in temperament, it follows that their

education must be different." He continues, A woman's education must therefore be planned

in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time,

and this is what she should be taught while she is young.” (Rousseau, (1791) p. 267)

For Rousseau there is only one kind of ‘ good woman’ and that is the woman who doesn’t try to intrude into the areas of life belonging to men, work, politics etc. A woman who promotes only those abilities that please and serve men, who submits to his judgment and aims at delighting him in all things, and finally a woman who raises his children. In Emile he states his preference when describing a woman fit for Emile: “ a homely girl, simply brought up, (rather) than a learned lady” (Rousseau, (1791) p. 305)

Rousseau’s theories on education were much agreed on by other writers. At the time it was the norm for boys to be fully educated and for girls to be prepared for a life of marriage and raising of the children. Rousseau writes about theories where the fundamentals are being used in schools today. He writes that it is necessary for children to learn from experience and for something to be genuinely educational it must engage both an individual’s intellect and sentiments, to stimulate the child, not ‘ force feed it’. The foundation of Rousseau’s writings on education are to do with learning from nature. A child can be corrupt from the corrupt society so much must be learnt from nature itself. Rousseau writes education comes to us from nature, from men, or from things.” (Rousseau, (1791) p. 12) education from nature, is vital for the development of “ inner” human abilities, in the way of senses development. Education by the people is to teach the child how to use the development of these abilities and new found senses. Finally, the education from things is our own human experience, which we acquire from

the experiences which affect us. Proper education will be when all these three factors act in the same manner.

Rousseau highlights the importance of education to form an incorrupt just citizen. He writes in *Emile* of corrupt men, " I have always observed that young men, corrupted in early youth and addicted to women and debauchery..." and continues, showing a man of genuine education is incorrupt " A young man, on the other hand, brought up in happy innocence, is drawn by the first stirrings of nature to the tender and affectionate passions... his anger dies away, his pride abases itself before the consciousness of his wrong-doing." (Rousseau, (1791) p. 159-161)

Finally in book V of *Emile* Rousseau attacks female education " Her education is neither showy nor neglected; she has taste without deep study, talent without art, judgment without learning. Her mind knows little, but it is trained to learn; it is well-tilled soil ready for the sower." Rousseau believes women did not need to be educated in the same way males are. When describing a suitable partner for *Emile* he notes he would rather a homely girl whose been simply brought up. Apposed to " a wit who would make a literary circle of my house and install herself as its president. A female wit is a scourge to her husband, her children, her friends, her servants."(Rousseau, (1791) p. 156) Rousseau feels that an educated woman is a threat to her husband and society as a whole.

Rousseau's work was typical of the time as it was essentially a man's world. What Mary Wollstonecraft argued for was to extend the basic ideas of

Enlightenment philosophy to women including Rousseau's educational ideas of how to educate boys, to girls.

Mary Wollstonecraft admires much of Rousseau's work. She is quoted saying in her letters " he rambles into the chimerical world in which I too have often wandered" (Wardle (1979) p. 145) in many respects Wollstonecraft is an attempt at a feminist revision of Rousseau's theories.' (Jump, (1994) p. 11)

Wollstonecraft argues against Rousseau's writings on the education of women and their place in society. Wollstonecraft writes "...considering the sex as the weakest as well as the most oppressed half of the species" Wollstonecraft continues, " The woman who has only been taught to please, will soon find that her charms are oblique sun-beams, and that they cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day". (Wollstonecraft, (1796) p. 68) If pleasing is all that a woman is meant to do in society then society itself is not at the level it could be. Wollstonecraft argues that the home; family life narrows women's horizons, constricts their affections, and restricts their sense of public responsibility. This woman cannot be virtuous, vigorous citizen. She states on page 129 of A Vindication of The Rights of Women that a housewife becomes a mere ' patient drudge... like a blind horse in a mill' whose husband, bored drifts away of an evening to search out more ' piquant society'. She adds a real life example on page 136 " Poorer women, who must earn money to help support their families, are spared this fate, since gainful employment always bestows self-respect and dignity; but a middle-class woman wholly supported by her husband is in a truly deplorable state, becoming either a frivolous parasite or, if more

attentive to domestic duties, a 'square-elbowed family drudge'.

(Wollstonecraft, (1796) p. 129-136)

Wollstonecraft feels that Rousseau's theories are an attack of the female sex. They claim that women are weak and artificial and not capable of reasoning. Wollstonecraft writes; "The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart; in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent and to exercise its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women." (Wollstonecraft, (1796) p. 37) A woman must be intelligent in her own right, she argued. She cannot assume that her husband will be intelligent! Mary Wollstonecraft maintained that this did not contradict the role of the woman as a mother or a carer or of the role of the woman in the home. She maintained that "meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers". (Wollstonecraft, (1796) p. 7)

Wollstonecraft agrees that naturally female are the weaker sex but the socially accepted role of a women is not because it is the tried and true method but through oppression and the lack of aspiration to change. Wollstonecraft is arguing not for women to have power of men but power over themselves. Well-educated women will in turn be good wives and mothers, friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband and ultimately contribute positively to society. "Let women share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues, of man..." (Wollstonecraft, (1796) p. 109)

She described the process by which parents brought their daughters up to be passive and domesticated. She maintained that if girls were encouraged from an early age to develop their minds, it would be seen that they were rational creatures and there was no reason whatsoever for them not to be given the same opportunities as boys with regard to education and training. Women could enter the professions and have careers just the same as men.

In proposing the same type of education for girls as that proposed for boys, Mary Wollstonecraft also went a step further and proposed that they be educated together which was even more radical than anything proposed before. The idea of co-educational schooling was simply regarded as nonsense by many educational thinkers of the time.

It was fashionable to contend that if women were educated and not passive creatures, they would lose any power they had over their husbands. Mary Wollstonecraft was furious about this and maintained that ' This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men but over themselves'.

Mary Wollstonecraft favoured co-educational day schools, lessons given by informal conversational methods, with lots of physical exercise both free and organised. She had a picture of an ideal family where the babies were nourished by an intelligent mother and not sent away to nurses and then to boarding school and fathers were friends to their children rather than tyrants. Essentially family members were all regarded as rational beings and children should be able to judge their parents like anyone else. Family relationships therefore became educational ones.

Conclusion

This paper looked at Mary Wollstonecraft's critique on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Enlightenment theories. In particular it looked at the critique Rousseau's theories on education and a woman's place in society. The majority of Wollstonecraft's feelings towards Rousseau's work can be concluded in this quote by Wollstonecraft in her book, " This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women". (Wollstonecraft, (1796) p. 37) Wollstonecraft was an advocate for equality and as such wanted the same rights for women as men. Mary Wollstonecraft's theories on education go further than Rousseau's, not only because they are extended to women but because she introduces the idea of co-education.