

Men as mary  
wollstonecraft's ideal  
people



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The late eighteenth century was a busy time for writers and thinkers. Affected by the French Revolution, such people routinely published their opinions for public review and comment. The entire literary community was abuzz, issuing papers and replies to papers seemingly overnight. Edmund Burke, author of "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790), criticized English sympathizers of the Revolution. To which Mary Wollstonecraft published a response, "A Vindication on the Rights of Men," challenging Burke's position and accusing him of forgetting to consider the lower class. Her essay elicited a flood of replies, most notably Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man," which was published in 1791-92. Within an astonishing six weeks, Wollstonecraft answers with "A Vindication on the Rights of Women," an essay defending women due to their underprivileged nature. In this essay, Mary Wollstonecraft shares her view of men and women's roles and how they are shaped by nature, society, and education. She frequently says that if given the educational opportunity, women could find themselves on equal footing as men. She also says the goal of said education is complete independence. Therefore, since fully educated women should be equal to men as well as independent, then fully educated men should already embody her 'ideal person.' Through a careful reading of her text, specifically her perception of gender roles and her aspects of an 'ideal person,' it can be concluded that Mary Wollstonecraft's model for her 'ideal person' is based upon men. Wollstonecraft places equal blame on nature, men, and women for their inferior position in life. She starts by saying man have the natural advantage because due to sheer physiological make-up, they are superior. However, just because men can lift bigger rocks does not, by itself, force women into the slump in which they find themselves. Wollstonecraft says it

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is a great misfortune that manners are learned before morals because women learn their social roles before they have mind enough to contest them. She continues, arguing that men place women and children in the same category, as innocent, yet mindless creatures of no practical value. With the current structure of education, women were instructed in the home, thus learning to become runners of households. Wollstonecraft feels that men can only respect a woman as one would a trusty servant, and this is unacceptable. Another great disservice to women is their lack of opportunity to exercise their mind. "The minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement," says Wollstonecraft, adding that the same problem afflicts the upper class members of society. Education is wasted on women and rich people because they are never forced to put into practice what they learn. Women appear useless because they are not equipped with tools to develop themselves into something of society's value; their world does not extend past the walls of their homes. However, Wollstonecraft strongly believes that women and men are equally capable; women simply need to be given the opportunity. One can see how society has crippled women's views of themselves and their potential. Wollstonecraft is quick to address shortcomings within the educational and societal system when it comes to women; therefore, it is implicit that she believes men succeed within these arenas. As mentioned before, Wollstonecraft believes the result of a perfect education is independence. While she does not elaborate on her meaning of independence, if the common definition is applied, men in the late eighteenth century would easily be considered independent. Men are free to pursue professions, lovers, travel, politics, and whatever else strikes their interest; marriage is rarely at the top of their list. Wollstonecraft says, "...

strength of the body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves – the only way women can rise in the world-by marriage.” Once married, women no longer need to exercise their mind and bodies because the goal has been met. Men, on the other hand, have careers to keep them physically occupied and their minds sharp.

Wollstonecraft declares that the woman who strengthens her mind and body will not be the humble dependant of her husband, but his friend. Without this level footing, women would never be viewed as anything but subservient.

Men have strong minds and bodies and are independent, as Wollstonecraft encouraged women to become. Wollstonecraft believes that with education comes an awakening of one's emotions, namely passion. Love can be felt by the educated and non-educated, alike, but passion only comes to those who seek it. It draws the mind out of its rudimentary ways and exalts one's affections. Such passion, rooted in physical pursuits, offers momentary gratification once achieved, then the satisfied mind rests again. However, the educated person's pursuit of passion is unlimited in scope and boundaries. One's intellect is constantly evolving and growing so as never to resort back to its stationary state. As noted earlier, women's lives presented no challenge, requiring no exertion on their part, so the mind and body wither. Men, on the other hand, had their personal careers to advance and to participate in a society that demanded much more of them. Men frequently engaged in meaningful conversations and debates, they read newspapers and essays, and they formulated their own opinions on a variety of issues relevant to life and times. Men fulfilled Wollstonecraft's idea of the pursuit of passion in a way women did not. After reading Mary Wollstonecraft's essay, “A Vindication of the Rights of Women,” one might think she is a radical

feminist who hates men, while the exact opposite is closer to the truth. By using men as her model of an ideal person, she is offering their gender the utmost praise. Wollstonecraft is not bitter because of man's position in society; she is angered that her own gender does not feel more of a need to join their ranks. She feels men should not be honored, obeyed, and respected simply because they are men, but because of their contribution to the world around them. She only wants the same for women. Wollstonecraft writes, " If love be the supreme good, let women be only educated to inspire it...but if they be moral beings, let them have a chance to become intelligent; and let love to man only be a part of that glowing flame of universal love." She does not dislike either gender; she simply wants what is best for society which she sees when women take a more active role. Repeatedly, Wollstonecraft cites a shortcoming on the part of women followed by how men surpass the expectation. She measures the progress of women against that of men, but Wollstonecraft is optimistic that her gender is capable of reaching the foothold of equality.