

# On Mary Wollstonecraft's Protofeminist Thought

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SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI  
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

Lidija Brajković

ON MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S PROTOFEMINIST THOUGHT

Diplomski rad

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SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI  
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET  
ODSJEK ZA ANGLISTIKU

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## ON MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S PROTOFEMINIST THOUGHT

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## ABSTRACT

Mary Wollstonecraft is an 18<sup>th</sup> century author whose name and ideas still echo in feminist world. She advocated a change in approach to education for women which would lead to their better position in society and would end an oppression to which they were exposed. Wollstonecraft's life was turbulent and gave her plenty of material to observe and discuss the position of women, starting from her own family and later love affairs. Also, she felt the atmosphere of some great social events such as the French Revolution. Her impression was that everywhere, women are forgotten and their rights are not considered relevant as those of men. In her work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she examines and explains how society oppresses women and argues with some great authors of the time (like Jean Jacques Rousseau), giving counter arguments for their theses.

In this work, I will try to present and elaborate Wollstonecraft's main work by putting it in a proper context and showing how her work might have influenced some other authors such as Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe. Some modern feminist views and interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft will also be given.

Key words: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of Rights of Woman*, feminism, position of women, education

## INTRODUCTION

This work aims to present to the reader a work and ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft and to show that they were influential back in her time and that they are still relevant in today's context. This work offers a biographical account of Wollstonecraft's life, as well as an overview of her minor works with different tematics. The most detailed analysis is that of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as Wollstonecraft's main work considered to be a powerful feminist work. Within the *Vindication*, there is a chapter concerned with education in which Wollstonecraft's interprets Jean Jacques Rousseau and his view of woman's education with which she mostly disagrees.

Other Wollstonecraft's works are mentioned and briefly analyzed with a purpose of better understanding Wollstonecraft's point od view. There are also analysis of some of Jane Austen's and Ann Radcliffe's heroines is used to show Wollstonecraft's influence in literature and how some other authors built female characters.

In the end, there is an interpretation of Mary Wollstonecraft by some modern feminists through which I wish to show that her idea is still very much alive and can be discussed in today's context.

## 1. MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT – A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT

Mary Wollstonecraft is author of several works which primarily discuss rights and position of women. What makes her different from most women of her time is her dynamic, life and her feminist activism. She was rebellious, passionate, and unique. Her life was marked with turbulent childhood, unsteady adulthood, great love, incisive ideas, and influential works. She is one of the authors who was belatedly given recognition of the importance of their work, one of those that did not have an impeccable reputation and life story and whom the public did not immediately appreciate. In an article called *'Mary Wollstonecraft: A 'Speculative and Dissenting Spirit''* Janet Todd (2000) says that 'Mary Wollstonecraft made a powerful case for liberating and educating women; at the same time she lived out her theories. Often reviled by her contemporaries, today she is considered a 'modern' heroine.'

### 1.1. Early life

Her life story begins on 27 April 1759 when she was born as a second child of Edward John Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Dickson<sup>1</sup> in a fairly wealthy family, among six other children. Miriam Brody (2000) notes that 'At the time of Mary's birth at mid-century, London was also the center of such great literary and scientific works that the period had been called the Age of Enlightenment. The satires of the English poet Alexander Pope and the essayist Jonathan Swift had instructed readers while delighting them'. In the year Wollstonecraft was

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft's parents were married the same year her future husband, philosopher William Godwin was born.



born, the works of three great writers were published: Samuel Johnson's novel *Rasselas*, Voltaire's novel *Candide*, and Adam Smith's treatise *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Fatih Duman (2012) clarifies that 'Wollstonecraft was affected by the principles of reason, science and development of the age of Enlightenment and established her ideas on these principles. Humanity was gradually progressing towards a regime where reason was dominant. An equalitarian and liberal regime will be possible only if reason is dominant in social and political issues.'

When she was born, Mary Wollstonecraft's family lived a steady life and had a decent income. However, the story of her family had a dark side, since her father was a rather unsuccessful farmer, prone to alcohol who would sometimes become violent towards his wife, Mary's mother. He never succeeded in his business enterprises, which led to frustration and aggression. The story tells us that Mary sometimes slept in front of mother's room to save her from father's violent outbursts. Furthermore, Mary took over the role of a mother for her younger sisters when he mother died. It is clear from these dashes of her life that it wasn't an easy life for her. We can speculate on how the relationship of her parents influenced her attitudes and believes on women's rights and roles, as well as marriage. Although her father had an abusive personality trait he did not neglect the education of his children, so they all attended school.

Regarding the family situation, we can only imagine how Mary must have felt – she was a girl from a family where there was not much affection, nor warmth children usually get from their parents. Her father was an unsuccessful farmer who was constantly trying to get rich and became gentleman. Instead, he spent all the money he had, making the life of his family more difficult. He realized the mistakes he was making and was drinking heavily, hoping he will find relief in drinking. Unfortunately, all he found were violent breakdowns.

Mary's mother, on the other hand, weak and passive women, unwilling and unable to stand up to her husband and his (self)destructive behaviour. She probably realized that their daughter is growing up and it should be the parents, their love and guidance, but was too busy dealing with her own depression and misery. When we take into account the circumstances of Mary's upbringing, we should not be surprised that in adolescence she was very insecure.

## **1.2. Young adulthood – Jane Arden, Fanny Blood and the Dissenting community project**

In 1768, the Wollstonecraft family moved to Beverly, where she received formal education in a day school. Her stay in Beverly was significant event for Mary because there she met Jane Arden – the first girl she could call „a friend“. According to Brody (2000) 'the Ardens were a poor but distinguished Beverly family with an intellectual and religious background. Dr. John Arden was a member of the Royal Society. He popularized astronomy for his neighbors so that ordinary persons, even if not particularly fortunate in their birth could improve themselves. Like other Enlightenment thinkers, John Arden believed society would progress as people became more learned.'

The meaning of this friendship for Wollstonecraft is twofold: for the first time in her life, she created a form of emotional bond with someone and started creating her attitude about friendship and romantic relationships. Also, it was an opportunity for Mary to engage in writing and use it as a means to express her emotions, which she did. According to some sources, she was insecure about her writing and sensitive, often too demanding in seeking attention and confirmation of her value. This trait of her personality will be present even later in her romantic relationships. Mary came from a family in which she was not accustomed to expressing affection and love, and was sometimes neglected by their parents. Her father had a temper, but aggressive, passive housewife and mother is not used to intercede for Mary so she

grew up developing a huge need to be loved and to have the attention of others. She often exaggerated in her demands and turned to hypersensitivity.

Brody (2000) states that 'Mary was an imaginative and sensitive child for whom the natural world was alive with feeling, these feelings reflecting her moods as if the woods and lanes were alive with a beating heart and a human soul.' The other way in which their friendship was significant for her was that she met Jane's father, philosopher and scientist. Under his influence and guidance, Mary flourished intellectually and developed her interest in philosophy.

Second friendship Mary formed was with Fanny Blood, a girl she met when the Wollstonecrafts moved to Hoxton, in 1774. Two girls were introduced through Mr. and Mrs. Clare, who embraced Mary as their own child. This friendship was even more significant to Mary and she formed strong emotional bond with Fanny. The fact that they had different views on marriage and the roles of women did not disturb their relationship nor were Mary's feelings for Fanny reduced because of it. After her mother's death, Wollstonecraft spent two years living with the Bloods. Soon, the girls have become very close and together they devised a plan on the establishment of schools. In Fanny, Mary found a person that could help her achieve some of her dreams – about independence, living together, and the work on the education of girls. Soon, Fanny married and her husband took her to Portugal, in attempt to improve her deteriorating health. Soon Mary arrived to Portugal to be with her pregnant and ailing friend. That visit was actually a chance for them to say farewell to each other because Fanny died soon after giving birth to her child. Mary made sure to remember her friend forever by naming her first daughter after her. Fanny was the last girl friend whose name is found in the biography of Mary Wollstonecraft. After this, Mary involved herself in relationships with men, but these two „friendships“ caused many speculations about Mary's sexual orientation – a subject that is always quite interesting to everyone investigating life and

work of the author involved. These speculations certainly were not unsubstantiated because we can see that Mary gave to her friends (and requested) from them attention and affection that is usual in a romantic relationship, not a typical friendship.

Her first project was establishing a school in Dissenting community. According to Todd (2000), 'The Dissenters were people committed to combining reason with piety, and who looked forward to a more just and egalitarian future brought about by individual effort'. The school was led by Mary Wollstonecraft, her sisters and Fanny Blood. Unfortunately, this project didn't last long because Fanny's health got worse and her husband took her to Lisbon, hoping it might improve. In 1785, Wollstonecraft left school to be with Fanny in Lisbon. This led to debacle of school. Even worse, Fanny soon died, which was a particular shock and tragedy for Wollstonecraft who, despite everything, had to move on. She got a job as a governess for a family in Ireland. This experience was in part an inspiration for her children's book *Original Stories from Real Life: with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*. Wollstonecraft (1796) announced in the introduction that Conversations should serve as moral guidelines for pupils and teachers. Her job as a governess was a significant experience for Wollstonecraft because it gave her a better insight into the world of women's education and it allowed her to detect its flaws more precisely. She was not satisfied with what she experienced and gave up the governess career, in order to pursue the career of an author. This was an unusual choice for women and it showed Wollstonecraft was a hardworking woman capable of breaking and some solid social rules, and following her idea of what was right. She started her career as a translator, after she learned French and German. The circumstances of this job allowed her to meet many influential intellectuals of the time. One of them was her future husband William Godwin. Approximately at the same time, she started a relationship with a married artist Henry Fuseli. Their relationship did not last long nor it ended happily since Fuseli broke it off.

### 1.3. Later life – French Revolution, Scandinavia, Gilbert Imlay and William Godwin

These unfortunate events made Wollstonecraft leave London, continue her career and find happiness somewhere else. It happened to be France where she became famous after writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in which he attacked the French revolution, questioning its value and considering it as a means of devastation of the society they lived in. His conservative view and lack of understanding for the issues of human rights and nature was in opposition to more liberal view of Mary Wollstonecraft. Despite the conservativeness of his *Reflections*, Burke is regarded as an important intellectual and author, and his work is appreciated as an important work of conservative theory.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Men* was an introduction into her most famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published two years later, a work which will determine her as a feminist writer, but also a great intellectual of her time.

The issuing of these works is not the only thing that happened to her while she was in France. She also started a love affair with an American Gilbert Imlay, whom she fell passionately in love and had her first child (daughter Fanny) with. Relationship with Imlay changed Wollstonecraft and she became more interested in maternal role and houseworks. That was not the same Mary he had fallen in love with and eventually Imlay lost interest in her. He left, promising he would come back but did not do so. Wollstonecraft was depressed, sending him many letters to which he hardly answered. This was a great impact for her: she lost the man she was in love with and was left alone with a child in very turbulent times of the French revolution. In 1795, she returned to London and attempted suicide after being rejected by Imlay. She decided to take a trip to Scandinavia and during her residence there, she wrote *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* which

cover an array of topics: from socio-economic observations about Scandinavia to various philosophical issues. Travelling to cold and unfamiliar Scandinavia would be a major enterprise for anyone, especially for a young woman alone with a child. She headed there, not knowing what is waiting for her, nor whether her man is still waiting for her. Undoubtedly, Wollstonecraft had plenty of time to contemplate her ideas, and her own life. This was a major milestone in her life, a giant step towards the rebellious and determined writer who will later in her works question some of the greatest mind of philosophy and pedagogy. This enterprise showed what women are capable of when they are not constrained by society, family, or the roles imposed on them. It is important to emphasize that Mary did not refuse to be a mother, or a wife, she simply refused to settle with the right and roles women were given by the society.

*Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* is a series of twenty-five letters which Wollstonecraft wrote to Imlay while she was travelling through the Scandinavian countries. At first, this might look like an ordinary itinerary, but it is an insight into the world of a woman who undertook a journey to unknown countries, where she was on her own, without anyone to support her or protect her. Letters are written to her fiancée Gilbert Imlay, the man she deeply loved, but eventually lost. In her letters, we find descriptions of customs in various countries she visited, intertwined with her personal opinions and interpretations. This way she created a unique network of descriptions, confessions and emotions. Despite the personal character of the letters, we got an insight into the life of Scandinavians and how much it differed from the life of the Englishmen or the Frenchmen. Wollstonecraft describes in great detail the cities, monuments, landscapes, inns, and people. She clearly expresses her opinion about their hospitality, customs, character, or their behaviour towards her (or one another). We can notice that their manners are either considered „tiresome“ and „overreacted“ or „uncultivated“. Wollstonecraft was an alert and

keen observer. She compares what she expected with what she saw, and pays particular attention to the position of groups which are usually „subordinated“ – servants and women (she concluded about their subordination from how poorly they were paid and how hard the women had to work even in the winter).

The letters are a confession of a person who loves deeply, but slowly starts to fall into despair with her love because there seems to be no response. In this case, she is a person who gives everything, who risks, asks questions; someone who is actively working on preserving the relationship and staying in touch with the beloved person. Wollstonecraft used these letters as a means of confessing her feelings. Future of her relationship with Imlay was uncertain and she fears their relationship is one-sided and that she will not receive a response from him. If we ignore the parts which relate to economy and society, these letters can be considered a kind of plea to the man she loves and to whom is trying to reach. When reading the letters, it seems that behind every letter there is a story which has fueled its occurrence. Through these letters, we see that Mary Wollstonecraft was a woman of profound feelings but also, an intellectual and a talented writer who managed to merge these three qualities while writing the *Letters*.

Wollstonecraft could not accept that her relationship with Imlay was over and she attempted suicide for the second time. She was rescued and this is when a new stage in her life begins. She returns to writing and bonds with a philosopher William Godwin, who is „considered one of the first exponents of utilitarianism, and the first modern proponent of anarchism.“<sup>2</sup> Godwin was deeply moved by her *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Eventually, they married. The fact that she was already married and had a child did not bother him, but it did cost him losing some of his friends because they thought such

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Godwin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Godwin)

decision is not in accordance with his philosophy presented in *Political Justice*<sup>3</sup>. In 1797, they started living together, but remained independent in their work. Unfortunately, their happiness was irretrievably ruined by Mary's death, after giving birth to their daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later known as Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein; Or The Modern Prometheus*. Godwin was deeply saddened by the loss of his wife, which he saw as a unique and strong woman, the one he truly and passionately loved. In an attempt to present her to the world in the light in which he saw her, in 1798 he released a book *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which he conveyed the life of his late wife with all the scandals and "ineligible" events such as suicide attempts and affairs with a married man. Clemit and Walker (2001) say the following about the *Memoirs*: '*Memoirs* also belongs to a tradition of biographical writing that sought to transform the consciousness of readers by using individual history as an agent of historical change. Written during the weeks following Wollstonecraft's early death, *Memoirs* provides an interpretation of the relations between Wollstonecraft's writings and her personal history, a candid account of her various relationships, and a vindication of her egalitarian intimacy with Godwin.' Such a move harshly criticized by many and certainly was not accepted the way Godwin imagined it. In addition, this work has seriously undermined the reputation of Mary Wollstonecraft. Society in which Mary Wollstonecraft lived was strict towards women, demanding them to live the lives of mothers and wives. Wollstonecraft's life was too scandalous for the society to handle. Mary Wollstonecraft was often in his life was guided by passion and heart. Men who had the courage to protest and to live ignoring standards are glorified as revolutionaries and thinkers. It will take a long time before her reputation is restored and she is recognized as a respected author and intellectual, one of the first women's rights advocates and feminists.

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<sup>3</sup> „*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*“ is Godwin's philosophical work from 1793 which made him one of the most influential advocates of anarchy and gained him popularity among the radicals.



There were several significant people and relationships in Wollstonecraft's life. Two of those were women she spent some time with when she was younger. Friendship with both of them was valuable for Mary because she formed some attitudes about relationships and emotional bond.

Although the first man Mary ever involved in a relationship was a married philosopher and intellectual Henry Fuseli, her life was marked by two other men: Gilbert Imlay and William Godwin. Both of them were in a relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft, but I would say they were not in a relationship with the same woman. Gilbert Imlay was in a relationship with a woman who was still trying to find herself, who was ready to succumb to a lifestyle he did not expect from her, but was also capable to an incredibly brave venture. His Mary was wild, but accepted to be tamed. She took the role of a mother and housewife, and restrained her rebelliousness. His Mary was not afraid of the chaos of the French Revolution nor the Scandinavian cold, but did not see the way out of the pain she felt when she thought she had lost him, so she tried to take her life. Luckily, she was saved. He was in a relationship with a courageous, dedicated, passionate, uncertain girl who still had to learn many lessons about life and herself. William Godwin, on the other hand, was in a relationship with Mary who has been through a lot in her life.

Her relationship with Imlay started during the turbulent times of French revolution. It seems as if the restlessness of the French Revolution 'projected' onto their relationship. For a moment, it might seem as if the rebellious and free-minded Mary calmed beside Imlay, since they got married and she gave birth to his child. However, some subsequent events in their relationship testify that Mary was prepared for major enterprises because of him. One of those enterprises was travelling to Scandinavia where she attempted to arrange some business for him. It was all in vain – Imlay did not see Wollstonecraft as a lifetime companion and he had let her because of other women. It took a lot of courage to live and act the way Mary did it.

She was incredibly passionate woman, devoted to her writing, her activism and her men. She deeply loved Imlay, and the endeavour she took to regain him is worth admiring. Maybe she was carried away by the story of love under the auspices of the war, and only idealized Imlay, while the idea of having a love relationship in such surrounding seemed appealing to her. Her insecure personality, temperament and radicalism (can be manifested in the fact that she twice tried to commit suicide because of him and unrequited love) again became evident in relationship with Imlay. After unsuccessful suicide attempts, she recovered and returned to writing.

After reading her *Vindication*, I can clearly see the difference in style in comparison to the *Letters* which were a lot more sentimental and somehow distant, with obvious fear and a huge desire to get a response from her loved one. Those letters are a personal cry of an abandoned and lamentable person. My first view of letters was not like this, but I had to return to them and compare the Mary which wrote with Mary who wrote the *Vindication*. Here, she is much more determined and precise, courageous and daring, drawing arguments which could beat the greatest works of well-known philosophers. It seems as if she now has a purpose and a vision; she writes like someone who was knocked down, but still found the courage to stand up, clean up the dust and continue moving forward. There is no grievous tone; it is replaced by resolute and sometimes very energetic.

Upon returning to her old circle of friends, she slowly started building a relationship with philosopher William Godwin, who was enchanted by her writing after reading *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. As Johnson Lewis says 'Godwin had read her *Letters*, and from that book had gained a different perspective on Mary's thought. Where he'd formerly found her too rational and distant and critical, he now found her emotionally deep and sensitive. His own natural optimism, which had reacted against her seemingly-natural pessimism, found a different Mary Wollstonecraft in the *Letters* – in their

appreciation of nature, their keen insights into a different culture, their exposition of the character of the people she'd met.'

William Godwin was born in 1756 and is remembered in the theory of philosophy as 'the father of philosophical anarchism'<sup>4</sup>. Godwin considered government as the source of the corruption for the society and rejected some of its institutions (including marriage and law). He wrote novels, but his most famous work is the philosophical work *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*. In this work, 'Godwin produced a sweeping explication of the general principles that underlay society and a plan for the future based on his comprehension of the past.'<sup>5</sup> His works are influenced by the political events in Europe as well as in America. He was acquainted with the works and ideas of great philosophers such as Rousseau, Locke and Montesquieu.

Wollstonecraft and Godwin were both liberal thinkers with revolutionary ideas. They got married, which was a bit unexpected decision if we consider their ideas and works (Godwin was famous for his critique of political institutions, including marriage) and Mary argued that women often accomplish less than they could because they are rushed into marriage.

Despite being married and living together, they remained independent in their writing and philosophies. Their relationship did not last long and was ended when Mary died, just after giving birth to their daughter Mary, who will be remembered in the history of literature as the author of famous fiction *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus*. Godwin was well-known for his advocacy of dialogue and agreement as the only means necessary for resolving disagreements. He despised violence and was a very peaceful man, unlike Mary's father. Godwin deeply admired his wife, both her intelligence and her appearance, thinking of

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<sup>4</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/godwin/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/godwin.html>

her as unique. His *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* were supposed to be sort of ode to her, but Godwin faced harsh reality when he received the response from public and for the rest of his life, he will have to carry the burden of revealing his beloved wife's most intimate details and damaging her reputation.

## **2. WORKS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT**

Wollstonecraft was a prolific author who found the inspiration for her works and characters in personal experiences. Her works can be divided into several categories, depending on the predominant topic discussed.

### **2.1. Educational works**

The first set of her works are educational works: *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct in the more important Duties of Life* and *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*. Both of these works were influenced by her experience as a governess, a companion to an elderly lady, and by a friendship with two girls of her age – Jane Arden and Frances (Fanny) Blood.

*Original Stories from Real Life* can be interpreted as an 18<sup>th</sup> century manual on how to raise children to become rational adults one day. Wollstonecraft describes a case of Mary and Caroline, girls aged fourteen and twelve, who came from a decent family. Unfortunately, during infancy they were mostly raised by servants and because of that they became ignorant and full of prejudice. Their governess, Mrs. Mason, had a difficult task of erasing their prejudices and „replacing“ them with right believes. She also had to cope with their flows –

Mary was a rather scornful person while Caroline was vain. In the preface of the book, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the importance of simplicity in writing. Also, every teacher who decides to use this manual should adjust the material according to the needs and affinities of students.

In the preface of the *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Wollstonecraft announces her intention 'to point out some important things with respect to female education.' Even though she is aware that similar attempts have already been made, she boldly believes that her work and writing may cast new light on some topics. She believes she has something to say and that her something is important. This way, Wollstonecraft presents to the reader its "nonapologetic" side of the personality with which everyone who ever glanced at her biography can become more familiar with. There is twenty-one chapter<sup>6</sup> in this book and through them, a variety of topics is covered – nursery, care about moral discipline and temper, love, public places, and many other. This work was written in 1787, five years before her Mary's famous *Vindication* and after reading the *Vindication*, I can see that there Mary further discussed some of the themes and ideas on education of children primarily mentioned in *Thoughts* (treatment of servants, relationship between children and mothers or wives with servants, homeschooling, public schools, lack of serious education for girls).

Upon reading *Thoughts*, I have even more respect for the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. What inspires and fascinates me is the freshness of her ideas, which, more than 200 years after creation, can certainly be applied. I consider *Thoughts* to be an excellent pedagogical and educational reading piece whose ideas can, with a slight adjustment, be

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<sup>6</sup> The chapters go in this order: „*The Nursery*“, „*Moral Discipline*“, „*Exterior Accomplishments*“, „*Artificial Manners*“, „*Dress*“, „*The Fine Arts*“, „*Reading*“, „*Boarding Schools*“, „*The Temper*“, „*Unfortunate Situation of Females, Fashionably Educated, and Left Without a Fortune*“, „*Love*“, „*Matrimony*“, „*Desultory Thoughts*“, „*The Benefits Which Arise from Dissapointments*“, „*On the Treatment of Servants*“, „*The Observance of Sunday*“, „*On the Misfortune of Fluctuating Principles*“, „*Benevolence*“, „*Card-playing*“, „*The Theatre*“, and „*Public Places*“

implemented today. In this work, Wollstonecraft dealt with many ideas some of which were later elaborated in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Her work is full of universal aphorisms that can serve as a guiding principle. I think that this universality speaks about her acumen and understanding of some basic and practical truth. Her thoughts are not mere stories which fills the pages of futile work, but are presented to the public in the form legibly essays. In it, she not only advises what should be done, but also how to achieve it.

Her ideas are here quite clearly presented, with specific guidelines on how to behave in a given situation. In this work several concepts of reason, education, benevolence and humility stand out as basic ideas. She sees the interrelationship between these concepts in the following way: without reason, there can not be education and anyone who has reason should strive to spread benevolence and humility. When it comes to raising children, Wollstonecraft advocates putting reason above all, but takes into consideration the differences among children, particularly when it comes to the development the importance of temper.

In the very beginning of her work, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the reason and its role in raising children. She attaches duty with reason and contrasts these two terms with instinct. She admits the strenght of instinct, but advocates taming the instinct and replacing it with reasonable conduct. Instinct is something we are born with, it is the inseparable part of our personality and our driving force in the earliest stages of life. Such state cannot exist for a long time and should be replaced with a different mindset – one that is haped by reason. It is our duty to be educated and act reasonably because only in that way can we contribute to society. Another term that us originally mentioned in the first chapter and later elaborated in the pleasing impulse – defined as a desire od mothers to raise their children by only doing and requiring of them what is pleasant. The problem occurs when pleasant goes against what is reasonable and purposeful. A term contrasted to the pleasing impulse is the unpleasant truth.

Later in her work, Wollstonecraft advocates facing children (and adults) with the truth whenever there is a chance. Knowing a truth helps us differentiate between good and wrong on which we build our own arguments and attitudes – the latter are the backbone of our personality which, we will see later, should be our only true ornament.

Sometimes, children are left with nurses who do not have the knowledge necessary to educate a child in proper manner. Such situations should be reduced to a minimum and parents should give their best or fulfill their moral obligation to educate their children. Reason is necessary so we could separate the right truths from the false ones. Further advices on how to treat children instruct us to include them in conversation, and answer their question in a reasonable manner, not to mislead with false or superficial answers. This will allow them to gradually develop their intellectual capacity.

The second chapter addresses the way in which girls are educated at school and which does not support their intellectual growth, capture their attention. It does not give them enough to interest them and encourage them to further investigate the subject themselves. Basically, girls receive half-hearted education which will not allow them to participate in conversations rightfully. Without proper education, they have no other choice but to reduce their conversation to topics which may be considered ridiculous and shallow. She is also somewhat critical towards sending children to school because she sees that as a way to parents to avoid educating their children which should be one of the most venerable duties of parents.

Wollstonecraft puts humility and sincerity in the same category of desirable character traits which should be developed during childhood. Humility can lead to other manners of desirable conduct which would improve society and relations within it. Wollstonecraft advises: 'Let the manners arise from the mind and there be no disguise for the genuine emotions of the heart.', meaning that there should be sincerity in the conduct with others, but

such conduct should not be coarse and heavy-handed. Our hearts should be pure and education should „polish“ our mind. Only in this can we treat others the right way.

Discussing „sincerity“, Wollstonecraft touches upon the subject of dresses and appearance. She objects to the amount of time girls spend in dressing up and using ornaments to decorate body. Unfortunately, such body appearance hides the true qualities of the mind and deceives the observer. Our embellished appearance cannot make up for the lack of decent conversation and every individual should focus more on embellishing his mind and intellect because that is where the true qualities lay – those with which we represent ourselves to society and with which we show the variety of our mind and knowledge.

The following chapter discusses music, painting, writing, and reading. Wollstonecraft praises writing and reading as skills which help children express their thoughts and acquire knowledge. Regarding the former, writing is particularly useful because it makes the person involved to arrange thoughts properly. Both reading and writing give a good base for elaboration of thoughts and a chance for children (or anyone else) to be involved in conversation and exchange of ideas. Reading is an activity children should be introduced to early in life because it is the best way to engage mind. Though teachers and parents have the duty to introduce reading to a child, they can not be the ones to transfer the wisdom of books into their mind. She notes that 'The mind is not, cannot be created by the teacher, though it may be cultivated, and its real powers found out.' This sentence can be interpreted as an advocacy of self-improvement, a very modern concept present in almost any pedagogical textbook. Writing obligates us to arrange our thoughts before presenting them to public. If we want to reveal our ideas, emotions, and fears, we must give ourselves some time to organize them. Writing is not just a process of composing long lines of meaningful words and covering a page with them – it is a complex process of transferring our „mental treasure“ to a reader, a process of sharing a part of ourselves with others. There is a vast variety of topics we can



write about, but the purpose of such act is almost always the same – to explain, elaborate, discuss. The sooner we enter the potentially magical world of writing, the greater is our chance to master it. Writing gives us an opportunity to edit or rephrase our ideas, but also to preserve them – what is written does not disappear as easily as things which are just said. Writing is a form of art which occupies our mind completely. While we were lost in writing, we are fighting with maelstrom of words we want to shape into the ideas. Not matter how praiseworthy it is to occupy ourselves with writing, we must not allow it to take us away from our daily duties, particularly those which concern taking care of family.

Chapter about boarding schools starts with a statement that 'If a mother has leisure and good sense, and more than one daughter, I think she could best educate them herself; but as many family reasons render it necessary sometimes to send them from home, boarding-schools are fixed on.' (Wollstonecraft, 1787). She further continues to explain the disadvantages of such schools – all children are taught the same material, without respect for their temper or affinities. These ideas remind of John Locke, highly influential Enlightenment philosopher, well known for his theory of social contract and the concept of tabula rasa. The work and philosophy of John Locke are too extensive to be discussed here in great detail, but I consider it necessary to outline at least some guidelines. In some aspects, Wollstonecraft's ideas remind to Locke's ideas about moral education, which he puts above others types of education because he considers it as the base for further education. Man's virtues arise from moral education. Only the virtuous individuals improve the society. Wollstonecraft and Locke agree on raising reason above all other characteristics. Parents have the vital role in guiding their children towards the reason. Whenever it is possible, servants should be excluded from the process of educating the children. In one of the chapters in „Thoughts on the education of daughters“. Wollstonecraft criticizes the servants pretty harshly, calling them ignorant and advising that they should be treated the same way children are (adults should constantly pay

attention to how they act). Locke also admits the importance of temper and advocates the consideration of it when it comes to education. Parents are, or at least should be, the crucial factor in education of children because they are the ones who know them the best and who can make the necessary adjustment. Furthermore, parents are the closest role models for children and should make sure to be the best ones as well.

Wollstonecraft advocates the attitude that we should devote ourselves to controlling our temper. This task is easier if we start doing so while we are young. Ruling our temper is the basis necessary for developing some desirable character traits such as humility or tenderness. By taking care of our temper, and the temper of others, we have a chance to rise above the idle worries of our everyday life and we will be able to work on our further improvement, allowing our character to grow. Wollstonecraft (1787) warns us that 'smothered flames will blaze out with more violence for having been kept down.' – it is not recommended to smother the character completely and not allow it to develop. We are advised to improve the character while taking into account the original temper. Raising a child seems like a task which consists primarily of balancing between wanting to accomplish the desired educational task and not suppressing the qualities our child originally has.

Wollstonecraft notices that women sometimes tend to be too sensitive and questions whether this arises from inequality and the lack of care for the development of character. It does make sense that those who are in a way neglected, sometimes overreact and see threat to their dignity even when it does not really exist. In this chapter Wollstonecraft also discusses the relation between the mother and the governess. It is a kind of relationship where the governess has to spend a significant amount of time arguing with the mother, instead working with the child. This situation is particularly harmful for the child because it is not in the center of interest and is not given the attention it deserves. It leads to uncertainty about their own quality and the image about themselves, which makes daughters easy prey for men one day.

As she later observes that a woman 'who has beauty without sentiment, is in great danger of being seduced.' After this chapter, Wollstonecraft devoted one chapter to love – she comments that love is the most unpredictable and illogical emotion, the hardest one to judge and write about because it blinds our judgement, weakens our arguments and diverts us from the reason. Platonic attachments are what brings particular restlessness to our lives and destroys our valuable peace of mind. After a chapter about love, follows a chapter about matrimony in which Wollstonecraft observes that women tend to focus on pleasing the other sex, and sometimes they marry too soon, again, neglecting the education which should be the basis for any kind of development.

In these works, a tremendous emphasis is put on *education* from which all the other concepts and qualities arise. To educate a child (or an adult) means to give him a chance to grasp the concept of *reason* which should further serve us a guiding principle in acting. Education leads to reason which leads to acting properly and being able to show the right path to others which makes us useful members of the society. We are sociable creatures and it is in our interest to have a well governed society – this can only be accomplished if we act in accordance with reason and truth. We should live a simple life, work on our own improvement, and help others to do the same.

## 2.2. Fictional works

Third set of her works are fiction works – novels *Mary: A Fiction* from 1788 and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* from 1798. Both of these novels are, at least partly, inspired by the patriarchal structure of society, or by the friends Wollstonecraft herself had while she was younger. These novels are also a critique of imposition of customs for women to read sugary and pathetic romantic novels which in no way strengthen their intellect, but rather do the opposite – have a detrimental effect on it.

*Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* is Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel which, as Sapiro states, 'weaves together the life histories of three people who find themselves in an insane asylum, one woman born poor, one man born wealthy, and one woman born middle class. Each has been subjected to the special violnces common to their class and gender in an oppressive patriarchal system. The main character, Maria, has been locked up by her husaband, who also took her child from her.' It is a novel through which Wollstonecraft, through stories of characters, speaks about violence and repression – either physical or any other form. In one way, the novel retells some of her own experiences – we have to keep in mind that she witnessed to violence of her father over her mother. Later in life, she was in the middle of the French revolution, a nest of violence and vandalism.

*Mary, a Fiction* is a novel with different tematics. In it, Wollstonecraft simply tries to portray a different type of heroine than those usually described. Instead of a story about a women imprisoned in an asylum, we get a story about Mary – a child neglected by her mother, who had some maternal instincts only towards her son. that is why mary had to find a way to entertain herself and was later taught to read by her maid. Eventually, Mary became an avid reader. She never found much understanding nor support in her mother.

In both of these novels, we can find an autobiographical trait because they are both stories about unfortunate lives of women.

### **2.3. Philosophical and political works**

The second set are her philosophical and political works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Both of these works are inspired by the events which took part during the French Revolution as well as works which were written by influential philosophers and writers of the time. The French Revolution shook the society and was a very fertile ground for writing about numerous social, political and religious topics. Many philosophers of the French Revolution could draw arguments for their theories and theses from which many counter-arguments and counter-theses could arise. Prior to the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in which she responded to conservative philosopher Edmund Burke and his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* which today takes an important place in the conservative philosophical theory. Burke came from a Protestant-Catholic family in Ireland and was educated in a law school in London. Burke, according to Kohl, 'saw the French Revolution as chaotic and unpredictable' and 'drew issue with the violence and anarchy'. Furthermore, he was 'sentimental in his views of the monarchy and reacted to the revolution with gravity and contempt' because he was 'horrified by the idea of seizure and had sympathy for those who were deprived of their rank and fortune during the progression of revolution.'

More famous work from this series is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, written two years after the first *Vindication*. What urged her to write two separate works on what may seem as one the same thing is probably an observation that women are never specifically mentioned nor is their position discussed. It seemed as if „men“ are only „males“ – husbands,

brothers, and sons. They have their rights and privileges. Wives, sisters, and daughters are a different class of citizens, rarely mentioned in a political pamphlet. Wollstonecraft was a woman who led a turbulent life in times when society had strict and clear expectations about how should women act and what they should do – they should be decent, obedient, silent and beautiful. When an intelligent woman capable of observation with a story about abusive fathers meets these expectations, we can surely expect a kind of rebellion. Her rebellion was primarily on intellectual level – she raised her voice, she wrote about her ideas, and she clearly argued them.

### **3. A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN**

Because of this groundbreaking treatise Mary Wollstonecraft is remembered in history as a protofeminist and the mother of the feminist movement. Her *Vindication* drew attention of the society to the issue of unequal and unjust treatment of women. Wollstonecraft writes mostly very precise and reasoned, carefully explaining what had been written. Sharpness and accuracy are qualities that characterize her work. They are most present in the beginning and in the chapters dealing with topics that are specific and known to her. Consider that her writer's career preceded career governess, a translator, a peculiar private life filled with passion and relationships and friendship with then-numerous intellectuals. Also, she had a quiet family life and during it formed some opinions about women and society as well as their overall attitude towards women.

This is extensive and boldly written work in which a young intellectual and rebel speaks out on an issue that was until then in some way "shoved under the rug". Women's rights, problems and shortcomings in the education of girls, inequality in access and outcomes were issues that rarely became the subject of debate. A much greater attention (at least if we

are talking about secondary and higher social class) was paid to the education of boys and they were taught subjects which could make them prominent intellectuals and young men one day. Women (girls) were educated so that they gain delicacy, sensibility, and to be fashionable and desirable for marriage. Marriage was certainly the most important goal to which they all aspired. Whenever the girls were educated, they were taught the skills which they had to „master“ in order to be desirable as wives. It is obvious that strengthening the intellect and teaching subjects such as algebra, was not in the focus of interest. Singing, dancing, knitting, reciting poems, cooking and teaching about manners took their place.

### **3.1. Introductory chapters of *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* – *Dedication and Introduction***

*Vindication of the rights of woman* is thirteen-chapter-long work concerned primarily with education of women and their role in the society. It begins with Wollstonecraft's *Dedication* of the work to M. Talleyrand-Perigord, Late Bishop of Autun 'who at the time was designing a national education program for boys in France. She hoped to convince him that such a system should include girls on the same basis for the same programs and in the same classrooms as boys. Her thesis was that the exclusion of girls from such a program should not be permitted unless it could be proved that women did not have the capacity for reason that men were presumed to have.' (Falco, 1996). Furthermore, she writes to him because she believes he will not discard her writing as many others would and announces the intention to argue for greater independence of her sex, emphasizing that she herself has been independent for her entire life. She compares the position of women in England with the one in France – the morality and manners there and how women are less modest, more courageous and less ashamed of their sexuality. She argues that the education of women is in interest of the entire

society because educated women can be better wives and mothers. If women remain ignorant as they are, they will not only ignore their duties, but will also bother others while they are fulfilling the duties. If marriage is not based only on attraction to appearance, it will be more stable and productive because neither husband nor wife will seek fulfillment outside the marriage. In *Introduction* she says that the education of women is neglected and it is the source of „misery“. Wollstonecraft admits the physical superiority of men – she is not a feminist who hates men, neglects their obvious advantages and sees women as ultimate superior beings; she rather seeks their equality in matters which do not succumb to the laws of nature. 'I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour 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 and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.' (Wollstonecraft, 1792) – what is usually seen as virtue and considered desirable for women is seen as certain weakness and insufficient by Mary Wollstonecraft; she wishes that women understand there is more in life than just being delicate, refined and sweet. '... that the instruction which women have received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire – mere propagators of fools! – if it can be proved that in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of their sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over, I presume that rational men will excuse me for endeavouring to persuade them to become more masculine and respectable.' (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Besides, there is an obvious problem with beauty – eventually, it fades. If beauty is the only ground on which women build the respect of others, what do they have to hope for when beauty fades? Unfortunately, they can expect for the



admiration and appreciation of the society to fade too. Even today we can see the obsession among women with staying young and beautiful forever – showing true age or weakness is almost forbidden and often interpreted as a sign of neglecting themselves.

### **3.2. Mary Wollstonecraft and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – clash of thoughts on position and education of women**

Both of these authors were active in the eighteenth century, during the period of Enlightenment. In the course of their activities they touched upon questions of education and raising children. According to Penny A. Weiss (1996), there are many similarities between Wollstonecraft and Rousseau in their writings. She states: 'Like Rousseau, Wollstonecraft wrote on education (a topic considered politically central even by malestream theorists at least since Plato). Like Rousseau, she wrote a novel' and 'like Rousseau, she published her self-reflective letters. Like Rousseau, she wrote on political changes in France, on mores and morality, and on political role of reason. It seems we cannot explain Wollstonecraft's absence from textbooks and catalogues and college curricula by any lack of breadth relative to that of men whose works are repackaged and reissued without apparent end.'

However, in the collective consciousness of the mankind, philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau is more deeply rooted, with his pedagogical work *Emile, or on Education*. His work about the social contract is one of the most important works in the modern theory of philosophy.

Rousseau advocates the view that society corrupts man and makes him miserable. Therefore, children should be educated outside of society, in a kind of isolation which would allow them to discover their natural, inner purity and goodness. When personality of a man is formed, he can join the society. Rousseau believes in man's innate ability to distinguish what

is morally right as well as his reason and judgement. However, all of this related exclusively to men. Women are neglected and seen as inferior to men and unreasonable. *Emile* is Rousseau's work in which his view on education is most clearly presented and which Mary Wollstonecraft particularly discusses in the fifth chapter of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

In her essay *Rousseau, Antifeminism, and Woman's Nature* (1987) Penny A. Weiss elaborates on Rousseau's view on women in the following way: 'Women are to be confined to the private sphere, consumed with the duties of wife and mother, ever sensitive to the opinions and needs of others, and limited to indirect access to power. Men are trained in a craft, taught to judge independently, prepared to be citizens and soldiers in a participatory democracy, and allowed to express their thoughts and desires openly.'

In Rousseau's opinion, Emile deserves a perfect woman. Does this perhaps means that in his opinion the whole interest in the education and raising of a woman goes from the desire to give the man a perfect woman/companion? Lorraine Clark and Guy Lafrance in an essay *Rousseau and Criticism* (1995) explain that Sophie's education is subordinated to Emile's needs. Sophie grows up accepting opinions and demands which men in her life impose on her (at first her father and later her husband). Unlike Emile, Sophie is not supposed to develop any critical (or any other) opinion of her own nor express her individuality. She is only supposed to help Emile reach his „perfection“. Being a woman, Sophie is destined to be a form of servant to Emile. Her education should only prepare her for the domestic roles. Clark and Lafrance as well as Weiss notice that Rousseau advocates sex roles and divides duties and rights according to it. His view on the relationship between men and women would today be characterized as traditional and patriarchal.

This clearly reminds of the obsession of society for the creation of a certain woman and constant instructions on what is considered feminine and how should women attain to the ideal of femininity. There are numerous definitions of „a real woman“ and it is presented a unique set of traits and qualities which all women should aspire to attain.

Today women have rights and possibilities that could not be imagined in Wollstonecraft's time, but if we observe how the media reinforce the image of perfect femininity and how society has numerous expectations on women regarding behaviour, we can see that certain oppression still exists.

Rousseau sees woman's place next to her man and considers that it is her duty to agree with it, with which Wollstonecraft strongly disagrees and announces that there is perhaps a different purpose in women's life. He notices girls tend to pay more attention to the way they look – it is important for them to be thought so. From very early age, the importance of opinion of others is emphasized to girls and they are encouraged to develop „personal charms“. There is part of the paragraph in which typical activities of boys and girls are explained – it can be summed up in the following way – „girls should be seen, and not heard“. The distinction in raising children is still present and boys or girls are expected to behave according to their sex. There is always very strict division between what is for boys and what is for girls. According to Wollstonecraft (1792), Rousseau considers that girls '... ought to be active and diligent... early subjected to restraint... must be subject, all their lives, to the most constant and severe restraint, which is that of decorum... the suppression of their caprices... we should learn them, above all things, to lay a due restraint on themselves.' Basically, it seems as if there is something inherently wrong with the girls that should be suppressed and restrained. When reading these lines, someone might assume that girls, unless they are fairly restrained from early age, might go the wrong way. Who knows into what kind of immoral or socially unacceptable creatures they might develop unless restrained. Wollstonecraft strongly

disagrees with this treatment, claiming it is wrong approach to suppress girls's interests and temperament. She further advocates giving 'their activity of mind a wider range' because of which 'nobler passions and motives will govern their appetites and sentiments.' Furthermore, Rousseau states that '... women have or ought to have, but little liberty; they are apt to indulge themselves excessively in what is allowed them.' (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Does he really consider women as creatures with little (or no) self-control or care for others? We might conclude from this that women should be restrained for the better of the society because they will carelessly indulge themselves. Wollstonecraft considers this „indulgement“ as a result of escape from authority. This seems as a rational view: if someone (or something) is being restrained and things were forbidden, once he/she/it escapes the authority, usual reaction includes a certain kind of „abuse“ of freedom. If the authority does not put too much pressure on the individual and if there is always room for him to exercise his freedom and satisfy his needs there will be no great desire to „go wild“ and „excessively indulge“. Just like with food: if we eat regularly and sufficiently, we won't overeat ourselves. However, if we skip few meals, the first meal we eat will be massive.

The main disagreement between Wollstonecraft and Rousseau is in the fact that Wollstonecraft does not see the position and role of woman the same way he does. She believes that women should be given a better education and that someone should explain to them that delicacy and beauty are not the greatest possible accomplishments and that there is a whole new world based on knowledge which they still have to explore and discover. She does not wish to turn women into men, she simply hopes to rise women few levels higher on the social scale. She wishes to see them strong and independent, yet feminine. As Duman (2012) says 'Wollstonecraft opposes against the argument that women are sentimental rather than rational by their nature. The differences between men and women in the present society have been totally resulted from the education they get. Men get an education that supports

their rationality whereas women get an education that supports their sentimental and feminine characteristics and make these characteristics permanent.'

Wollstonecraft argues that a relationship between a man and a woman in which she is nothing but a sweet obedient companion will not last for a long, because with time he will get tired of her. In order to be a good wife, she needs to be able to offer something more than just beauty and charms. Furthermore, there is the question of children – mothers are the first persons children will spend time with. Should they not be educated enough to offer something to their children? They should at least be able to offer them some basic education and be a good role model, particularly for daughters.

There are several other concepts in Rousseau's writing which could be considered „problematic“ for today's feminists. For example, the suggestion that woman should always be ready to please her man and that her obedience decides on whether there is peace in the house.

Wollstonecraft (1792) explains that 'Men are allowed by moralists to cultivate, as Nature directs, different qualities, and assume the different characters, that the same passions, modified almost to infinity, give to each individual. A virtuous man may have a choleric or a sanguine constitution, be gay or grave, unreproved; be firm till he is almost overbearing, or, weakly submissive, have no will or opinion of his own; but all women are to be levelled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance.' There is basically one set of qualities to which a woman has to conform if she wants to be attractive and desirable, i.e. there is a well-defined set of qualities which determine the femininity. Men, on the other hand, are allowed a much greater freedom and versatility – they can display different character and possess different corporeal qualities and still will not affect their manliness.

### 3.3. Discussion on various ideas and concepts

After the fifth chapter, it seems that Wollstonecraft somehow shifted her interest from exclusively women's rights to a wider range of topics. Chapters from sixth to thirteenth discuss the formation of character, the value of modesty and morality as virtues, effects of unequal treatment, role and duties of parents. She also offers an analysis of national education.

At the beginning of the sixth chapter, she proposes the idea that genius is born, and not made and that we are all born with a certain spark. The knowledge we acquire only gives a kind of variety to our genius which remains the same during our entire life.

There are also interesting notions on love – she advocates that love is usually based on pure passion and „unreasonable“ bases, but again, it must be „kept“ by something – love starts by passion, but remains because of reason. After this notion, she explains the difference between men and women – men look for beauty and pleasant character, while women look for manners. With time, passion with which everything started turns into care and friendship. This is basically the response to the expectations society has from women – if a marriage between a man and a woman is to last, both of them should offer something to desire for a long time. There has to be more than charms because they are like a spell – with time they lose the power. Men often boast on the winning of women, but there actually is not much to boast about because women are already weak and their judgement is false. Really, does it make sense to brag about winning someone incapable of setting a clear set of criteria (or not used to doing so)? If women were directed by reason, knowledge, and experience, then it could be a greater success for a man to win her attention (or heart). Regarding this issue, there is the advice that men should 'maintain a woman whom they have seduced' (Wollstonecraft, 1792) – once men seduce the woman they desire, they should continue working hard on

keeping her and continue giving her the feeling of importance and value, as well as to continue working on themselves.

In the eighth chapter, concerned with morality, one of the issues touched is the question of honor and respect and the way these concepts related to women and their behaviour. According to Wollstonecraft (1792) 'If an innocent girl become a prey to love, she is degraded forever, though her mind was not polluted by the arts which married women, under the convenient cloak of marriage, practise; nor has she violated any duty – but the duty of respecting herself.' Furthermore, Wollstonecraft expects women to be able to responsible citizens, with duties and responsibilities that surpass motherhood and marriage.

## 4. FEMINIST TRAITS IN LITERARY HEROINES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

### 4.1. Anne Radcliffe's heroine

*Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), a prototype of the Gothic novel written by Ann Radcliffe (1764 – 1823) and the protagonist Emily St. Aubert can also be observed through the feminist problematic. Emily is a character with some traits which can be considered truly feminine. She is beautiful, fragile, properly educated, sometimes defenseless and in need of a protection. Emily is an heroine exposed to various horrors and difficulties. With both her appearance and performance, she meets all the requirements of femininity and seem to embody all that Wollstonecraft considered to be the troubles of feminine gender. Radcliffe has created a fragile heroine whose fate, at first glance, is determined by the others, mostly villains after her father dies and she is left without anyone to protect her. Emily was educated by her father on a variety of subjects, but she was not prepared for the horrors and manipulations. As any true heroine, she was pure and kind.

Mary Poovey offers a detailed analysis of style and ideology in Radcliffe's novel. Poovey explains in her article *Ideology and the Mysteries of Udolpho* (1994), 'in her romances Radcliffe investigates specifically the paradoxical role sensibility plays in simultaneously restricting women and providing them power and an arena for action.' In one way, Emily is a defenseless orphan left at the mercy of the world and subject to games and malevolence of others. The horrors and torments she actually experiences while she is imprisoned in Udolpho can be compared to the social subjection of women which Wollstonecraft explains and condemns in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The same way women are unable to break free from the social restrictions (in education, employment, involvement), Emily can not



escape the horrors and haunting experiences in *Udolpho*. But, despite the victimization of Emily, Radcliffe gives her a certain power and a possibility of choice so that Emily does have a right to decline the desires of the main villain Montoni. Although the situation for Emily might have seemed hopeless, it proves differently, offering a hope that there is strength in sensibility and femininity.

#### **4.2. Jane Austen's characters**

Jane Austen (1775 – 1817) and her novels take up a significant place in English literature. Amusing characters, sharp humor and a fluent language contributed to a good reception of the novels. As all great authors, Austen was a subject to a large number of discussions and analyzes from various aspects. Being a woman writer who wrote mostly about women characters and their love adventures, in the time of well-defined social norms, Jane Austen eventually became a subject of works by feminist writers.

Christine Marshall in her article *"Dull Elves" and Feminists: A Summary of Feminist Criticism of Jane Austen* (1992) notes that 'Jane Austen was widely considered to be a master writer of witty domestic comedies, but her lack of consideration of the larger social issues of her time was a major, if not the major critical concern.' The accusation for the „lack of consideration“ comes from Austen's apparently light approach to the formation of her female characters. Eventually, they get happily married as a kind of reward for all the „misfortunes“ they had to go through. When watching her heroines, we see that there is one universal form which they correspond: mostly this is a young and beautiful girls from middle-class families. Their problems and worries do not go beyond the search for a desirable groom and finding a friend. When reading through her novels this way, traits of feminism might not be obvious to us. What we see at the first glance is that an author subjects her characters to the patriarchal

social norm of their time which focused on young girls getting married to a man who is suitable because of class and income. Seems as if Austen approves such an outcome and norm.

However, the 1970s were a turning point for interpretation and understanding Austen's novels. It was a time when, according to Marshall (1992), many 'feminist critics have found it fruitful to study, historically and politically, the structure and influence of gender relations that were part of the environment in which Austen wrote.' Furthermore, Marshall (1992) explains that they 'have found that both Austen's style and her subject matter are responses, both overt and covert, to the patriarchal English gentry society in which women's lives were constricted in ways that men's lives were not.'

From an array of Austen's characters, it is possible to extract three women characters through which we can analyze Wollstonecraft's ideas about women within Austen's novels. These characters are Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1813), Emma Woodhouse (*Emma*, 1815), and Catherine Morland (*Northanger Abbey*, 1817).

Elizabeth is one of the seven Bennett sisters, a favourite of her father because she has 'something more of quickness than her sisters' (Austen, 1813). Elizabeth inherited her father's sense of humor and was much more critical to people's personalities than any of her sisters. Her self-evaluation was not strictly tied to men and to how desirable she was to them. This was in opposition to, for example, her older sister Jane who was very excited about some compliments from men. Elizabeth's femininity combined with intelligence and awareness of her own qualities remind of Wollstonecraft's ideal woman. As readers, our first encounter with Elizabeth Bennet is when her mother disagrees with her father's favoritism. Her mother appreciates the beauty and fine manners of Elizabeth's older sister Jane much more. The freshness of Elizabeth Bennet, her wit, intelligence, gracefulness make her a memorable character who could, in today's terms, be called emancipated. She is capable of discussing

others people's qualities and is more critical towards them than her sisters. However, Elizabeth is not a character without a sin. She carries a sin of prejudice. 'To begin with she seems unconscious that she suffers from pride at all. Quick of observation, encouraged by her father's example to take delight in the follies and vanities of others, she sees everyone's mistakes but her own.' (Butler, 1988). In the end of the book, Elizabeth finds herself in love with Mr. Darcy, but it is important to note that Elizabeth is quite a self-confident person who does not seem to need a confirmation of her value through marriage. She is not focused on marriage so much, she rather searches love, enjoys conversations and entertainment. Austen did not imagine her as a rebellious feminist, but rather as a character whose charm is based on some other qualities other than looks and the art of frivolous conversations and behaviour. By personality, she resembles most to one her father and does not have much in common with her mother.

Emma Woodhouse is presented to readers in the first sentence of a novel as 'handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.' (Austen, 1815). Such an introduction does give much hope that Emma will be a virtuous representative of feminist role model; she rather seems like an idle person. According to Goodheart (2008), she is 'willful, manipulative, an arranger or rather a misarranger of other people's lives. Much of the time she fails to see things clearly and truly, and her self-knowledge is uncertain.' Environment she lives in is critical of her attitudes, and prevailing opinion is that she needs to work on them. Through the novel, certain feminist traits become evident. For example, the view that a woman of her status should not at any cost be married is definitely a feminist. Her time and energy are usually focused on the most love plots of the others. Perhaps the strongest feminist determinant of Emma lies in her independence and "casual" approach to marriage.

Another Austen's heroine is Catherine Morland, a protagonist in *Northanger Abbey*. Austen warns us in the beginning of the novel that 'No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her.' (Austen, 1817). She does not seem very talented in any way desirable for a proper lady. Over time, the situation with her femininity improves as she gains more delicate features and she 'read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives.' (Austen, 1817). From a feminist point of view, Catherine has some heroic features, as she enjoys (gothic) novels very much and takes them seriously. Her love for novels, reading and experiencing the adventures similar to those she reads about rather than her interest in marriage can be interpreted as a wish to educate and enlighten herself. She does not forget nor neglect the social norms, such as socializing with girls of her age and status and attending balls and dancing with young men, but in the end, it is the novels to what she believes and where she finds explanations for events and plots which happen to her (the misinterpretation of the Tilney's abbey and misconstruction of the story about Mrs. Tilney). Despite being naive and sometimes indecisive, there is certain independence, suspiciousness and determination in Catherine's conduct. She is not tied to her household nor to the idea of marriage, rather she is much more interested in social conventions of her time. When she does think about marriage, she idealizes it, imagining it should be a loving and caring relationship between two people. Goertz explains that 'While the Gothic novel may have created some freedom of action for female authors and main characters, Austen moves beyond action by valuing the role of women in society and their capability as individuals. In *Northanger Abbey*, this means focusing on Catherine's maturation into a rational, competent being, rather than on specific moments of victimization and romance.'

These three Austen's characters are feminist in the sense that they somehow defy to the norm which „orders“ women to marry because they „have to“. They are not uncompromised rebels, but rather reasonable ladies with their own attitudes and decisions. Their choices and characters surpass the framework of blindly obedient woman who listens to everyone. They all have virtues and flaws, but through them Austen showed that woman's life can be fulfilled even without marriage, i.e. these three characters had their preoccupations and interests and found a way to express themselves.

## 5. MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S IDEAS IN MODERN FEMINIST CONTEXT

Evaluating Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Sapiro (1992) states: 'But to understand her significance we must remember one thing: we are talking about a woman who wrote at a time in which neither democracy nor a feminist movement, nor a democratic mass movement existed. She approached theorizing feminism without benefit of the invention of that very term that manifests group or political consciousness by women on the basis of their gender; that is, before the term „feminist“ or even „womanist“ was invented.' Indeed, a term „feminism“ came to use much later than Wollstonecraft spoke about the position of women. In today's terms, her *Vindication* is a feminist manifesto, and her fiction works can be defined as feminist literature of feminist novels, but she saw herself only as a woman who speaks in the name of those who can not.

Sapiro further explains Wollstonecraft's view on government in any aspect of life or society. She says: 'Wollstonecraft does not distinguish between public and private relationships, institutions, or virtue. To govern is to govern. She saw the current sociopolitical system as one in which the institutionalized self-interest of the powerful corrupts the society as a whole and all the relationships within it, just as sickness in any organ hurts the whole body.' This correlates with Wollstonecraft's view that improvement of the education of women would be in the interest of the entire society. She explains this in the following way: if women were better educated on various things (the same way men are), they would be better mothers because there would be much more they could teach their children. Virtuous and reasonable mothers could raise virtuous and reasonable children who would, in the future, be better citizens of the society because they would clearly differentiate between right and wrong.

In the book *The Feminist Papers: from Adams to de Beauvoir*, Alice S. Rossi (1973) explains Wollstonecraft's view on „social problems“ in the following way: 'Like her contemporaries and immediate descendants in political thinking on social problems, she felt both cause and solution to lie in education: ignorance, poverty, prejudice, and sin arise in the absence of knowledge and will be solved by the spread of education.' This is particularly true if we discuss the position of women in some societies with lower rates of education where still exists subjection to „ancient“ and ungrounded beliefs and customs. Furthermore, 'there are no innate racial, sexual, or social class differences among men and women; all differences are rooted in the social environment and can be eradicated by changes in that environment.' (Rossi, 1973). Inequality in social environment and treatment is the main issue that Wollstonecraft emphasizes. She admits, for example, the physical strength of men over women, but in her opinion, it should not be a foundation for different approach in education.

## CONCLUSION

Today there is a general agreement that Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the champions of the feminist movement and that her *Vindication* is one of the most important works on women's rights. Even today, many women struggle with the problems of different types of oppression which Wollstonecraft discussed in her work. Women are educated and employed in various fields, but there is a neverending debate of them being paid less and not being treated equally at work. Lives of women are not so strictly defined as they used to be in Wollstonecraft's time, but there are still traces of what is used to be like more than two hundred years ago.

Modern feminists agree that education, one of the central topics of Wollstonecraft's work is a most powerful tool for improving the position of women and that sometimes society creates inequality where it should not exist.

Literature has always been a powerful tool for the the actualization of certain topics and their modernization. When the interest in the feminist movement has awakened again, feminist authors and literary critics interpreted the works of Jane Austen through the lenses of feminism and found that she advocates some of Wollstonecraft's postulates of emancipation, but not in a very radical way, but rather through the subtle portraying of the characters.



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