

WOLLSTONECRAFT AND GODWIN WRITING SUPPLEMENT

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S *VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN*

NOTE FOR TEACHERS:

This selection is a concise summary of Wollstonecraft's main arguments—(1) that it is unfair to deny women an equal education and then ridicule them for being uneducated, and (2) that the education of women will benefit all of society by making them more capable mothers. It might provide an opportunity to discuss how ideas of education and feminism feature in *Frankenstein*.

(Excerpt is from the author's introduction to her work)

“The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of 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. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act:—they dress; they paint, and nickname God's Creatures.—Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio! Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?

If then it can be fairly deduced from the present conduct of the sex, from the prevalent fondness for pleasure which takes place of ambition and those nobler passions that open and enlarge the soul; that the instruction which women have hitherto 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.”

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- ⚡ Wollstonecraft challenged her readers with a new way to raise daughters that would affect both men and women. What are changes Mary Wollstonecraft suggests for the education of women and why? Do students think any of her criticisms of women's education still apply today?
- ⚡ Do students think the book *Frankenstein* contains feminist ideas? Discuss why or why not. Encourage students to examine how an absence of women is significant to the plot and characters. For example: What might have been different if Victor's mother had lived? What if the Creature had a mother or mother figure? How might the plot change if Elizabeth had gone to school with Victor?

WILLIAM GODWIN'S *POLITICAL JUSTICE*:

NOTE FOR TEACHERS:

This excerpt is the most representative of *Political Justice* as a whole —and also more accessible than much of his other writing. It suggests a number of fruitful possibilities for discussion, such as the relationship between the individual and the state (which could connect to Justine's false conviction and execution), or the notion of progress (which could connect to Victor Frankenstein's early habit of "look[ing] backward" for scientific knowledge), and the relationship between social interaction and the pursuit of knowledge (which could connect to the Creature's moral and intellectual development, and the effect of his encounters with cruelty on his still-developing consciousness). The bolded section could be used on its own if time is limited.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 4:

...[I]t may reasonably be doubted whether error could ever be formidable or long-lived, if government did not lend it support. The nature of mind is adapted to the perception of ideas, their correspondence and difference. In the right discernment of these is its true element and most congenial pursuit. Error would indeed for a time have been the result of our partial perceptions; but, as our perceptions are continually changing, and continually becoming more definite and correct, our errors would have been momentary, and our judgments have hourly approached nearer to the truth....



A system of government, that should lend no sanction to ideas of fanaticism and hypocrisy, would presently accustom its subjects to think justly upon topics of moral worth and importance. A state, that should abstain from imposing contradictory and impracticable oaths, and thus perpetually stimulating its members to concealment and perjury, would soon become distinguished for plain dealing and veracity. A country, in which places of dignity and confidence should cease to be at the disposal of faction, favour and interest, would not long be the residence of servility and deceit.

These remarks suggest to us the true answer to an obvious objection, that might otherwise present itself, to the

conclusion to which these principles appear to lead. It might be said, that an erroneous government can never afford an adequate solution for the existence of moral evil, since government was itself the production of human intelligence, and therefore, if ill, must have been indebted for its ill qualities to some wrong which had previous existence.

The proposition asserted in this objection is undoubtedly true. All vice is nothing more than error and mistake reduced into practice, and adopted as the principle of our conduct. But error is perpetually hastening to its own detection. Vicious conduct is soon discovered to involve injurious consequences. Injustice therefore by its own nature is little fitted for a durable existence. But government "lays its hand upon the spring there is in society, and puts a stop to its motion." It gives substance and permanence to our errors. It reverses the genuine propensities of mind, and, instead of suffering us to look forward, teaches us to look backward for perfection. It prompts us to seek the public welfare, not in innovation and improvement, but in a timid reverence for the decisions of our ancestors, as if it were the nature of mind always to degenerate, and never to advance.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

-  Discuss the excerpt in the context of the events of the time—especially the French Revolution. [See timeline supplement for more information.] How would this argument affect readers debating the merits of democratic governments versus monarchies?
-  "Vicious conduct is soon discovered to involve injurious consequences." The Creature experiences cruelty and gradually becomes a murderer. How does the Creature's turn to violence relate to Godwin's arguments about the role of government for its citizens?

EDMUND BURKE'S REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

NOTE FOR TEACHERS:

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* was the first response to Edmund Burke's defense of the collapsed French monarchy. This passage relates directly to the Wollstonecraft and Godwin selections as Burke argues for the value of distinctions between men and women, kings and servants, and so on. It can also connect to ideas in *Frankenstein* as the Creature experiences life outside the established social hierarchies.

(*Burke's Reflections is not divided into sections or chapters.)

...[T]he age of chivalry is gone.—...All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex in general as such and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly. Regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition, corrupting jurisprudence by destroying its simplicity. The murder

of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father, are only common homicide; and if the people are by any chance, or in any way gainers by it, a sort of homicide much the most pardonable, and into which we ought not to make too severe a scrutiny....

But power, of some kind or other, will survive the shock in which manners and opinions perish; and it will find other and worse means for its support. The usurpation which, in order to subvert antient institutions, has destroyed antient principles, will hold power by arts similar to those by which it has acquired it. When the old feudal and chivalrous spirit of *Fealty*, which, by freeing kings from fear, freed both kings and subjects from the precautions of tyranny, shall be extinct in the minds of men, plots and assassinations will be anticipated by preventive murder and preventive confiscation, and that long roll of grim and bloody maxims, which form the political code of all power, not standing on its own honour, and the honour of those who are to obey it. Kings will be tyrants from policy when subjects are rebels from principle.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:



Burke's *Reflections* sparked a literary "pamphlet war" between writers about the French Revolution and the questions it brought up related to political systems and institutions. Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* texts began as replies to Burke. Some scholars argue that the heart of the debate was the understanding of democracy— and whether it would ultimately tend toward savagery or toward civilization. Wollstonecraft argued for civilization and Burke for savagery.

- Where do students see these arguments play out in *Frankenstein* if at all?
- Where do they see them playing out in today's world?

For further exploration of this material, [read this article from the British Library](#):