

Discussion Questions—Mary Wollstonecraft

1. On p. 6, Wollstonecraft writes, “. . . I have sighed when obligated to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial.”
 - Wollstonecraft is speaking here about the nature vs. nurture controversy. Which does Wollstonecraft believe is responsible for the fact that women’s “minds are not in a healthy state”?
 - How has education contributed to women’s inferiority? What are women taught to be? What does she mean by the phrase that “strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty”?
2. What is *nature’s* role in the shaping of women? In other words, what is nature responsible for? What are men responsible for? What are women themselves responsible for (1st half, p. 7)?
3. What does Wollstonecraft mean when she says that she wishes that women “may every day grow more and more masculine” (middle, p. 7)? How has masculinity been defined? What is associated with masculinity?
4. What specific audience is Wollstonecraft addressing (bottom, p. 7; top, p. 8)? What does she say about the middle class? What is her attitude toward the rich?
5. Why does she describe women as being in a state of “perpetual childhood” (middle, p. 8)? What words are frequently used to describe women? What accomplishments are they expected to have? What do such descriptions lead to? Love or something else?
6. Why does Wollstonecraft refuse to polish her style (bottom, p. 8)? With what does she associate elegant writing and flowery diction? What is she after instead?
7. What has been the goal of education for women (middle and bottom, p. 9)? What have women been trained to become? What’s wrong with this kind of education and training?
8. How, then, *do* women attain power (p. 10)? What does Wollstonecraft mean by “cunning”?
9. What does Wollstonecraft mean by the “specious name of innocence” and how has this affected women (top, p. 18)? What about Milton’s Eve? How does Milton describe Eve (bottom, p. 18)? What’s contradictory in the two passages from Milton that Wollstonecraft cites at the bottom of p. 19?
10. How does Wollstonecraft believe that a person becomes virtuous (middle, p. 20)? Why is it important that we believe that *everyone* is capable of this? How is this belief related to our view of God?
11. Instead of focusing on marriage, what should a good education lead to (bottom, p. 20)?

12. What does Wollstonecraft mean by the “regal homage” women receive (bottom, p. 20)? What’s the danger of being placed on a pedestal?
13. What does Wollstonecraft say about an orderly education (p. 22)? Is this the type of education that she believes women have received? How are women like soldiers?
14. What’s her complaint about Rousseau (top of p. 25; bottom of p. 26)? What does she have to say about the creation story in the Bible (bottom of p. 25; top of p. 26)?
15. How does Wollstonecraft envision a mature marriage? What’s appropriate to wives and what to mistresses? Why (middle, p. 27)? What’s more important in her view: love or friendship (bottom, p. 26; middle, p. 28; p. 29)?
16. What does Wollstonecraft think about women reading novels and why (pp. 190-193)? What kind of reading does she advocate instead? Are there any circumstances in which she believes reading novels is okay?