

## Summary

### CHAPTER 1

**Wollstonecraft** begins with some “plain questions.” She asks what humanity’s preeminence over creation consists in, and concludes that it is Reason. Then, “what acquirement exalts one being above another?” The answer is virtue. And why do people deal with passions? The purpose of passions is to bestow experience (knowledge) by means of struggle. Concluding all this, then, “the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge” that distinguishes each person; and from these three things, virtue “naturally [flows].”

While all this seems obvious, **Wollstonecraft** argues that reason has been clouded by prejudice to such a degree, and “such spurious qualities have assumed the name of virtues,” that it’s necessary to explore these opening assertions more deeply. After arguing that the sacred right of kings is a belief that stifles virtue and happiness by destroying human equality, **Wollstonecraft** argues that any profession that involves subordination of rank “is highly injurious to morality.” For example, a standing army necessarily lacks rigor and must be kept in line through despotism, which is “incompatible with freedom.” Also, when soldiers take up residence in country towns, they lure locals into their own vices, under the guise of gallantry. The point is that every person’s character is shaped by their profession—something societies should keep in mind.

### ANALYSIS

Wollstonecraft’s opening questions and answers reveal her debt to Enlightenment thought—“Reason” is elevated above all else. She also establishes the basis for her coming argument, which is that all human beings are capable of virtue, which is only attainable through knowledge. Wollstonecraft’s claims for the centrality of reason, virtue, and knowledge are no longer taken for granted by society, no matter how much it pays lip service to them; it’s therefore necessary to clear away prejudices from the truth in order to better understand the nature of virtue.

Wollstonecraft’s anti-monarchical, republican political commitments are obvious here; they are never far in the background of her arguments about individual and societal

virtue. In fact, she holds that “despotism” lurks in any profession in which people must be kept in line by means of authority instead of reason, and this has poor consequences for people’s character. The idleness of soldiers in peacetime is a key example. In short, any defect in the structures of society has a corresponding effect on its constituents’ character.

## CHAPTER 2

### Summary

**Wollstonecraft** argues that “to account for, and excuse the tyranny of man,” many have argued that men and women should aim to acquire different virtues. In fact, “women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire” real virtue. But Providence has appointed only one path to human virtue; so if women have immortal souls, there can be no secondary path to virtue.

Men complain of women’s folly, but, **Wollstonecraft** holds, folly is only the natural result of ignorance. Women are taught all their lives that cunning and outward propriety “will obtain for them the protection of man,” and that as long as they’re beautiful, they don’t need to worry about anything else for at least 20 years of their lives. Innocence in children is a good thing; but when applied to adults, it’s a synonym for weakness.

When **Wollstonecraft** argues for education, she means “such an attention...as will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions...and set the understanding to work.” Though education can’t work miracles, she does believe that through this process, every person is capable of becoming virtuous. Such habits of virtue allow for personal independence.

**Wollstonecraft** admits that she might be considered arrogant for taking on writers on this subject from **Rousseau** to **Dr. Gregory**, but she believes that all of these writers’ works have served only to make women weaker and less useful to society.

One of the things that has most served to limit women’s education, **Wollstonecraft** says, is “disregard of order.” The training of men tends to be methodical from birth; women’s education, by contrast, is marked by a “negligent kind of guess-work.” This indicates a “contempt of the understanding in early life,” and leads to women picking up information in a piecemeal fashion throughout life, often by observation. Thus, women enter adulthood having learned “by snatches,” as a secondary emphasis, and without sufficient rigor to master any subject or strengthen the overall judgment.

**Wollstonecraft** draws a comparison with military men. Like women, soldiers are given superficial knowledge, then sent out to mix with society, where they emulate manners, but gain no real understanding of humanity. They “practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness.” She uses this as evidence that there is no fundamental sexual difference, where educational background has been so similar.

Women must be “considered either as moral beings,” or as so weak “that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men.” **Rousseau** takes the latter position, arguing that women therefore should not cultivate truth or fortitude (“the corner stones of all human virtue”), but obedience. **Wollstonecraft** counters that, even if women *are* naturally inferior to men, their virtues must still be the same in *quality*, and thus their conduct “should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim.”

Women’s moral character is important because of their duties to parents, husbands, and children; yet, more importantly, they should work “to unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue.” **Wollstonecraft** argues that if women have immortal souls, there is no reason to make women constantly “subservient to love.” She acknowledges that downgrading love is “high treason against sentiment,” but that she wants to address the head rather than the heart. She doesn’t mean to “reason love out of the world,” but to prevent love from “[usurping] the scepter which the understanding should ever coolly wield

While love is an appropriate focus for both men and women in their youth, **Wollstonecraft** says, “in those days of thoughtless enjoyment provision should be made for the more important years of life, when reflection takes place of sensation.” Unfortunately, **Rousseau**, and male writers like him, say that the entire goal of women’s lives is to please men.

**Wollstonecraft** argues that writers who argue as **Rousseau** does do not understand human nature. When the passion of youth passes, what are women to do then? Unless a woman is motivated to activate her “dormant faculties,” it’s likely that she will seek to please men besides her husband. The study of “pleasing” that’s pressed on women is, therefore, entirely inadequate; in fact, it’s “only useful to a mistress.” Women’s concern should be, instead, to “purify their heart,” but this is impossible when most women have been taught to amuse themselves with vanities and have never been encouraged to curb their emotions.

**Wollstonecraft** scorns writers like **Dr. Gregory** who urge women not to develop too much “delicacy of sentiment,” lest they be shocked by their husbands’ shortcomings in this regard. Women should rather “acquire the qualities that ennoble a rational being,” and not “model [their souls] to suit the frailties” of their spouses.

Women, **Wollstonecraft** charges, are only encouraged to develop the so-called virtues of “gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection,” to prepare themselves to be the toys of men in the present, but to make no preparations for the future state of

their souls. The implication of most writers is that women were “made to be loved,” but “must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine.” But Wollstonecraft thinks it is questionable whether “passive indolent women make the best wives.” Do such women have “sufficient character to manage a family or educate children?”

There can be no direct comparison of men and women with regard to virtue, **Wollstonecraft** says, until women’s “faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength.” Even if it’s shown, in time, that women can’t attain the same *degree* of virtue as men, “let their virtues be the same in kind.” In short, let a woman strive for her God-given rank in the world, instead of artificially suppressing her.

**Wollstonecraft** points out that kings have always been acknowledged to be inferior in virtue to the masses, yet they’re treated with reverence; men submit to them in order to enjoy the benefits of their favor. This is analogous to what women have always done in submitting to men. If servile courtiers are moral agents, then “it cannot be demonstrated that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated.”

## Analysis

Key to Wollstonecraft’s argument is the claim that there can be no such thing as “gendered” virtue. She believes that God has created human beings with souls capable of virtue, and there are not distinct, sex-differentiated tracks for attaining virtue. Traditionally, women’s education is geared toward marriage, with no aims beyond that. But Wollstonecraft argues that this keeps women dependent and in an infantile state. At best, it only serves them during a brief period of life.

Wollstonecraft gives her definition of education, which is clearly based on Enlightenment principles of Reason’s reign over the senses, personality, and passions. Being educated with the goal of virtue leads to individual freedom, also underlining her political belief in liberty. Wollstonecraft is bold in publicly critiquing prominent male writers—something that would not have been common in her time.

Wollstonecraft begins explaining the factors that have contributed to inadequate education for women, beginning with its typically disorganized character. Training for men is purposeful, but women are taught without any apparent method or goal, leading them to devalue learning and leaving their reasoning faculties underdeveloped

Poorly educated soldiers are a favorite example for Wollstonecraft. At this relatively peaceful time in British society, soldiers had little to occupy them except to develop rather superficial social graces. From this similarity in outcome between men and

women, Wollstonecraft argues, we can conclude that women do not lack the capacity for virtue.

There is no middle ground, Wollstonecraft argues; either women are moral beings or are deservedly subjected to men as their superiors. Rousseau makes the latter case in his work *Emile*, an educational treatise written some 30 years before the present work. Wollstonecraft counters that, since there are no gender-distinct virtues, women should strive for the *same* virtues as men, even if it were to be demonstrated that they can't reach the same *level* of virtue as men.

Wollstonecraft consistently upholds traditionally feminine roles and duties to the family, but she goes beyond moral philosophers of her day in that she sees virtue as an end to be pursued for its own sake, not only for the sake of women's responsibilities to others.

It is degrading for women as human beings, Wollstonecraft argues, to be expected to live as if their concerns should rise no higher than romance. Her comment about "high treason" is heavily sarcastic, an indictment of the prevalence of emotion and sentiment in contemporary writings by and about women. While love has its place, she believes, it is secondary to all-important reason—her Enlightenment commitments once again shining through.

Wollstonecraft reiterates that romance has a role in most people's lives, but it is ultimately a minor and short-lived one. That's why, contra Rousseau and his fellows, overemphasizing love does a disservice to women (and men) who will long outlive the most passionate season of life.

Wollstonecraft argues that when the usual educational path for women is followed to its logical conclusion, it sometimes leads to women becoming mistresses. This is because women aren't taught to regulate their emotions appropriately and to pursue goals higher than romance. This is an example of an important undercurrent of Wollstonecraft's thesis, which is that the dominant approach to women's education undermines morality for society as a whole.

Typically, writers who limit women to the pursuit of love put a damper on the acquisition of all virtues, warning them not to surpass potential husbands in their attainments. Wollstonecraft argues that this is degrading for a rational human being, whose soul should be "ennobled" for its own sake.

The virtues women are typically encouraged to acquire have very limited utility; remaining fixated on the concerns of the present, they fail to do justice to women's immortal souls. Wollstonecraft scathingly points out that desiring respect is viewed

as “masculine” by her society. Ironically, too, the characters formed by traditional values don’t actually serve the needs of one’s husband or family well in the long run.

The arguments of writers who claim that women are inferior in virtue are premature, because women haven’t had sufficient opportunity to prove themselves. Anyway, Wollstonecraft contends that there is no risk in letting women strive for greater virtue, even if it’s proven that they are unequal to men in this way.

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