

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT



Nature, beauty, and romanticism. Ashna Karpe.

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759-1797) THROUGH A ROMANTIC LENS

This paper analyzes Mary Wollstonecraft's life and fourteen major literary works. It argues that her legacy should be considered in the context of romanticism. Romanticism is usually defined in a traditional, masculine sense: as an emotional escape from repression and rationalism. Eighteenth-century societal norms, however, categorized women as purely emotional and did not allow them to express their rationality. This paper uses Wollstonecraft's work to argue for an expansion of the traditional Romantic canon that includes female romantics' focus on reason, sense rather than sensibility, women's rights, and gradual societal change. Wollstonecraft's works demonstrate she was a romantic by both the masculine and feminine definitions. It is unfortunate that until recent years, literary historians did not consider Wollstonecraft or other female writers part of the canon of romanticism. Wollstonecraft and writers like her added important ideas to the canon; their ideas should take their place alongside those of traditional romantics.

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Mary Wollstonecraft is perhaps the most well-known female author of the eighteenth century. The public primarily knows her from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and sees her as an early feminist. However, even feminists and the educated public forget about her numerous other works and do not consider her legacy in the context of romanticism. Mary Wollstonecraft, nonetheless, was a romantic — although not in the traditional, masculine, and oversimplified definition of the word. Generally, her works have a stronger focus on reason, sense rather than sensibility, women's rights, and gradual rather than rapid societal change than the works of male romantics do. Societal norms of the era forced men to suppress their passions, limiting their emotional side. Romanticism offered an emotional escape from repression and rationalism

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

for men. Eighteenth-century societal norms, however, categorized women as purely emotional and did not allow them to express their rational side. Thus, Wollstonecraft's work, as a female romantic, advocated for using reason, while male romantic works often advocated for the opposite. Both male and female romantics, in promoting differing ideas, fought against the dehumanizing nature of gender roles and argued that men and women should be able to develop themselves as a whole person. However, very few romantics — and very few people — consistently advocate for the same ideas. Wollstonecraft was no exception. A few of her works conform to traditional societal ideas regarding education, and do not advocate for change. Further, some excerpts of her work are romantic in the traditional, masculine sense. Mary Wollstonecraft's life ultimately mirrors her work — it was romantic, in both the traditional and more nuanced definitions of the word. She was a feminist, traveled, and wrote for a living, but also married for practical reasons and to avoid ostracization in society. She enjoyed nature and reflection, but often connected her reflections to society as a whole and women's issues. She did not have the same freedom

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to pursue passions, to isolate herself from society and social reform activity, and to ignore her family as male romantics did.¹ Yet, at times, she struggled deeply with her mental health and focused on her own personal tragedies, as male romantics did. Contextualizing Mary Wollstonecraft's life and work through the lens of romanticism clarifies her complex, rich, and difficult life and the important contributions of her work. It is unfortunate that until the last two decades, literary historians did not consider Mary Wollstonecraft or any other female writer a part of the canon of romanticism. This categorization was an oversight. Wollstonecraft

1. Marilyn Butler and Janet Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol. 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

and other writers like her added important ideas to the canon; their ideas should take their place alongside those of traditional romantics.

Traditionally, British romantic scholars have defined British romanticism based on the work of six male romantic authors: William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and John Keats. In *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), Anne K. Mellor identifies this traditional definition as the masculine definition of romanticism. She relies on past scholars, notably Meyer Abrams, to summarize the work of prominent male British romantics and outline the characteristics they deemed central to masculine or traditional romanticism. Masculine romanticism stressed the importance of feelings and emotions and the idea of a fall from innocence. This fall led to an upward spiral that eventually led to a higher form of consciousness — a paradise lost and then regained. Masculine romantics gendered nature as female, as other male authors had for centuries.² They often portrayed nature as something that should be dominated and appropriated for men's use, implying the same thing about women.³ Further, most male romantics did not have important female characters; those present were often silent, dominated by males, or portrayed as frail, inferior, and lacking a rational mind.

Mellor proposes a new interpretation of British romanticism that includes the contributions of over two hundred female writers between 1780-1830. Mellor argues that the scholarly approach to British romanticism is gender-biased and ignores the contributions of feminine romanticism. She acknowledges that her interpretation is not the only valid one, and notes that the creation of separate categories for masculine and feminine romanticisms poses potential problems. She speculates that it might be better to define masculine romanticism as romanticism and use another term for feminine romanticism altogether. In the end, nonetheless, Mellor holds that for both curricular and pragmatic reasons, scholars should continue to use the word romanticism. More importantly, Mellor defends the term by drawing on the origins of the meaning of romanticism, which come from "romaunt," or the novel, and are associated with the ideas of the ideal, utopian, revolutionary, and imaginative.⁴ Both feminine and masculine romanticism have utopian, revolutionary, and imaginative ideas, and thus they are both a form of romanticism.

2. Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (Oxon, Great Britain: Taylor and Francis, 1993), 13-14, 18.

3. Mellor, *Romanticism*, 18.

4. Mellor, *Romanticism*.

Although she does highlight the utopian, revolutionary, and imaginative nature of both feminine and masculine romantic works, Mellor denotes the differences between the two new categories she has created. She points out that feminine

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romanticism celebrated the rational minds of both women and men, advocated for gender equality, promoted gradual rather than rapid social change, and viewed the concept of “self” in context of community and family. Mellor, primarily by analyzing Wollstonecraft’s work, argues that feminine romanticism called “not for sensibility but sense, not for erotic passion but for rational love, a love based on understanding, compatibility, equality, and mutual respect” and stressed “the evils of a patriarchal culture which oppresse[d] [women].”⁵ Mellor also suggests that feminine romantics advocated for gradual social change grounded in the family-politic. She defined the family-politic as the idea of a state that develops “gradually and rationally under the mutual care and guidance of both mother and father.”⁶ Mellor provides a close reading of Wollstonecraft’s works and traces their emphasis on the mother’s central role in children’s development. Rather than reducing the mother’s role to a biological one, as many male romantics did, feminine romantics saw how enlightened mothers could bring about gradual political change in shaping their children’s views.

Mellor, additionally, argues that feminine romantics differed from male romantics in a number of other ways. First, feminine romantics argued that women were rational and deserved education and equality. They saw women acting rationally and reason as a way to gain equality and respect. They argued for the repression of the feeling and emotion that masculine romantics promoted. Second, feminine

5. Mellor, *Romanticism*, 59.

6. Mellor, *Romanticism*.

CAROLYN DALY

romantics viewed the sublime as creating self-knowledge, dialogue with others, and participation in the human community, in contrast to the more individually focused male interpretation of the sublime.⁷ In addition, Mellor contends that “assertion of a self that is unified, unique, enduring, capable of initiating activity, and above all aware of itself as a self” characterizes masculine romanticism.⁸ In contrast, feminine romanticism connects the self to a significant other, nature, human society, and the environment around the self. Mellor, therefore, clearly delineates differences between feminine and masculine romantics; and in doing so, she convincingly advocates for an expansion of the canon.

Since the crux of Mellor’s evidence is Wollstonecraft’s work, Mellor makes it clear that analyzing Mary Wollstonecraft’s life and work through the lens of feminine romanticism is useful. One must remember, however, that feminine and masculine romantics had many similarities. In the third and final part of her book, Mellor adds complexity to the concept of feminine and masculine romanticism, providing an important caveat to her argument – feminine and masculine romanticism are not polar opposites. She maintains that neither group can fully identify with or represent the opposite gender, as implicit differences always remain in male and female romantics’ writing. Mellor uses the work of Emily Bronte, often considered a masculine woman, and John Keats, often considered a feminine man, to indicate that female romantic authors can embrace part or all of masculine romanticism, and male romantic writers can embrace part or all of female romanticism.⁹ Thus, when analyzing Wollstonecraft’s life and work, it is not as important to categorize her as a masculine romanticist or a feminine romanticist, but rather to see her as a romantic. The definition of romanticism should be expanded to include the ideas of feminine romantics that Mellor outlines, but scholars should not focus on the distinctions between male and female romantics. Rather, they should focus on how romanticism as a whole is useful in analyzing male and female writers’ lives and work.

Viewing Mary Wollstonecraft’s life through the lens of romanticism highlights how she paved the way for other feminists, as well as the nuance and importance of her short life. Mary Wollstonecraft was born in 1759 in London to Edward and Elizabeth Wollstonecraft. Edward Wollstonecraft was a brutal man who took out his anger on his wife and children. Mary Wollstonecraft disliked him, and his

7. Mellor, *Romanticism*, 101-103.

8. Mellor, *Romanticism*, 114.

9. Mellor, *Romanticism*, 183.

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

treatment of her mother likely helped to form her negative views about marriage.¹⁰ She saw firsthand how women and men can become trapped in marriage, either suppressing their passions and emotions, or taking them out violently on their spouses.

Growing up, Wollstonecraft was closer to her two friends, Jane Arden and Fanny Blood, than her family. At age nineteen, Wollstonecraft moved away from home against her family's wishes, following her own passion and desires and showing her independent, feminist spirit at a young age. In doing so, she pioneered a new model of what young women could do. However, when her mother passed away in 1782, she returned home to help take care of her sisters, demonstrating the reason, rationality, and connection to society that she had as a female romantic. While at home, Mary continued to challenge societal expectations about marriage by helping her younger sister, Eliza, leave her husband. Afterwards, they set up a school with Fanny Blood and another one of her sisters. Although Wollstonecraft left the school in 1785 to go to Portugal and help Blood during her pregnancy, education remained a focus throughout her life. Sadly, Blood and her baby died slightly after the child's birth. This tragedy later inspired Wollstonecraft's novel *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), an early example of romanticism in her writing.¹¹ The book was largely based off of Wollstonecraft's real life.

After Blood's death, Wollstonecraft returned to her struggling school. Although she had to close it, she continued to focus on education in her book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). She wrote the book to support herself and Blood's family, showing a unique mix of practicality, feminism, and desire to create gradual social change. Shortly afterwards, she became a governess, and while working, wrote *Mary, A Fiction*. Her book was published, and her publisher hired her to work for *The Analytic Review*, a journal.¹² Working for the journal, Wollstonecraft knew she was a woman in a man's job and was proud of it. She enjoyed the status the job brought, and was confident in her ability, despite the doubts most people in society likely had.¹³ Her possession of this job demonstrates how she embodied romanticism in her life well – she was being practical and reasonable by supporting herself, she was helping to support her friend's family, indicating her connection to society, and she was being feminist

10. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

11. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

12. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

13. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.



Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft. Ashna Karpe.

and advocating for equality of the sexes by serving as an example of what women could do.

While working, Wollstonecraft wrote, compiled, and translated a number of works that focused on educating women and children. These works included *Original Stories from Real Life*, *The Female Reader*, *Of the Importance of Religious Opinions*, *Elements of Morality for the Use of Children*, and *Young Grandison*. Wollstonecraft also became a part of the radical literary circle in London. The views she learned in this circle led her to write the first reply to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, called *A Vindication*

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

of the *Rights of Men*. This work is what first made her famous. It created the audience for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's most important work.¹⁴

After writing *A Vindication of Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft began to explore her sexuality. Wollstonecraft fell for a man she knew named Henry Fuseli. He was a married man, avant-garde painter, and political radical from Switzerland. She proposed moving in with Fuseli and his wife, so that "[his] wife [could] enjoy the man's body, Mary his conversation."¹⁵ Her proposed partner sharing was ahead of its time. Wollstonecraft, in falling for a radical, avant-garde artist and married man, and then acting on her desire, demonstrates she was romantic not only in thought but also in action. She refused to conform to societal expectations of gender and marriage, and followed her passions instead. However, society was not ready for her radical ideas yet, and neither were Fuseli and his wife, who refused her offer.¹⁶

Rejected, she traveled to Paris, where she wrote *A Historical and Moral View of the Progress of the French Revolution*. More significantly for her personal life, she met up with Gilbert Imlay, an acquaintance who was much more attainable than Fuseli. Wollstonecraft lived with him, as if they were married. She had her first child with him in Paris, an extremely important development in any woman's life, and one that made Wollstonecraft even more attached to Imlay. When Imlay was unfaithful to her, Wollstonecraft was devastated and attempted suicide for the first time after following him to London.¹⁷ Her relationship with Imlay, and her reaction to it, was similar to many characters in romantic works, such as *Young Werther*. Although scholars debate whether the affair was an embarrassment, most agree that it contributed to Wollstonecraft's intellectual development and her understanding of the sublime.¹⁸

Imlay responded to Wollstonecraft's attempted suicide by taking her to Scandinavia. In Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft's response became more characteristic of Mellor's feminist romanticism — she wrote *Letters Written During*

14. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

15. Eva M. Pérez Rodríguez, "Rewriting and Reinterpreting: Godwin's 'Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft,'" *Atlantis* 20, no. 2 (1998): 186.

16. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

17. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

18. Cynthia D. Richards, "Romancing the Sublime: Why Mary Wollstonecraft Fell in Love with That Cad, Gilbert Imlay," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 25, no. 1 (2006): 71–91.

CAROLYN DALY

a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, inspired by travel writers.¹⁹ Her letters are marked by grief, and perhaps served as a way to sublimate her feelings. Her trip was a dark time in her life and Imlay was not very present or attentive.

After returning to her literary life in London, she was reintroduced to William Godwin. He was a writer who she previously had met at a dinner party in which she tried to solicit his opinions, despite his lack of interest in her. Godwin, who admired Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, fell for Wollstonecraft, and she for him. They became lovers, and after she became pregnant, eventually married. She and Godwin kept separate households, but supported each other, both in their writing and in life. This practical marriage allowed Wollstonecraft to follow the societal expectation of marriage after she became pregnant. Her second child, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Mary Shelley), was born soon after their marriage. Wollstonecraft died about a week later from complications due to childbirth.²⁰ She left a rich literary legacy behind, but one her husband inadvertently tarnished in creating the controversial *The Posthumous Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*. His blunt, and at times brutal, account of her life, especially his mention of her suicide attempts, her proposal to Fuseli, and her child out of wedlock, prevented most of her works from being republished, read, and celebrated because of a moralistic public response to her life.²¹

The public knew her name, but had not read her work, and was not aware of what she had published besides *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Tragically, the public did not immediately get the opportunity to read Wollstonecraft's work or fully appreciate her life. She was an incredible woman who managed to create a path for herself in which she was able to be a whole person, as romantics desire. She was able to be passionate, emotional, rational, and reasonable. She was able to have a career as a writer and have children. Childbirth complications cut Wollstonecraft's life short, and her husband tarnished her legacy, but the way she lived her life demonstrated she was a romantic who supported greater freedom for women. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's most famous work, also demonstrates she wanted more freedom for women. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is romantic in the traditional sense in key few

19. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

20. Butler and Todd, "Introduction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

21. Rodríguez, "Rewriting and Reinterpreting," 183-191

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

ways. First, Wollstonecraft references the idea of genius, imagination, and the sublime frequently. Second, Wollstonecraft refers to Rousseau and Milton, two authors that romantics often praise as good examples of writing. Wollstonecraft, nonetheless, does not interpret them in the same way as many other romantics did. Wollstonecraft states that “Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her NATURAL cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a SWEETER companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself.”²² She ridicules this statement and goes on to argue that women can be independent and that the institution of marriage should not enslave them to men. The traditional romanticism in Wollstonecraft’s work is highlighted in the way she is trying to reform society to bring it closer to a utopian paradise. For example, Wollstonecraft states that

in the infancy of society, when men were just emerging out of barbarism, chiefs and priests, touching the most powerful springs of savage conduct — hope and fear — must have had unbounded sway. An aristocracy, of course, is naturally the first form of government. But [then]...monarchy and hierarchy break out...and the foundation of both is secured by feudal tenures...[and next,] the people acquire some power in the tumult, which obliges their rulers to gloss over their oppression with a show of right.²³

Wollstonecraft, in short, suggests not only that society has improved and should continue to do so, but that it has improved in a cyclical pattern. Society starts in a state of innocence, then falls, and then redeems itself somewhat, and continues to improve in this spiral pattern. This spiraling cycle is exactly what Mellor mentions Meyer Abrams describes in his book *Natural Supernaturalism*.²⁴Wollstonecraft’s references to the sublime, imagination, genius, Rousseau, and Milton, as well as her support for the romantic model of innocence, the fall, and redemption, indicate that Wollstonecraft’s romantic work shares some of the ideas of traditional romantics. Viewing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* through the lens of romanticism, then, improves the understanding of the work.

Without Mellor’s extension of the canon, however, much of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* would not be considered romantic, as Wollstonecraft also

22. Mary Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 5 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

23. Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.”

24. Mellor, *Romanticism*.

breaks away from Abram's idea of innocence, fall and redemption. She asserts that "Girls and boys... would play harmlessly together, if the distinction of sex was not inculcated long before nature makes any difference... most of the women, in the circle of my observation, who have acted like rational creatures, or shewn any vigour of intellect, have accidentally been allowed to run wild — as some of the elegant formers of the fair sex would insinuate."²⁵ Wollstonecraft holds that girls have the most freedom when they are very young, and the older they get, the more constraints society puts on them. She contends that without these constraints, they would have the same intellect and the same ability to fall and become redeemed as men. Wollstonecraft notes that in reality, however, women's choices are limited. They are never able to fall because they don't have freedom, and thus they never are redeemed, or gain the experience and ability to use their intellect that men do. Women, therefore, experience the opposite of the typical innocence, fall, and redemption cycle; they spiral downward. This argument demonstrates that Wollstonecraft, as a romantic, was willing to pioneer new ideas and stand apart from traditional authors. Reading her work through the lens of the expanded definition of romanticism highlights how the societal change in women's roles that Wollstonecraft advocates for is romantic.

Wollstonecraft's argument that women are rational and deserved equality and education fits into Mellor's expanded definition of romanticism. In arguing that educating women to transform the family is a better way to increase women's rights, rather than demanding full equality, Wollstonecraft advocated for gradual social change, instead of rapid change.²⁶ Wollstonecraft's argument for change is even more gradual because it is partly based on the fact that educated women would make better mothers.²⁷ By rationalizing the idea of female education by linking education to motherhood, Wollstonecraft placed the idea of the self within the family and community structure, as many other female romantics did. Without the expanded definition of romanticism, scholars might ignore how romantic linking women's rights to the community and family is. The expanded definition also allows us to see that Wollstonecraft, by tying in female rationality with repression of sexual passion and emotions, was trying to give a perspective of women as whole beings, rather than the typical portrayal of women as only passionate or emotional.

25. Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman."

26. Catriona MacKenzie, "Reason and Sensibility: The Ideal of Women's Self-Governance in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (1993): 35–55.

27. Mellor, *Romanticism*, 33.

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Wollstonecraft's advocacy for women's rights supports a key tenet of Mellor's definition of feminine romanticism, making her a romantic. In the conclusion to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft states that "we shall not see women affectionate till more equality be established in society."²⁸ Scholars contend that Wollstonecraft, while clearly disliking the women of her day, blamed women's faults on men and suggested that equality for the sexes would result in better men and better women.²⁹ Wollstonecraft, hence, criticizes men for creating an unattainable "imaginary ideal" for women that ultimately ended up ruining the marriages of both women and men.³⁰ Viewing Wollstonecraft's work through the expanded lens of romanticism, therefore, reveals the romantic nature of her argument about equality.

Wollstonecraft is also a romanticist in her call for the use of sense, reason, and rationality to enable women to become more whole. Wollstonecraft, instead of advocating for informal education, or more arts and poetry in education, advised that individual education should be "attention to a child as will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions, as they begin to ferment, and set the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity; so that the man may only have to proceed, not to begin, the important task of learning to think and reason."³¹ Traditionally, advocating for reason and regulation of passions would not seem romantic, but Mellor's expanded definition shows that Wollstonecraft, in advocating for suppressing passion, simply suggests that women become more whole – just as men were doing for themselves by arguing they should express emotion.

Wollstonecraft advocates the application of a similar rationale in marriage. She asserts that "in order to fulfil the duties of life, and to be able to pursue with vigour the various employments which form the moral character, a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion... they ought not to indulge those emotions which disturb the order of society, and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed."³² Wollstonecraft contends that passion is not the most important aspect of marriage, but rather that being moral and not disrupting society are more important. The idea

28. Mellor, *Romanticism*, 33.

29. Mellor, *Romanticism*, 37.

30. Naomi Jayne Garner, "Seeing Through a Glass Darkly: Wollstonecraft and the Confinements of Eighteenth-Century Femininity." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11, no. 3 (2009): 85.

31. Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman."

32. Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman."

of suppressing passion for societal good is an idea present in the expanded definition of romanticism that includes Mellor's ideas. Wollstonecraft elaborates upon this idea later and suggests that passion is one reason that marriage

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doesn't always work well – people often commit adultery because of passion, as Imlay did to her, and this destroys marriages. In other words, “Passions are spurs to action, and open the mind; but they sink into mere appetites, become a personal momentary gratification, when the object is gained, and the satisfied mind rests in enjoyment.”³³ Adultery, Wollstonecraft asserts, is committed by men and women and results in consequences for both sexes. Following passion and emotion results in adultery, but it had roots in societal flaws as well. Wollstonecraft claims that if women are “only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion, [they will be led to] shamefully to neglect the duties of life, and frequently in the midst of these sublime refinements they [will] plump into actual vice.”³⁴ If women, therefore, are taught by their families, their education, and society to focus only on love, marriage, their appearance, and sensuality, they will ultimately not be productive, effective, or happy members of society. If women are not happy and interesting, their husbands won't be happy either, and both sexes will feel trapped in marriage, potentially committing adultery.

33. Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.”

34. Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.”

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Although both sexes have vices, Wollstonecraft blames men for women's vices, stating that they should "let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man, for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty."³⁵ Thus, although women and men both are flawed, women are more trapped than men because they do not have rights and the freedom to make their own rational choices and have a life outside of the family. By using reason and rationality to argue that women's rights will improve society as a whole, Wollstonecraft cements herself as a romantic in this work – and demonstrates that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is better understood through the lens of romanticism.

Wollstonecraft builds her identity as a romantic in *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, a novel that was an attempt to fictionalize *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Mary Poovey, a respected romantic scholar, states that Wollstonecraft attempted to recreate the "insights of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in a genre she felt could articulate her own emotion and attract a female audience – the sentimental novel."³⁶ Therefore, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* articulates the same romantic concepts as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, yet in a genre that attracted more women. This makes the novel even more characteristic of romanticism, since it strived to focus even more on emotion and cater to women. The similarities of *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* to George Sand's feminine romanticist novel *Indiana*, are striking as well, particularly the discussion of women's romantic relationships and sensuality.³⁷ *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, therefore, is a strong example of feminine romanticism according to the expanded definition.

Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, another one of Wollstonecraft's more famous works, and the work that made Godwin fall in love with her, also is romantic according to the expanded definition. In this work, Wollstonecraft focuses on nature, reflection, and her own emotions, which is typical of masculine romanticism. Despite her focus on nature, Wollstonecraft notably uses language that is very different from that of male romantics. She opens "her bosom to the embraces of nature" and her "soul rose to its author"

35. Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman."

36. Mary Poovey, "Mary Wollstonecraft: The Gender of Genres in Late Eighteenth-Century England." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 15, no. 2 (1982): 111.

37. Mary Wollstonecraft, "Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

while most male romantics describe nature as “other,” or something to be usurped or controlled, not a friend.³⁸ Wollstonecraft, furthermore, distinguishes herself from male romantics because even in her reflections — she considers society, the communities she is in, and other people. Additionally, both her journey and the book “were motivated by her desire for financial independence,” which shows practicality and reason that was not advocated for by male romantics, such as Rousseau in his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*.³⁹ He reveled in doing nothing, not contributing to society, and not focusing on having a job. Wollstonecraft, in contrast, made no attempt to rebel against the useful as male romantics did.

Being useful was a rebellion for women. When Wollstonecraft discussed nature and herself too much, she would realize that in her letters and reprimand herself, stating, for example, that her reader would say “enough...of inanimate nature...let me hear something of the inhabitants.”⁴⁰ She also examined others in her reflections. After she discussed nature in Gothenburg, she mentions that had she traveled farther into Sweden, “she imagined that she should have seen a romantic country thinly inhabited, and these inhabitants struggling with poverty. The Norwegian peasantry, mostly independent, have a rough kind of frankness in their manner; but the Swedish, rendered more abject by misery, have a degree of politeness in their address, which, though it may sometimes border on insincerity, is oftener the effect of a broken spirit, rather softened than degraded by wretchedness.”⁴¹ Wollstonecraft, in considering the peasants in each country, indicates that she is not blind to others’ struggles, despite having her own. She, moreover, realizes that even if a country is romantic, it might not be a good place to live. These reflections about society distinguish her from male romantics. Although trying to avoid writing primarily about herself, considering others’ struggles, using different language to describe nature, and writing the book out of practicality would not have been considered romantic, the expanded definition of romanticism shows that these ideas of Wollstonecraft were rebellious and romantic.

In addition to having ideas that only fit into the expanded definition of romanticism, Wollstonecraft discussed topics included in both the traditional and expanded definitions – nature and self-reflection. Wollstonecraft discusses

38. Mary Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark,” in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 6 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

39. Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.”

40. Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.”

41. Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.”

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

nature as being beautiful and charming her, but also hurting her, “Why has nature so many charms for me — calling forth and cherishing refined sentiments, only to wound the breast that fosters them?”⁴² For Wollstonecraft, nature evokes strong emotions, as it does for many romantics. However, she does not see nature as something to be usurped, or controlled, traditional romantics do. Rather, she recognizes the power of nature to both cause harm and wonder — and to cause both life and destruction. Wollstonecraft marvels at the beauty and elegance of the scene when

The spiral tops of the pines are loaded with ripening seed...the profusion with which nature has decked them, with pendant honours, prevents all surprise at seeing, in every crevice, some sapling struggling for existence... The grey cobweb-like appearance of the aged pines is a much finer image of decay; the fibers whitening as they lose their moisture, imprisoned life seems to be stealing away. I cannot tell why — but death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free.⁴³

Mary Wollstonecraft, like male romantics, appreciates the beauty of nature and enjoys solitude. Walks in nature allow her to reflect and consider the sublime. Despite feeling the awe-inspiring and sublime characteristics of nature, Wollstonecraft also sees its dark side — likely because she is caught up in her own emotions and is upset about Imlay’s adultery. Her recent attempt at suicide made it more likely for her to consider death and destruction in nature more than the average person. Wollstonecraft sees death as a way of escape. In death she searches for a new path, one in which she is able to “get free” from personal and societal problems, and projects this desire onto nature.

Wollstonecraft, in being primarily concerned with herself and overwhelmed by her emotions, is similar to male romantics who concentrated on passion and emotions. In particular, Wollstonecraft is comparable to Werther in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, as he commits suicide and spends much of his time in solitude wallowing.⁴⁴ Wollstonecraft is also comparable to male romantics in that she views nature as a space in which she can escape her problems. She states that “[she] reasoned and reasoned; but [her] heart was too full to allow [her] to remain in the house, and [she] walked, till [she] was wearied out, to purchase...

42. Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.”

43. Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.”

44. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

forgetfulness.”⁴⁵ Walking in nature allows her a respite from real life and allows her to consider the sublime and forget about her own problems. Many male romantics, notably Rousseau, also went into nature to forget about society and their real life. Wollstonecraft is most similar to male romantics when she happily reflects in nature, appreciating the sublime. She notes that a “vague pleasurable sentiment absorbed me...the grey morn, streaked with silvery rays, ushered in the orient beams, — how beautifully varying into purple! — yet, I was sorry to lose the soft watery clouds which preceded them, exciting a kind of expectation that made me almost afraid to breathe, lest I should break the charm. I saw the sun — and sighed.”⁴⁶ Here, Wollstonecraft clearly describes nature as majestic, sublime, and beautiful. Male romantics usually spoke of nature similarly, contrasting it with cities and urban landscapes, which they thought were inferior and related to society’s transition towards science, technology and reason, and away from the arts.

Wollstonecraft is similar to Rousseau in that she does not want her thoughts and feelings interrupted by other people and seeks solitude in nature. Wollstonecraft says of one of her favorite places to visit, “I seldom met any human creature; and sometimes, reclining on the mossy down, under the shelter of a rock, the prattling of the sea amongst the pebbles has lulled me to sleep — no fear of any rude satyr’s approaching to interrupt my repose.”⁴⁷ Clearly, Wollstonecraft, like Rousseau, finds pleasure in being alone by herself in nature and values nature. In summary, Wollstonecraft’s writings about happily reflecting alone in nature, fit her into the traditional definition of romanticism well. Comparing her writing with romantics validates and contextualizes her thoughts.

The majority of Wollstonecraft’s works, however, do not focus on nature. Most of her works focus on education and society. Wollstonecraft’s works focusing on education and society include *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, *The Female Reader*, *Elements of Morality*, *The Cave of Fancy*, *Young Grandison*, and *Original Stories*. These stories are partially works of romanticism according to the new definition, but also conform to societal norms.

Wollstonecraft’s ideas in *The Female Reader* and *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* are characteristic of feminine romanticism. In *The Female Reader*,

45. Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.”

46. Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.”

47. Wollstonecraft, “Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.”

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Wollstonecraft writes that “far too much of a girl’s time is taken up in dress...The body hides the mind, and it is in its turn obscured by the drapery...dress ought to adorn the person, and not rival it.”⁴⁸ Wollstonecraft advocates for women to be valued for their minds, not their bodies. She proposes a gradual change to society — a decrease in the focus on women’s attire — in order to increase the respect given to women. In short, she advocates for women and for gradual societal change, which is typical of feminine romanticism. Later, she reminds her readers that “our feelings were not given us for our ornament, but to spur us on to right actions.”⁴⁹ Wollstonecraft, by connecting the practical and the emotional, demonstrates that she is a feminine romanticist. She cannot afford to ignore society or focus solely on emotions; she feels that she, and other women, have a responsibility to act as well.

In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* Wollstonecraft focuses on the fine arts, a very romantic topic. She mentions that art is a good way to sublimate passions, which is an idea in both feminine and masculine romanticism. On writing in particular, Wollstonecraft states that it should be “termed a fine art; and...a very useful one” but that young people often “substitute words for sentiments, and clothe mean thoughts in pompous diction.”⁵⁰ She laments that the young do not write well, and proposes that they should be taught how to, as it “is of great consequence in life as to our temporal interest, and of still more to the mind; as it teaches a person to arrange their thoughts, and digest them...[and] forms the only true basis of rational...conversation.”⁵¹ Wollstonecraft values the fine arts and connects her thoughts on fine art to rationality and educating young girls. In emphasizing the importance of writing in teaching young girls how to be rational and present themselves as rational, Wollstonecraft holds that her sex is rational, not just emotional, and that arts can teach reason, just like math and science. Her assertion is both romantic and feminist.

Wollstonecraft’s opinion on marriage in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* is also feminist, and by extension, romantic. Wollstonecraft disparages early marriages, stating that they are “a stop to improvement” and that women were not born only to “to draw nutrition, propagate and rot” but have souls,

48. Mary Wollstonecraft, “The Female Reader,” in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 4 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

49. Wollstonecraft, “The Female Reader.”

50. Mary Wollstonecraft, “Thoughts on the Education of Daughters,” in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 4 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

51. Wollstonecraft, “Thoughts on the Education of Daughters.”

CAROLYN DALY

which “ought to be attended to.”⁵² Women, hence, should not only “endeavor to please the other sex” in youth, but become educated, so their passion does not influence them too much, and they do not “marry a man before they are twenty, whom they would have rejected some years after.”⁵³ Wollstonecraft, an advocate for later marriage, supports a gradual change in society that would give women more choices and more time to become educated, rational, and not easily influenced by their passions. In summary, Wollstonecraft connects education, the fine arts, and reason in order to argue for gradual, feminist societal change. The expanded definition of romanticism includes these ideas, and helps us to contextualize her work.

However, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *The Female Reader* also conforms to bourgeois societal norms, as do Wollstonecraft’s other works focused on education, *The Cave of Fancy*, *Young Grandison*, *Elements of Morality*, and *Original Stories*. These works solely focus on teaching lessons and making children follow rules, emphasizing reason, duty, and suppressing passion and idleness without arguing for a cause or change to society. The preface of *Young Grandison*, for example, states that people’s “temporal as well as eternal welfare is only to be secured by a constant attention to [their] duty.”⁵⁴ The guiding principle of *Young Grandison*, hence, is very non-romantic because it focuses on duty and following societal rules instead of working towards reform in society and allowing individuals to express themselves and their emotions. The lessons in *Young Grandison* also support bourgeois societal norms. For instance, Wollstonecraft provides a lesson, told in the form of a story about Edward and his brother Charles, who are both young men. Edward sees a broken plate and thinks it is a servant’s fault. He wants to tell his aunt about it and get the servant in trouble, but Charles points out that not only is that immoral, but that it was Edward’s fault the plate got broken, since he carelessly left it on the chair. Edward then changes his mind and doesn’t want to tell his aunt about the broken plate. Charles points out how immoral this is.⁵⁵ This story is fundamentally a lesson about abiding by rules and teaches children to be responsible, respectful of property, forgiving, and slow to blame other people — ideas common in middle and upper class society.

52. Wollstonecraft, “Thoughts on the Education of Daughters.”

53. Wollstonecraft, “Thoughts on the Education of Daughters.”

54. Mary Wollstonecraft, “Young Grandison,” in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* Electronic Edition Volume 02, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

55. Wollstonecraft, “Young Grandison.”

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Wollstonecraft further promotes adherence to reason and duty in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, stating that “it is our duty to lay down some rule to regulate our actions by, and to adhere to it, as consistently as our infirmities will permit. To be able to follow Mr. Locke’s system...parents must have subdued their own passions, [but] it does not always happen that both parents are rational...”⁵⁶ Wollstonecraft, in summary, holds that parents are responsible for acting rationally and giving their children rules to abide by, and that children have a duty to follow those rules, which is an emerging middle class as well as traditional societal idea.

Wollstonecraft, moreover, argues that idleness is bad in *Original Stories*. In doing so, she deviates from the ideas of romantics, who believe that there is too much focus on work and contributing to society. *Elements of Morality* builds upon the idea that children should be taught to have good judgement and obey their parents. The book is broken into sections, each with a different story from a young boy named Charles’ life. The stories all advocate for children to follow their parents’ rules and fulfill their duties. In the beginning of the book, for example, little Charles doesn’t listen to his parents and wanders far into the woods without telling them; he becomes scared, faces consequences, and then learns this lesson.⁵⁷ The book recounts countless similar stories, and ends with a chart detailing everyone’s duties to themselves, to others, to animals, to events, and to things.⁵⁸ The emphasis on conforming to societal norms, such as the duty to obey one’s parents, is present in all of these works, and demonstrates that although Wollstonecraft was romantic, she held some traditional ideas typical of her class status, gender, and era.

The Importance of Religious Opinions is another work of Wollstonecraft’s that is primarily not romantic, although the work discusses nature, the sublime, and imagination. The work is very concerned with religion and following its teachings, so it has the same focus on abiding by rules and moral codes as some of Wollstonecraft’s texts about education. The text does not support the traditionally romantic idea of striving for an ideal society. However, *The Importance of Religious Opinions* is a translation she made of another person’s work, and thus, it does not have significant implications about Wollstonecraft’s life and work.⁵⁹

56. Wollstonecraft, “Thoughts on the Education of Daughters.”

57. Mary Wollstonecraft, “Elements of Morality,” in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft Electronic Edition* Volume 02, ed. by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

58. Wollstonecraft, “Elements of Morality.”

59. Mary Wollstonecraft, “Of the Importance of Religious Opinions,” in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*,

Mary Wollstonecraft's works *On Poetry*, *The Cave of Fancy*, and *Mary, A Fiction* are all primarily romantic works in the traditional sense of the word. All three works discuss nature, reason, sensibility, sense, genius, imagination, the sublime, and feminist topics. The opening paragraphs of *The Cave of Fancy* discuss nature and the sublime, "One mountain rose sublime, towering above all, on the craggy sides of which a few sea-weeds grew, washed by the ocean, that with tumultuous roar rushed to assault, and even undermine, the huge barrier that stopped its progress."⁶⁰ Since the work starts by discussing nature as sublime, Wollstonecraft makes it clear that the sublime and nature, and by extension romanticism, are central to *The Cave of Fancy*. The rest of the work follows up on these expectations and focuses on the romantic themes.⁶¹ Since Wollstonecraft is familiar with other romantic texts, her frequent use of the words "sublime," "genius," and "imagination" are not coincidental – she intends for her work to be romantic, and it should be designated as such, so it can be fully appreciated and contextualized.

Similarly, *On Poetry* discusses the sublime and imagination, as well as feminist ideas. Wollstonecraft mentions that boys who "have received a classical education...load their memory with words" and do not fully grasp the concept of the sublime or the beauty of nature.⁶² The themes of disparaging classical education and promoting nature and the sublime are characteristic of many romantics. Wollstonecraft describes cities as crowded and rural scenes as pleasant, beautiful, and full of nature, again reinforcing the ideas of many romantics who believed in the importance of nature, and rural areas, as opposed to cities, industrialism, mechanization, and the corresponding decrease in the value of the arts.⁶³

Mary, A Fiction alludes to the sublime, genius, and imagination present in *On Poetry*. Wollstonecraft, in this novel, also focuses on love, relationships, and nature, and the emotional journey and relationships of Mary, the main character in the book. When Wollstonecraft mentions books Mary reads, she

ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 3 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

60. Mary Wollstonecraft, "The Cave of Fancy," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

61. Wollstonecraft, "The Cave of Fancy."

62. Mary Wollstonecraft, "On Poetry," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 5 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

63. Wollstonecraft, "On Poetry."

SEEING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

highlights *Paradise Lost*, a book typically lauded by romantics.⁶⁴ Wollstonecraft, in short, consistently and effectively alludes to romantic ideals and uses romantic vocabulary in *Mary, A Fiction*, *The Cave of Fancy*, and *On Poetry*. Since these works are romantic in both the traditional and expanded sense, they should be read through the lens of romanticism to be better understood.

In conclusion, I argue Mary Wollstonecraft should be considered a romantic according to the expanded definition of romanticism that accounts for gender. The overwhelming majority of her works are shining examples of romanticism or have significant excerpts that focus on topics central to romanticism. Although Wollstonecraft places a higher value on reason, sense rather than sensibility, women's rights, and gradual rather than rapid societal change, this is typical of many female romantics; and Mellor argues that their works should be added to the canon, as they have valuable, romantic ideas. Practicality and reason constituted radical and rebellious stances for women in the Eighteenth Century in ways they did not for men. Further, female romantics, in advocating for reason, parallel male romantics advocating for passion in that both groups are arguing for the development of the whole person. Wollstonecraft proves herself as a romantic with her focus on topics such as nature, the sublime, and imagination - all of which are central to both the traditional and expanded definition of romanticism. Nevertheless, very few people hold absolutely no culturally conservative ideas, and Wollstonecraft is no different. Her work conforms to middle and upper class societal norms by arguing that women should raise children, and that children should follow societal bourgeois rules and obey their parents. Mary Wollstonecraft's life, like her work, demonstrates that she is a romantic. She was a feminist, traveled, and wrote for a living, but also married for practical reasons and to avoid judgement from society. She did not have the same freedom to pursue her passions and to ignore her home life as many male romantics did, but she struggled with her mental health and focused on her own personal tragedies, as male romantics did. Contextualizing Mary Wollstonecraft's life and work through the lens of romanticism clarifies her incredibly complex, rich, and difficult life and the important contributions of her work. If scholars do not consider Mary Wollstonecraft a romantic, not only do they miss out on contextualizing some of the strengths of her work and her as a person, but the canon of romanticism is less nuanced. Mary Wollstonecraft was undoubtedly romantic – the fact that she was a woman and carved her own path only makes that more impressive.

64. Mary Wollstonecraft, "Mary, A Fiction," in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).

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