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Wollstonecraft vs Rousseau on the Education of Women

The concepts of national education and coeducation are not considered controversial subjects in today's modern civilized world and even recent history. What is regarded as a logical and acceptable way to educate our citizen's children was, however, typically unheard of before the mid-19th century when national school boards were developed. When Mary Wollstonecraft expressed these ideas in her 1792 essay *Vindication of the rights of woman*, she wrote from a position of experience and authority that may not have been taken seriously in the 18th century but formed a basis for future consideration. In her treatise she reveals that she read "various books written on the subject of education and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools" (Wollstonecraft 20), only to conclude that the lack of education for women is the reason that they are "rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes originating from one hasty conclusion" (20).

Wollstonecraft wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in response to Jean Jacques Rousseau's most successful work, *Émile, or On Education*, which focuses more on educating boys, while dismissing the need for educating girls except for some domestic instruction (Reuter 1145). His essay rightly advocated for a more natural learning experience to replace the rote memorization techniques routinely used to educate children at the time. Even though *Émile* was praised as a formative manual regarding educational reform, his secret concerning his children was exposed in a 1764 eight-page pamphlet published anonymously in Geneva named *Sentiment*

des citoyens where it was stated that the author of *Émile* placed all of his children in a foundling hospital (Garrard 150). This essay will examine how the public perception of Mary Wollstonecraft's past reputation may have delayed the adoption of a national education system that supported coeducation and why Jean Jacques Rousseau's ideas about childhood education were embraced despite the exposure of a much worse reputation regarding the treatment of his own children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, written in 1782, Rousseau explains how certain events in his childhood related to his ideas of how children could become better citizens if educated properly and rationalizes his actions concerning his avoidance of having any relationship with his own children. In *Confessions* Rousseau describes a series of sexually exhibitionistic acts he played as a youth (Coetzee 208), asking his readers to contemplate "Who would believe this childish discipline, received at eight years old, from the hands of a woman of thirty...I gazed on every handsome woman with delight; imagination incessantly brought their charms to my remembrance, only to transform them into so many Miss Lamerciers" (Rousseau 20). The description of these acts is itself, of course, a kind of exhibitionism. According to one scholar, the goal of Rousseau's self-revelations was to win love and acceptance by offering the truth of the self, while allowing others to see (Coetzee 208).

Before Wollstonecraft published her now celebrated work, *Vindication of the rights of woman*, her difficult life would take her places that aided in her realizations of the need for woman's rights and especially a proper education beginning at an early age. After surviving an abusive childhood, where at some point she had to shield her mother from her father's violent abuse, she left home at 18 years of age and promptly began working, which already showed her

willingness to be independent (Godwin 9). At first, young Mary worked as a paid companion for a widow that she did not get along well with, which led her to seek more satisfying work. Before Wollstonecraft was able to start a school with her sisters and close friend Fanny Blood, she suffered two tragic events that would influence her writing regarding her mother, who died, and a tragic situation that caused her sister public denunciation after following Mary's advice to leave her husband (Godwin 14). Shortly after founding the school in Newington Green, her friend Fanny Blood left to get married. Unfortunately, the school failed when Mary left to tend to her friend in 1785 due to an illness that ended in Fanny's death (Godwin 16). Not only would these experiences shape Mary's philosophy regarding the importance of educating woman and children properly, but she was also able to use her personal experience of starting a school offer advise on educating children in *Vindication of the rights of woman*.

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATING CHILDREN

Rousseau's educational philosophy, which he outlined in his work *Émile*, suggested some very good ideas for educating boys by focusing on natural development and experiential learning instead of mere training. Rousseau believed that children are inherently good, and that society corrupts them, so he attempted to design an educational system that would preserve the natural innocence of children while encouraging more organic biological development (Scott 534). He suggested that children should be allowed the freedom to explore and discover the natural world instead of traditional schooling which consisted mostly of memorization (Schaeffer 106).

Rousseau also believed that not only should children be given the necessary freedom to explore, but that the role of the educator should guide the child, instead of dictating their learning and that children's feelings are important sources of knowledge and should not be suppressed. In his

educational program, Rousseau suggested a period of twelve years for childhood education, followed by four years of education where there is a gradual introduction of more intellectual pursuits towards a formal education, much like some modern educational systems in place today (Schaeffer 91-92). Rousseau's educational ideas challenged the predominant educational standards of the 18th century, as he proposed a more child-centered approach to education which continues to influence educational thought today.

According to Susan Laird, *Vindication of the rights of woman* scrutinizes the way in which boys and girls are educated. Wollstonecraft appraises educational thought written about both sexes, maintaining the need for a national system of coeducation, which “constitutes a brave new kind of philosophical writing about education” (Laird 63). Wollstonecraft attempts to advise how children should be educated in a way that they can become good citizens and not just taught as a way to prepare for one’s status or position in life. In Wollstonecraft’s plan of coeducation, she implies that character of boys would not be impaired by exposure to early decadence, nor girls rendered powerless and supercilious, by trivial interests. A better way to produce effective moral citizenship is through education because morality requires discernment of truth and the rejection of misinformation in a world of inequality and corruption (Frazer 614).

BAD REPUTATIONS REVEALED

In spite of the popularity of Rousseau’s publication proposing a better educational system, several responses published by some noted contemporary 18th-century philosophers disclosed the abandonment of his children, which had immense impact on the wider acceptance his ideas. In the pamphlet *Sentiment des citoyens* (The Feeling of the Citizens), for example, Rousseau was not only discovered to have deposited all his children in a foundling hospital, but

he was also blamed for causing the death of his mother-in-law. The author, believed to be Voltaire (Garrard 150) wrote “dressed as a mountebank drags with him from village to village and from mountain to mountain the unfortunate woman whose mother he killed, and whose infants he exposed at the door of an orphanage” (Voltaire). Edmund Burke in England described Rousseau as “a wild, ferocious, low-minded, hard-hearted father” (Mitchell 657). During his lifetime and even today, Rousseau’s relinquishment of his paternal charges has been mostly viewed as a black mark on his character which weakened his authority as a contributor to social reform (Garrard 150). In *Confessions*, Rousseau would attempt to again rationalize his actions prompting sympathy regarding his situation. Rousseau believed that pity is the cornerstone of healthy social cohesion because pity staves off vanity which fuels inequality, however, pity can also lead to the development of vanity if while feeling another person’s pain, we take pleasure in our own absence of pain (Schaeffer 111-117).

While Rousseau tried desperately to change his readers perception while he was alive, by writing and publicly reading his last work, *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, where he explains his avoidance of having any relationship with his own children, Mary Wollstonecraft’s late husband, as a tribute to her, disclosed personal details of her life that the world was not yet ready for as he described her “out of wedlock” pregnancy. He wrote:

Finding the return of Mr. Imlay continually postponed, she determined, in January 1794, to join him at Havre. One motive that influenced her, though, I believe, by no means the principal, was the growing cruelties of Robespierre, and the desire she felt to be in any other place, rather than the devoted city, in the midst of which they were perpetrated. From January to September, Mr. Imlay and Mary lived

together, with great harmony, at Havre, where the child, with which she was pregnant, was born, on the fourteenth of May, and named Frances, in remembrance of the dear friend of her youth... (Godwin 40).

According to Wang, even though “Godwin’s intentions were pure and he simply wished to provide an honest portrayal of his late wife’s life, the memoir was not well received, and Wollstonecraft was criticized for her actions” (Wang 1).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, whether or not Rousseau was successful in vindicating himself in his *Confessions* depends on when, where, and who the reader is. A 21-century liberal student who understands poverty may feel more sympathy for Rousseau, unless that student was a feminist, probably not, but not because of his actions concerning his children, but for his views on education for women. In the 19th century, Rousseau was known as one of the authors blamed for the French Revolution, and yet he is the first philosopher to be honored by the National Assembly for his great works during the Enlightenment including *The Social Contract* and *Émile* (Mitchell 648). Rousseau's work set off a wide range of responses, from those who welcomed his unique vision of a holistic attitude toward education to those who passionately opposed his religious and educational ideas. Despite the controversies, Rousseau had an enduring influence on educational thinkers and progressive educators, his concepts of employing natural experience and observation in education continue to correlate with modern educational methods. Whether Rousseau’s life experience or character impacts how a reader responds to Rousseau’s ideas depends on the character of the reader and whether or not they understand the value of pity.

For Wollstonecraft, her ideas evolved from her personal challenge to earn a living and also her prior teaching experience, but regardless of her significant contribution, Wollstonecraft's work received barely any notice during her lifetime, while faced with the contempt of male scholars. Her work would not be taken seriously until the 19th century when suffragists Susan Antony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in America published the *History of the Women's Suffrage* in 1889, and Wollstonecraft was included in the list of earlier feminists who had inspired them (Poonacha 431). However, her ideas regarding national education took hold throughout the 19th century, and during the latter part of the 19th century, public elementary schools became available to all children in most countries (CEP 2020). During the 20th century, most schools included girls and gradually throughout the 1900s, became more inclusive, beyond what Wollstonecraft envisioned.

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