

Transcript of Mary Wollstonecraft lecture

Childhood:

Mary Wollstonecraft lived from 1759-1797. She was born in rural England outside of London, the second child of seven. A younger brother died. Her older brother Ned was the family favorite. The other children included Eliza, Charles, James and Everina.

Her paternal grandfather was Edward Wollstonecraft, a successful master weaver who established a prosperous weaving business.

Her father – John Edward Wollstonecraft – trained as a weaver, but he squandered his inheritance as a failed gentleman farmer. His failures forced the family to move numerous times. In his misery he turned to alcohol, and physically and emotionally abused his wife.

Mary's mother – Elizabeth Dickson – was a weak and timid woman.

Mary recalls toddling behind her mother and brother Ned, trying to keep up. John (Mary's father) and Ned (her brother) both received equal parts of Edward's inheritance. Neither managed money well, and later in life Mary supported them both.

As oldest daughter, Mary often tried to shield her mother from her father's abuse; she even slept in front of her mother's bedroom door. But as a result she often bore the brunt of abuse herself. In addition to hating her father, she also resented her mother for being so weak.

Her education was not a priority. She attended a day school for awhile. Because she did not get positive attention/love at home, she sought it elsewhere--first through friends—Jane Arden and then Fanny Blood. She wrote letters to them that resembled love letters. She wanted/needed to be the center of their world. From the book *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* by Claire Tomalin: “There was a quarrel. Mary accused Jane of neglect and of having hurt her feelings and demanded her own letters back. She then said nothing could ever be the same again but asked Jane to call as usual so that their friends should not gossip. When Jane ignored this letter, a still more frantic one followed in which Mary confessed to jealousy of another girl; the torture was the worse because the Arden parents also favoured the rival. Perhaps they thought Mary was not a suitable friend? She explained herself further: ‘If I did not love you I should not write so;--I have a heart that scorns disguise, and a countenance which will not dissemble: I have formed romantic notions of friendship—I have been once disappointed—I think if I am a second time I shall only want some infidelity in a love affair, to qualify me for an old maid, as then I shall have no idea of either of them. I am a little singular in my thoughts of love and friendship; I must have the first place or none.—I own your behaviour is more according to the opinion of the world, but I would break such narrow bounds” (8).

Later she did the same thing with men and even her siblings. I believe she was trying to fill a void that is created by an absent or abusive father and a weak mother. She was seeking validation she never received from her parents. She had to prove someone could love her, but in doing so, she had to have control and impose her will, which made people pull away from her. This set her into a vicious cycle.

Again from Claire Tomalin's book: "Jane's failure to respond to her affection was not the first disappointment she had suffered, as she was at pains to point out. Perhaps she had her parents in mind. How much they were really to blame for making her unhappy is hard to say; apart from the drunken episodes they seem to have been cool rather than cruel, too preoccupied with their own interests and troubles to give Mary what she wanted of them, unable to fill the roles she wished to see them in, and unappreciative of her efforts to impress them" (9).

A particularly disturbing story illustrates how Mary also inserted herself into the lives of her siblings. Mary's sister Eliza married and had a child. She suffered post-partum depression (although this was not a named or diagnosed condition at the time), and her husband called on Mary to come help. Mary determined that Eliza would be better off without husband and daughter, and took her away. The baby died within a year, and Eliza resented Mary thereafter. From Tomalin's book: "When Mary arrived at the Bishops' she found Eliza in a severely disturbed state, talking disconnectedly but saying enough to suggest to her sister that she had been very ill-used by her husband. Whether this was a delusion of her breakdown or based on some real grievance is hard to say. And so, in a state bordering on hysterical high spirits, Mary crept out of the Bermondsey house, with Eliza but without the baby, during Meredith's (her husband's) absence one day in January. They took a coach into central London and then another to the village of Hackney, far north of the river, where they installed themselves in lodgings under false names.... All the way across London Eliza in her distress had been biting her wedding ring... Left to herself, there seems little doubt that Eliza would have returned to her repentant husband and the innocent baby; she was soon sighing for the little creature.... This state of affairs—cold weather, uncomfortable lodgings, increasing disapproval and uncertainty over the future—continued into February. Eliza never went home to Bermondsey and almost certainly never saw her little daughter again." Her daughter died before her first birthday, as recorded in the local parish register.

Before moving on to the second Wollstonecraft lecture, take a moment to think about the impact that Mary's early family life, particularly her relationship with her parents, may have had on her social and emotional development. Why do you think she felt the need to insert herself into the lives of others? Why did she have to have 'first place or none'?

Early Adulthood

In order to escape her household Mary took a position as a lady's companion, one of the few jobs open to women of middle class who were not married and didn't have family money. Two years

later she returned home to nurse her sick mother. She left again after her mother's death, and moved in with her friend Fanny Blood's family—a destitute family. It was here Mary saw the limitations facing women who needed to earn a living but were denied an education.

Mary worked as a seamstress, governess, and school mistress. She opened a school with her sisters and Fanny. Fanny later married and moved to Portugal (Mary had begged her not to do so—Fanny had contracted tuberculosis). When Mary found out Fanny was going to be giving birth, she left the school and went to her. She arrived as both Fanny and the baby died in childbirth. Mary took a lock of Fanny's hair, fashioned it into a ring, and wore it the rest of her life.

Mary returned to London to find the school failing. She began writing to pay off debts. She was lucky to find a radical bookseller willing to publish her work, Joseph Johnson. Her first publication came in 1787 – *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. She wrote it in six weeks. This work addresses the dilemma of women who are denied education but do not have the financial means to support themselves. She sent the money she earned to the Blood family. While working as a governess she wrote her first novel, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), a fictional account of her own childhood and her relationship with Fanny. Johnson published the novel and a children's book. In 1789 he published her anthology *The Female Reader*, under a male penname, Mr. Cresswick, teacher of Elocution. She also wrote articles for *The Analytic Review* and did translations from German and French. She was primarily self-taught.

While her professional life was coming together, her personal life continued to be disastrous. First, through her publisher Johnson she met Henry Fuseli, a Swiss artist and scholar. He was 47 and recently married. She was 29 (and clearly looking to replace her lack of father love). She eventually asked his wife if she could move in with them and become a permanent part of the household. His wife Sophia ran Mary out. From Tomalin's biography: "She called on Sophia, who had so far taken the line of deliberate, dignified ignorance demanded by the situation, and amazed her by asking to be admitted to the household on a permanent basis. Her wish, she explained, was to be his spiritual partner; she was not trying to supplant Sophia's position as the legal wife of the flesh, but she felt herself truly united to Fuseli by a mental affinity. She could no longer bear to live separately. She must see him every day....[Sophia] sent her packing and told her on no account ever to return to the house again" (115).

Before moving on to the last installment of Wollstonecraft's biography, think about how she might have been impacted by her position in society (a woman of no means having to find work when positions for women were extremely limited), by the death of her friend Fanny, by her newly found writing career, and by her affair with a married man. One of the struggles I had with Wollstonecraft for years was trying to reconcile her personal life with her professional life. How do you reconcile the two?

The influence of the French Revolution

After the disastrous affair with Fuseli, Mary became part of a radical group of writers and philosophers (that included her future husband, William Godwin—although they did not get involved with each other at that time). The French Revolution began in 1789 and in 1790 she anonymously published *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. He was against toppling the patriarchal monarchy, and she was for government that recognized the rights of all (more democratic). She dedicated the book to the French minister of Education, who at the time was designing a national education program for boys. She was hoping to convince him that girls should also be involved. In 1791 a second edition was published, this time with her name as author. When people discovered the author was a woman, they were outraged. In 1792 she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She wrote the entire work in a matter of weeks.

In 1792 she also went to France to view the revolution for herself. There she met Gilbert Imlay, an American who had served in the American Revolution. They did not marry, but when the French Revolution deteriorated into the Reign of Terror, she sought protection at the American Embassy as Imlay's wife. She became pregnant, and when she gave birth to a daughter, she named her Fanny after her friend Fanny Blood. After her daughter's birth Imlay left her, and she made her first suicide attempt by taking laudanum (an opiate). They reconciled, and he sent her on a trip to Norway on behalf of his business interests. While on the trip she wrote *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). This work is a narrative written in the form of a personal journal. When she returned, she found Imlay living with another woman. She sent him a letter telling him when and where she was going to jump to her death into the Thames. From Tomalin's biography: "The flaw in Mary's courage—or it could be called the sensible loophole she left—was the carefully dispatched letter to Imlay in which she not only announced her intention of killing herself but explained how, and even gave some indication as to where she proposed to carry out the deed. 'I shall plunge into the Thames where there is the least chance of being snatched from the death I seek.' And of course there was a veiled appeal here too: love me enough to come and save me, she was saying. If not, death is to be 'peace' and 'comfort', in contrast with the treatment he has been handing out. 'I would encounter a thousand deaths, rather than a night like the last.'" (180). Her attempt was unsuccessful. Some fishermen who saw her jump in dragged her out. She also eventually asked Imlay if she could live with him and the woman he was seeing, so he could be a father to Fanny. He declined.

She eventually became involved with fellow writer William Godwin. She did not feel the same passion for Godwin that she had felt for Imlay and Fuseli, perhaps because her father wound had lessened with age and maturity, or maybe being a mother to her daughter Fanny had helped fill the void. When they married after she became pregnant, she made the decision to marry him with almost careless disregard, as biographer Tomalin notes in Wollstonecraft's own words: "The wound my unsuspecting heart formerly received is not healed. I found my evenings solitary, and

I wished, while fulfilling the duty of a mother, to have some person with similar pursuits, bound to me by affection; and beside, I earnestly desired to resign a name which seemed to disgrace me” [she had taken Imlay’s name when they had a child together, even though the two had never legally married]. At this point in her life, she seemed to be recognizing the importance of companionship and stability rather than continuing her reckless pursuit of passion and heartache in order to feel loved and wanted. This seems to be the first relationship Mary entered into on equal footing. Godwin respected Wollstonecraft as both a woman and a writer, and for the first time she seemed to be seeking a true partner and not someone to fill the void left by a lack of parental love. Neither she nor Godwin believed in marriage, but they did marry after she became pregnant. They maintained separate residences next door to one another. She died ten days after giving birth to their daughter Mary, after developing an infection when her placenta did not fully expel. After her death, Godwin wanted to honor her by publishing a book about her life and works. He was brutally honest about her personal life, which led to extensive criticism and ridicule. As a result of telling her whole truth, her works were essentially ignored for almost a full century after that, which is believed to have delayed the women’s movement by an entire generation.

Wollstonecraft’s daughter Fanny committed suicide in 1816 (she overdosed on Laudanum at age 22) and her daughter Mary later became a famous author herself after writing *Frankenstein* in 1818.