

The Rights of Women Student Worksheet

Introduction:

One of the offshoots of Enlightenment philosophy was a changed view of the role of women in society. Enlightenment thinkers held reason supreme and valued education as the best way to develop a person's reason. They also viewed education as crucial for moral development and for society to function as close to ideal as possible. Many thinkers, therefore, advocated education for women; however, they differed on the specific things they believed women should be taught, and most male thinkers did not extend their arguments to advocate full equality for women.

In this lesson, you will first read an essay written by Daniel Defoe, best-known for writing the classic novel *Robinson Crusoe*. You will then read a selection from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, written in 1792, largely in response to the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" that had come out of the ferment of the French Revolution one year earlier. In the selection, Wollstonecraft (mother of author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein*) mentions "virtue" several times. This is not "virtue" in the modern sense of the word, but rather a larger philosophical concept. A "virtuous" person was not only moral in their conduct but strove for the larger improvement of society as a whole; such a person would be committed to the acquisition and spreading of knowledge so as to contribute to social "progress."

Directions:

All Web links for this lesson can be found at:

<http://www.socialstudies.com/worldlinks.html>

Daniel Defoe: (On) The Education of Women (1719)

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1719defoe-women.asp>

1. Is Defoe for or against the education of women? What does he mean when he says, "We reproach the sex every day with folly and impertinence; while I am confident, had they the advantages of education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves"? In your own words, paraphrase the meaning of this statement.
2. How does Defoe use God to justify the education of women?
3. What specific things does Defoe believe women should be taught?
4. What does Defoe see as the ultimate goal of educating women?
5. Do you think Defoe believed that men and women should be afforded an equal place in society? Use examples to justify your answer.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: Mary Wollstonecraft

<http://www.bartleby.com/144/2.html>

This selection is about eight pages long, but you will only be focusing on the first two pages. Read these pages and answer the following questions:

6. What does Wollstonecraft see as the reason that women are “kept in ignorance”? What does she claim that women are taught to do from infancy?
7. What does Wollstonecraft claim is the result of the “most perfect education”? What does she see as the only way that people can become “virtuous”?
8. Wollstonecraft says that “if...women do not resign the arbitrary power of beauty—they will prove that they have less mind than man.” What does she mean by this statement?
9. Why does Wollstonecraft believe that “the little knowledge which women of strong minds attain, is, from various circumstances, of a more desultory kind than the knowledge of men”?
10. Do you think Wollstonecraft believed that men and women should be afforded an equal place in society? Use examples to justify your answer.
11. In a paragraph, summarize the differences between Defoe’s view of women and Wollstonecraft’s view of women.