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## Duration

One or two class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

## Resources

### 1. Student handout



### 2. Student handout with vocabulary



### 3. Multiple-choice questions



## Objectives of Lesson

- To read a historical source for information about women's education in the 18<sup>th</sup> century
- To practice multiple-choice questions related to Enlightenment thought

## College Board Objectives from the 2019-20 CED

- **Topic 4.3:** The Enlightenment (p. 98)
- **Learning Objective 4.C:** "Explain the causes and consequences of Enlightenment thought on European society from 1648 to 1815."
- **Key Concept 2.3.I.C:** "Despite the principles of equality espoused by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, intellectuals such as Rousseau offered controversial arguments for the exclusion of women from political life."
- **Topic 4.5:** 18th-Century Culture and Arts (p. 102)
- **Learning Objective 4.F:** "Explain how European cultural and intellectual life was maintained and changed throughout the period from 1648 to 1815."

## Illustrative Examples

Mary Wollstonecraft, who appears in the multiple-choice sample passage, is listed under the category of "individuals who challenged Rousseau's position on women" (p. 98).

Daniel Defoe is listed under the category of authors who produced "literature that reflected commercial society or Enlightenment ideals" (p. 102).

## Student Activities

- Close reading of a historical source (either in class or for homework)
- Class discussion of the source
- Multiple-choice practice questions
  - Answer key: 1 (B), 2 (D), 3 (C)

## How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is organized around Daniel Defoe's argument about the value of the education of women. You can assign the source for homework or read it in class. The source contains challenging diction and syntax, so we have provided two versions of the source—one with vocabulary annotations and one without. The list of questions below can help guide you through group work or a class discussion, depending on your preferences. The multiple-choice questions are based on Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and can be assigned either in class or for homework. The source provides a useful point of comparison with that of Defoe.

## Historical Context

The education of women in the Enlightenment was a major topic of debate among the leading writers of the eighteenth century. Notably, Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that “women do wrong to complain of the inequality of man-made laws. When she tries to usurp our rights, she is our inferior.” By contrast, John Locke and Nicolas de Condorcet advocated for women’s education and a degree of equality between the sexes. These authors drew on Enlightenment principles and the examples of powerful female monarchs, rather than on tradition or the Bible. This issue took on special importance during the French Revolution, the context in which both Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges wrote their seminal works on women’s rights.

**Daniel Defoe** (1660-1731) was a prolific English novelist, journalist, and pamphleteer. Over the course of his long writing career, he produced hundreds of works, covering a wide range of subjects. His most famous works are *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Journal of the Plague Year*. His writings on the education spanned many decades, and the source presented in this lesson was first written some 20 years before he republished it in 1719.

**Mary Wollstonecraft** (1759-1797) was an English philosopher, writer, and advocate of women’s rights. She was a founding philosopher for later feminist thought and practice. Her most famous work is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which was published in 1792. In the book, she argues against philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who sought to prevent women’s access to education.



Daniel Defoe



Mary Wollstonecraft

## Questions for Discussion

While some of the formal elements of this text are challenging, Defoe’s overall point is clear and consistent throughout the excerpt. His argument for women’s education makes appeals both to civilization and Christian tradition and is heavily influenced by the new Enlightenment emphasis on reason and nature. These are some questions that can guide students through the discussion of the source.

1. What is the purpose of education (lines 15-17)?
2. Which subjects are important for women’s education? Which subjects does he leave out (lines 34-43)?
3. What is the primary differentiator among women (lines 49-51)? Between men and women (lines 83-85)?
4. Is this a piece of feminist writing or is Defoe condescending to women and participating in their subordination in society?
5. What specific reasons does Defoe offer for his claim that it is “the sordidest piece of folly and ingratitude in the world, to withhold from the sex the due lustre which the advantages of education gives to the natural beauty of their minds” (lines 59-61)?
6. In the final paragraph of the passage, why is Defoe optimistic about the future? What is the practical path to achieving education for women?
7. How would a women’s rights advocate make this argument today? What terms of Defoe’s argument would be unacceptable to most writers today?

## Passage

### Daniel Defoe: *The Education of Women*, 1719

I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us as a civilized and a Christian country, that we deny the advantages of learning to women. We reproach the sex every day with  
*Line* folly and impertinence; while I am confident, had they the advantages of  
5 education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves.

One would wonder, indeed, how it should happen that women are conversible at all; since they are only beholden to natural parts, for all their knowledge. Their youth is spent to teach them to stitch and sew or make  
10 or so; and that is the height of a woman's education. And I would but ask any who slight the sex for their understanding, what is a man (a gentleman, I mean) good for, that is taught no more? I need not give instances, or examine the character of a gentleman, with a good estate, or a good family, and with tolerable parts; and examine what figure he makes for want of education.

15 The soul is placed in the body like a rough diamond; and must be polished, or the lustre of it will never appear. And 'tis manifest, that as the rational soul distinguishes us from brutes; so education carries on the distinction, and makes some less brutish than others. This is too evident to need any demonstration. But why then should women be denied the benefit  
20 of instruction? If knowledge and understanding had been useless additions to the sex, God Almighty would never have given them capacities; for he made nothing needless. Besides, I would ask such, What they can see in ignorance, that they should think it a necessary ornament to a woman? or how much worse is a wise woman than a fool? or what has the woman done  
25 to forfeit the privilege of being taught? Does she plague us with her pride and impertinence? Why did we not let her learn, that she might have had more wit? Shall we upbraid women with folly, when 'tis only the error of this inhuman custom, that hindered them from being made wiser?

The capacities of women are supposed to be greater, and their senses  
30 quicker than those of the men; and what they might be capable of being bred to, is plain from some instances of female wit, which this age is not without. Which upbraids us with Injustice, and looks as if we denied women the advantages of education, for fear they should vie with the men in their improvements...

35 [They] should be taught all sorts of breeding suitable both to their genius and quality. And in particular, Music and Dancing; which it would be cruelty to bar the sex of, because they are their darlings. But besides this, they should be taught languages, as particularly French and Italian: and I would venture the injury of giving a woman more tongues than one. They  
40 should, as a particular study, be taught all the graces of speech, and all the necessary air of conversation; which our common education is so defective in, that I need not expose it. They should be brought to read books, and especially history; and so to read as to make them understand the world, and be able to know and judge of things when they hear of them.

45 To such whose genius would lead them to it, I would deny no sort of learning; but the chief thing, in general, is to cultivate the understandings of the sex, that they may be capable of all sorts of conversation; that their parts and judgements being improved, they may be as profitable in their conversation as they are pleasant.

## Passage

50 Women, in my observation, have little or no difference in them, but as they are or are not distinguished by education. Tempers, indeed, may in some degree influence them, but the main distinguishing part is their Breeding.

The whole sex are generally quick and sharp. I believe, I may be allowed to say, generally so: for you rarely see them lumpish and heavy,  
55 when they are children; as boys will often be. If a woman be well bred, and taught the proper management of her natural wit, she proves generally very sensible and retentive.

And, without partiality, a woman of sense and manners is the finest and most delicate part of God's Creation, the glory of Her Maker, and the  
60 great instance of His singular regard to man, His darling creature: to whom He gave the best gift either God could bestow or man receive. And 'tis the sordidest piece of folly and ingratitude in the world, to withhold from the sex the due lustre which the advantages of education gives to the natural beauty of their minds.

65 A woman well bred and well taught, furnished with the additional accomplishments of knowledge and behaviour, is a creature without comparison. Her society is the emblem of sublimer enjoyments, her person is angelic, and her conversation heavenly. She is all softness and sweetness, peace, love, wit, and delight. She is every way suitable to the  
70 sublimest wish, and the man that has such a one to his portion, has nothing to do but to rejoice in her, and be thankful.

On the other hand, Suppose her to be the very same woman, and rob her of the benefit of education, and it follows

If her temper be good, want of education makes her soft and easy.

75 Her wit, for want of teaching, makes her impertinent and talkative.

Her knowledge, for want of judgement and experience, makes her fanciful and whimsical.

If her temper be bad, want of breeding makes her worse; and she grows haughty, insolent, and loud.

80 If she be passionate, want of manners makes her a termagant and a scold, which is much at one with Lunatic.

If she be proud, want of discretion (which still is breeding) makes her conceited, fantastic, and ridiculous.

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The great distinguishing difference, which is seen in the world between men and women, is in their education; and this is manifested by comparing it with the difference between one man or woman, and another.

90 And herein it is that I take upon me to make such a bold assertion, That all the world are mistaken in their practice about women. For I cannot think that God Almighty ever made them so delicate, so glorious creatures; and furnished them with such charms, so agreeable and so delightful to mankind; with souls capable of the same accomplishments with men: and all, to be only Stewards of our Houses, Cooks, and Slaves.

95 Not that I am for exalting the female government in the least: but, in short, I would have men take women for companions, and educate them to be fit for it. A woman of sense and breeding will scorn as much to encroach upon the prerogative of man, as a man of sense will scorn to oppress the weakness of the woman. But if the women's souls were

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100 refined and improved by teaching, that word would be lost. To say, the  
weakness of the sex, as to judgment, would be nonsense; for ignorance  
and folly would be no more to be found among women than men.

I remember a passage, which I heard from a very fine woman. She  
had wit and capacity enough, an extraordinary shape and face, and a great  
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I need not enlarge on the loss the defect of education is to the sex; nor  
argue the benefit of the contrary practice. 'Tis a thing will be more easily  
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One would wonder, indeed, how it should happen that women are conversable at all; since they are only beholden to natural parts, for all their knowledge. Their youth is spent to teach them to stitch and sew or make baubles. They are taught to read, indeed, and perhaps to write their names,  
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The soul is placed in the body like a rough diamond; and must be polished, or the lustre of it will never appear. And 'tis manifest, that as the rational soul distinguishes us from brutes; so education carries on the distinction, and makes some less brutish than others. This is too evident to need any demonstration. But why then should women be denied the benefit  
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## Vocabulary

- ① **reproach**—express disapproval
- ② **conversable**—capable of social interaction, conversation
- ③ **beholden**—owing something
- ④ **baubles**—small trinkets
- ⑤ **want**—lack of
- ⑥ **lustre**—shine
- ⑦ **forfeit**—be deprived
- ⑧ **impertinence**—lack of respect, rudeness
- ⑨ **upbraid**—find fault with
- ⑩ **hindered**—blocked, obstructed
- ⑪ **bred**—trained in culture
- ⑫ **vie**—compete eagerly with
- ⑬ **profitable**—beneficial

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## Vocabulary

14 **lumpish**—stupid, lethargic

15 **retentive**—having the ability to remember facts and impressions easily

16 **partiality**—bias

17 **sordid**—vile, dirty

18 **society**—being in the company of others

19 **sublime**—awe-inspiring

20 **want**—lack of

21 **haughty**—proud

22 **insolent**—rude, arrogant

23 **termagant**—a harsh, overbearing woman

24 **scold**—a person who nags constantly

25 **steward**—person in charge of managing others

26 **exalting**—raising someone to a higher power

27 **encroach**—intrude on another's territory

28 **prerogative**—the exclusive right of a class

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wise enough to mend it.

## Vocabulary

29 **cloistered**—sheltered

30 **enlarge**—write about in more detail



Questions 1-3 refer to the passage below.

“Consequently, the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. . . . But for this epoch we must wait—wait, perhaps, till kings and nobles, enlightened by reason, and, preferring the real dignity of man to childish state, throw off their gaudy hereditary trappings: and if then women do not resign the arbitrary power of beauty—they will prove that they have less mind than man.”

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792

1. Based on the passage, Wollstonecraft’s ideas would most likely have influenced which of the following nineteenth-century ideologies?
  - (A) Anarchism
  - (B) Feminism
  - (C) Conservatism
  - (D) Constitutionalism
2. Wollstonecraft’s argument takes place most directly in the context of which of the following?
  - (A) Challenges to existing absolutist forms of government
  - (B) The migration of workers from the countryside to cities
  - (C) Critiques of emerging industrial technologies
  - (D) The rise of Enlightenment rationalism
3. Wollstonecraft’s arguments were most clearly in contradiction to
  - (A) Diderot’s application of the Scientific Revolution to social structures
  - (B) René Descartes’ distinction between inductive and deductive reasoning
  - (C) Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s argument for the exclusion of women from public life
  - (D) Ignatius of Loyola’s reforms of the Catholic Church