**Meet Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797)**

When Mary Wollstonecraft wrote “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”, she became the mother of the feminist movement and launched a struggle that would continue for more than two centuries. Through her writing, Wollstonecraft exposed injustices, challenged a society dominated by white, upper class males, and promoted social improvement.

**Awakening to Social Injustice**

Wollstonecraft was born in London to a violent, alcoholic father who squandered the family’s fortune. Her childhood was filled with anxiety and fear, and she quickly realized the subservient role of women: her mother was abused and submissive, and her brother was well educated, while she was not. Wollstonecraft resented her family and the inequalities that existed between the sexes.

**Controversial Writer**

With limited opportunities to support herself and her family, Wollstonecraft tried the few professions available to middle-class women—governess, lady’s companion, and educator. While a governess, Wollstonecraft wrote her first novel, Mary: A Fiction. The novel is a cultural critique of a patriarchal and aristocratic society. It was published by Joseph Johnson, who later hired Wollstonecraft to be a reviewer for his journal Analytical Review and introduced her to the political theorist William Godwin, whom Wollstonecraft later married. At the Analytical Review, Wollstonecraft continued to write educational tracts, believing that through education women would become an integral part of society. She published her first controversial work, A Vindication of the Rights of Men, anonymously in 1790, and she continued her work on education and politics with the publication of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman in 1792. She called for a “revolution in female manners” and for a world in which women would not be limited to menial labor or relegated to the dependent roles of wife, companion, or governess. Despite her radical determination “to loudly demand Justice for one half of the human race,” the work was well received.

“[I]t is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau’s opinion respecting men: I extend it to women.” —Mary Wollstonecraft

**A Troubled Life**

Although neither Wollstonecraft nor William Godwin believed in marriage, their bond was strong. However, their life together was cut short when Wollstonecraft died just eleven days after giving birth to her daughter Mary, who would become Mary Shelley, author of Frankenstein. Godwin was devastated by Wollstonecraft’s death and decided to publish her unfinished novel, in which she documented “the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society.” Since then, her writings have been praised for their influence on the women’s rights movement.

**Questions**

1. Describe Mary Wollstonecraft’s childhood.

2. Name three different books that she authored.

3. Why is she considered the mother of the feminist (women’s rights) movement?

4. What do you think the quote in the center of the reading means?