**Intro**: One way of evaluating whether a novelist's treatment of an issue is realistic is to compare the novel and a historical document. In this case, Mary Wollstonecraft's treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is a logical choice:

The Vindication was published a few years before Austen began writing *Pride and Prejudice*. In other words, Wollstonecraft and Austen were describing the status of women at much the same time. Wollstonecraft's treatise, like Austen's novel, described the status of women in England. The two writers were, therefore, discussing women who lived in the same country.

**Read** the following excerpts from Wollstonecraft's Introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

AFTER considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial. I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result?—a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.—One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than wives; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

...

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonimous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.

...

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavor by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments: meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves,-the only way women can rise in the world,—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act:—they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures.—Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!—Can they govern a family, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?

...

It seems scarcely necessary to say, that I now speak of the sex in general. Many individuals have more sense than their male relatives; and, as nothing preponderates where there is a constant struggle for an equilibrium, without it has naturally more gravity, some women govern their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern.

**A. Some questions to consider prior to comparing Austen and Wollstonecraft:**

1. What is a treatise?

2. Who was Wollstonecraft's intended audience?

3. What was her purpose in writing this treatise?

4. What is her main argument?

5 What are the key components of her argument?

(*Keep in mind that these excerpts are taken from the introduction and, therefore, "introduce" but do not develop or defend those ideas. The main argument appears in the body of the book*.)

**B. Now, compare Austen and Wollstonecraft. Based on these excerpts from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (Except for the last question, all answers must be 100 words or more and contain textual evidence):**

To what extent did Austen and Wollstonecraft agree/disagree in their thinking about the status of women?

To what extent did Austen and Wollstonecraft agree/disagree on the subject of marriage and the expectations of women/for women in English society?

Are Wollstonecraft's assertions reinforced by Austen in Pride and Prejudice?

Does the Vindication supply evidence that Austen's depiction of women is realistic? Why or why not?

How reliable a source is the Vindication for understanding the status of women at the turn of the nineteenth century? Explain.

What other kinds of sources could the historian use to judge the realism of Austen's novels?