Chapter One

Introduction

I The Life and Works of Radcliffe

Ann Radcliffe was born on 9 July 1764 in London; she was the only child of William Ward and Ann Oates. Her parents were in trade; however, one of her aunts married Thomas Bentley, a liberalist, “an expert in Greek and Etruscan art,” and “was reputed to be a man of wide culture” (Miles 22). He was also an advocate of the equality of women, and published articles in the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* and the *Monthly Review*. Robert Miles in his *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* wrote:

> Many members of the intelligentsia of the day visited Bentley at his home, including Hester Thrale, the friend of Johnson and future travel writer, historian and critic (as Mrs Piozzi); Elizabeth Montagu, the famous ‘bluestocking’ and author of the *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare*; and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, editor, poet, dissenting radical intellectual, as well as future critic of Radcliffe. (22)

Ann was the favorite niece of the Bentleys; therefore, she passed much of her childhood with the Bentleys and their visitors. In 1772, her family moved to Bath, where she attended a girls’ school run by Sophia and Harriet Lee, early innovators in the writing of Gothic novels and plays.

When she got married in 1787, at the age of twenty-three, she was shy and short,
but beautiful and exquisitely proportioned in figure.¹ Her husband William Radcliffe was an Oxford graduate and a law student who later became the proprietor and editor of the *English Chronicle*. Although married at Bath, the young couple soon moved to London. William embarked upon a publishing career. He spent a long time in the management of the paper; he was often out the whole evening, and did not return till a late hour. Ann thus remained alone at home and took care of the housework. As the husband and the friend of Ann, William discovered that Ann was not merely a beautiful, capable housewife but she also had extraordinary genius in writing. It was under the strong encouragement of William that Ann took up writing as a pastime. She often wrote her mysterious stories beside a blazing fire in a quiet evening. When William came home late Ann “surprised him by the quantity of manuscript she had produced in his absence” (Kavanaugh 247). Her tales were so interesting, vivid, and imaginative that William encouraged her to publish them.

Ann began to write at twenty-five, and she wrote assiduously for eight years. During these years Ann was a prolific writer; she wrote five novels. Her first Gothic novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* appeared in 1789, and *A Sicilian Romance* followed in 1790. Both works were published anonymously and received positive attentions from the reviewers. Her third Gothic novel, *The Romance of the Forest* was published in 1791. By then Ann had reached the maturity in her writing. She was praised by the reviewers, and was reputed as the first-rate novelist of the Gothic novel. Two later works, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*, appeared in 1794 and 1796.

¹ For the physical descriptions of Radcliffe please refer to the Obituary in the *New Monthly Magazine*, May 1823.
Both works established her reputation as “the Great Enchantress” (Miles 24), and brought her great success not only in Britain but also in Europe. This series of fiction had won Ann great fame, and fortune. However, she ceased to write Gothic novels in the high period of her fame. She retired from publishing in 1797. Perhaps “she was disgusted to see her mode of composition profaned by a host of servile imitators, who, unable to achieve her merits, rendered her defects more obvious” (Varma 86).

Ann spent the rest of her life in the enjoyment of all intellectually refined tastes with William —books, music, and nature. The Radcliffes had no children, traveling was their great delight, and Ann brilliantly delineated the beauty of Holland, Germany, the Rhine and the Lake District in her journals. Ann was afflicted with spasmodic asthma during the last twelve years of her life. She died tranquilly on 7 February 1823, after a few weeks’ illness. Her last Gothic novel, *Gaston de Blondeville*, was published posthumously in 1826.

II The Critical Response

The works of Ann Radcliffe represent the best type of the following features of the Gothic novel: “fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images, and life-threatening pursuits . . . Specters, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks, and nuns, fainting heroines and bandits” (Botting 2). Although her works include all of the entertaining elements of the Gothic novel, they contain didactic function, elegant depiction, and intellectual cultivation. The style of her writing is dominated by the late eighteenth century’s value, and this tendency is due to the largely

---

2 In the beginning of each chapter, Radcliffe always quotes some verses from Shakespeare, or the contemporary English poets, such as Thompson, Collins and Pope.
increasing readership of middle class in the literary market.

_The Mysteries of Udolpho_ is the most popular novel of Ann Radcliffe. This novel is praised by the eighteenth and nineteenth-century reviewers because of the correctness of its sentiment, the elegance of its style, the propriety of its characterization, and the author’s imaginative, descriptive power.

As a master of the Romanticism, Coleridge in the _Critical Review_ praises the extraordinary talents of Radcliffe. He indicates that four volumes of the novel exemplify “character, unity of design, a delineation of the scenes of real life, and the variety of well supported contrast” (361). A. V. George Dyer in the _Analytical Review_ writes:

> It is not enough to say that _The Mysteries of Udolpho_ is a pretty, or an agreeable romance. The design has ingenuity and contrivance; the style is correct and elegant; the descriptions are chaste and magnificent; and the whole work is calculated to give the author a distinguished place among fine writers. (145)

The anonymous reviewer of the _British Critic_ praises Radcliffe: “_The Mysteries of Udolpho_ is one of the best and most interesting of her works” (110). In the same review, Radcliffe’s endeavor to explain supernatural incidents is regarded as “uniformly animated, and, in general sufficiently correct” (121). The anonymous reviewer of the _European Magazine and London Review_ writes, “Mrs. Radcliffe’s poetical abilities are of the superior kind, and we shall be glad to see her compositions separately published” (433). William Enfield in the _Monthly Review_ asserts that this novel “will be entitled
to rank highly in the scale of literary excellence” (278). Matthew G. Lewis in a letter to his mother writes, “The Mysteries of Udolpho, which is in my opinion one of the most interesting books that has ever been published. I would advise you to read it by all means” (122-24).

To the twentieth-century critics, The Mysteries of Udolpho is a profound literary text. Thus, critics tend to analyze the following types of issues: first, the connection between supernatural terror and human consciousness; second, the function of natural scenery within this novel; and third, the association with the conservative political ideas of England during the 1790s.

The research of Terry Castle belongs to the first type of issue. In her “The Spectralization of the Other in The Mysteries of Udolpho,” Castle centers her contention on the relation between the uncanny atmosphere and human consciousness:

We seek to deny our own corporeality and the corporeality of others; even more deeply than they, we have come to cherish the life of the mind over life itself . . . we began to acknowledge it—is the denatured state of our own awareness; our antipathy toward the body, and its contingencies, our rejection of the present, our fixation on the past (or yearnings for an idealized future), our longing for simulacra and nostalgic fantasy. (253)

J. M. S. Tompkins and Heller Lynne Epstein concentrate their studies on the second type of issue. In his The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800, Tompkins argues that the characters and conflicts are not the focus in this novel, because “the center of interest is impersonal” (255). Tompkins explains that “it is the southern
landscape, whose fullest effect is to be elicited by the happy musing of lovers or by their terror-stricken flight; it is the castle or the convent, for complete expression of which required both the victim and the tyrant” (255). Epstein expresses a similar idea to that of Tompkins; she explores the purposes of the depiction of nature in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. In her essay, “Mrs. Radcliffe’s Landscapes: The Influence of Three Landscape Painters on Her Nature Descriptions,” Epstein concludes that Radcliffe’s “characters are stylized and lack of psychological depth. For it is Nature who is the real protagonist who dons the faces of the grand, the sublime, the beautiful” (119).

April London and Kenneth Graham dedicate their works to the third type of issue. In his “Ann Radcliffe in Context: Making the Boundaries of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*,” London shows that Radcliffe’s depiction of the suffering female has much to do with the reactionary perspective of Edmund Burke. He argues that in this novel “Radcliffe, in attempting to clarify and strengthen conservative values, uses the affective image of the victimized female in a way reminiscent of Burke’s iconic glorification of Marie Antoinette in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*” (46). Graham connects the depiction of the panic of England in the novel to the anarchic status in France, and he analyzes this subject in “Emily’s Demon-Lover: The Gothic Revolution and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. He argues that Radcliffe defends the values of order, domesticity, and harmony in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Hence, Radcliffe makes the villain Montoni “alien to the novel’s system of values. He is cruel, unresponsive to domesticity and indifferent to the picturesque” (163). Graham
explains that Radcliffe uses the character Montoni to express her fear of the unregulated individuality, which leads to the destruction of the family and the state in the French Revolution.

With respect to the various views of the critics, the writer of this thesis notices that few critics investigate the novel’s description of the social inferiorities of women. In addition to the surveys of the critics (traditionally literary analysis, psycho analytical interpretation, and political explanation), the writer observes that the novel’s connection between sensibility and the equality of women is an issue worth considering. Through the exploration of the novel’s emphases on women’s opposition to social subordination, and women’s interest in intellectual improvement, the writer thinks that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* could be interpreted as a feminist text. Thus, the writer will devote her analysis to the issues of sensibility, women’s rights and independence in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

*The Mysteries of Udolpho* has much to do with the eighteenth-century sensibility and the liberal feminist thought. In Radcliffe’s time, sensibility not only influences philosophy and aesthetics but also becomes a prevailing idea. It also enters all literary genres—the novel, essay, poetry and drama. Thus “life and literature are directly linked, not through any notion of a mimetic depiction of reality, but through the belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one. So literary conventions become a way of life” (Todd 4). Radcliffe’s concern with the equality of women cannot be separated from sensibility, because sensibility plays an important role

---

to affect the way women think about themselves. She aspires to use the valuable qualities of sensibility to release women from subservience.

Like sensibility, the liberal feminist thought has major influence on the upper, middle-class women intellects. The liberal feminists talk over the inequalities of women and the root of women’s oppression; therefore, they urge women to consider the reform of women’s characteristics. Under such circumstances the works of the late eighteenth-century women novelists concentrate on the description of women’s oppressed status in society. Nevertheless, the purposes of women novelists’ works are not to overthrow the patriarchy. Women novelists aim to emphasize the importance of women’s education, their rejection to corrupt male values and their fulfillment of equality and happiness within the form of marriage. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is a novel of this type. Through the protagonist Emily St. Aubert, Radcliffe shows how a young woman fulfills her liberty in the male dominating world.

Hence, the late eighteenth-century liberal feminist thought of Mary Wollstonecraft will be adopted as the interpretative model to analyze this text. As a feminist in the 1790s, Wollstonecraft provides modern readers the most profound discussion about the connection between the oppression of women and the eighteenth-century sensibility. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft devotes many sections to discussing the causes of women’s subjection to men, and analyzes the eighteenth-century sensibility. This thesis will hopefully give an insight into how Radcliffe dismantles the solid sexual distinction and women’s subservience to patriarchy. In other words, the writer will make her contribution to the
feminist interpretation of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

**III  The Theory Employed in the Textual Analysis**

The Enlightenment begins in the seventeenth century, and reaches its heyday in the eighteenth century. It opens a trend to overthrow many unexamined ideas and authorities; however, women, as half of the human species, are enslaved by the tyranny of men, and are excluded from this intellectual movement. Similar to Genovese, the French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau describes women as “categorically different from that of men—and perhaps even a lurking belief that women’s consciousness remains shaped by their biology or their nature” (118). Rousseau believes that women are viewed as the inferior fellow creatures in Western culture. Hence, women are deprived of their capacities for reason. Nevertheless, the problematic assumption about the debased nature of women is under attack. Women writers such as Mary Astell, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Catherine Macaulay defend the faculties of women, and insist on the importance of learning.4 They also question the right by which men determine “the difference between women and men in all of the abstract legal and ethical standards” (Genovese 118).

Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* develops the insight of her predecessors into a volume of powerful defense toward the individuality and the social rights of women. She indicates that the social inequalities of women result from the oppression of men, and she severely opposes the predominant view of

---

4 Mary Astell has advocated the education of women, in her *Serious Proposal to Ladies*. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu asserts that the weakness, and subordination of women result from their improper education. Catherine Macaulay, in her *Letters on Education*, denies the fundamental difference in the characteristics of men and women. She contends that both sexes should be given the same education.
the innate irrationality of women. Though Wollstonecraft admits the existence of physical difference between men and women, she disagrees with the fundamental difference between the natures of both sexes. She believes that inside each individual, there is an abstract, sexless self—reason. Thus, there are three major agendas in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: femininity, education and marriage.

In the beginning of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft indicates that the cause of the enslaved state of women is not their nature but the unnatural formation of their characteristics. Thus, in her second chapter, “The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed,” she begins her critique with John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. She points out that in *Paradise Lost*, Milton expresses an important view for the hierarchal relationship between men and women in the British society—he for God only, she for God in him. Milton writes: “God is thy law, thou mine; to know no more/ Is Woman’s happiest knowledge and her praise” (634-38). According to Milton, there is no direct tie between Eve and God. Hence, the only means for Eve to experience divinity is through Adam. Adam has absolute power over Eve because she is created for him. In other words, Adam is the superior being. As the inferior being, Eve “only bends to the indefeasible right of beauty” (Wollstonecraft 20). Thus, Wollstonecraft observes that Milton purposes to emphasize the necessity of men’s power over women; therefore, in the period of the Enlightenment male writers follow the idea of Milton. They reinforce the authority of men, and the subservience of women through conduct books and novels.

In her fifth chapter, “Animadversions on Some of the Writers Who Have
Rendered Women Objects of Pity, Bordering on Contempt,” Wollstonecraft directs her criticism to Dr. James Fordyce, Dr. John Gregory, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. From the viewpoint of Wollstonecraft, these men in discussing the subject of female education and conduct “have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters than they would otherwise have been; and consequently, more useless members of society” (22).

Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* and Gregory’s *Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* are the famous conduct books, and books of female education, but their descriptions toward the education of women “draw them (women) out of the track of common life without enabling them to act with consonant independence and dignity” (97).

Rousseau’s *Émile* also deeply influences the way women think about themselves, and the way they behave. Wollstonecraft severely criticizes Rousseau’s morbid idea of the characteristics of women in *Émile*. She cites a passage from the book to denounce the absurd view of Rousseau toward the nature of women:

> Hence, we deduce a third consequence from the different constitutions of the sexes; which is, that the strongest should be master in appearance, and be dependent in fact of the weakest; and that not from any frivolous practice of gallantry or vanity of protectorship, but from an invariable law of nature, which, furnishing woman with a greater facility to excite desires than she has given man to satisfy them, makes the latter dependent on the good pleasure of the former, and compels him to endeavour to please in his turn,
in order to obtain her consent that he should be the strongest. On these occasions, the most delightful circumstance a man finds in his victory is, to doubt whether it was the woman’s weakness that yielded to his superior strength, or whether her inclinations spoke in his favour; the females are also generally artful enough to leave this matter in doubt. The understanding of women answers in this respect perfectly to their constitution; so far from being ashamed of their weakness, they glory in it; their tender muscles make no resistance; they affect to be incapable of lifting the smallest burthens, and would blush to be though robust and strong. To what purpose is all this? Not merely for the sake of appearing delicate, but through an artful precaution; it is thus they provide an excuse beforehand, and a right to be feeble when they think it expedient. (323)

Investigating Rousseau’s assumption, Wollstonecraft considers that “in educating women these fundamental principles lead to a system of cunning lasciviousness” (78). She blames Rousseau for his designing to make women the objects of the lust for men, and his rule of the formation of women’s nature is based on a “brutal desire of self-preservation” (79).

By unearthing Rousseau’s delineation of women’s characteristics, Wollstonecraft continues her attack on the theory of the ‘gendered aesthetics’ of Edmund Burke. To Wollstonecraft, “Burke’s ideas about the sublime and the beautiful are generated by a highly gendered binary which construct a femininity, later claimed to be ‘natural,’ that is discursively excluded from the ethical sphere” (Johnson 27). In a passage of his A
Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful,

Burke argues that nature makes women “little, smooth, delicate, fair” (110). Wollstonecraft opposes Burke because Burke’s teaching causes the weakness and debility of women. Burke convinces women to believe that their supreme duty in life is to be beautiful in order to please men. Many women believe in Burke because they think that the only way to obtain men’s love is to be beautiful. However, women fail to fulfill their dreams. To many men, women are merely sexual objects. Men will not love and cherish women, no matter how beautiful they are. Hence, Wollstonecraft contends that women are the victims of libertinism, and the cause of their miseries result from Burke’s misleading statement. She thus retorts upon Burke:

You may have convinced them that littleness and weakness are the very essence of beauty; and that Supreme Being . . . seemed to command them by the powerful voice of Nature not to cultivate the moral virtues that might chance to excite respect, and interfere with the pleasing sensations they were created to inspire…that one half of the human species, at least, have not souls; and that Nature, by making women little, smooth, delicate, fair creatures never designed that they should exercise their reason to acquire the virtues that produce opposite, if not contradictory feelings. The affection they excite, to be uniform and perfect should not be tinctured with the respect which moral virtues inspire, lest pain should be blended with pleasure, and admiration disturb the soft intimacy of love. This laxity of morals in the female world is certainly more captivating to a libertine
imagination than the cold arguments of reason that give no sex to virtue. (A Wollstonecraft Anthology, 45-46)

Education

Wollstonecraft thinks that the only way to help a person to use his/her reason is education, without knowledge a person’s capacity for reason will not develop. In her A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft points out that the most important thing for women is to cultivate their understanding, but men such as Foryce, Gregory, Rousseau, and Burke contribute to “raise females in the scale of animal being” (8).

Wollstonecraft centers her defense on “her struggle with men over the right to redefine the feminine ideal” (Conger 110). The focus of her contention is to dismantle the distinction between masculinity and femininity, and between reason and feeling. Her strategy is to use sensibility to mend the widening gender gap between men and women. Lacking the opportunities of education equal to men, women are unable to reject the false teachings of men. They thus spend most of their lives on developing their physical beauty; therefore, they neglect to improve their understanding. Wollstonecraft argues that women are not created for men. There is no fundamental difference in the nature of the sexes. Women, too, possess the faculties for reasoning, but their abilities have been suppressed by the oppression of men. Hence, she ascribes the weakness of women to their inadequate education. In order to help women to develop their reason, she demands the same education to be provided for women as it is provided for men:
To render mankind more virtuous, and happier of course, both sexes must act from the same principle; but how can that be expected when only one is allowed to see the reasonableness of it? To render also the social compact truly equitable, and in order to spread those enlightening principles, which alone can meliorate the fate of men, women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuit as men. (173)

She encourages women to pursue the “masculine virtues” (8), but she does not want women to imitate men. To Wollstonecraft the “masculine virtue” is equivalent to the following qualities—intellectual cultivation, rational understanding, and independent judgment. However, under the unequal power relations of both sexes, men exclude women from the sphere of learning, and regard intellectuality as their exclusive right. As an intellectual woman, Wollstonecraft strives to challenge this injustice. She thinks that once women are equal to men in intellectual attainments, they will become the companion of men, and will deserve the right to enter the civil domain, and to be economically autonomous.

Marriage

To Wollstonecraft, her emphasis of women’s happiness and equality in marriage is a very important theme in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She thinks that men like to marry beautiful women who are “demonstrably his social and intellectual inferior” (Jump 85). Under such circumstances the foundation of marriage is not

---

5 For detailed explanations of this aspect, see Mackenize, 35-55.
love but lust. Wollstonecraft criticizes this “physical displays of affection” (Jump 85), because thus the role of wife is synonymous with prostitute. She explains that women are regarded as sexual objects, and men will rapidly lose interest in them when their beauty fades. Wollstonecraft contends that most of the women’s marriages are short-lived because their husbands never show love, respect and faithfulness to them. Many men indulge themselves to extra-marital affair, and not long afterward they ignore their wives. Some women cannot endure loneliness; therefore, they commit adultery. Wollstonecraft shows that the cause of women’s miserable circumstances is their distorted view of life:

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! (10)

Considering the majority of women’s miserable marriage, Wollstonecraft points out that the relationship between husbands and wives demands a change. She believes that the happiness of marriage is based on mutual respect and mutual understanding of both sexes. Thus husbands and wives should be like friends. To Wollstonecraft friendship “is a serious affection, the most sublime of all affections,
because it founded on principle and cemented by time” (73). She stresses the moral improvement and intellectual development of both sexes. By elevating two people’s capacities for understanding and morality, Wollstonecraft illustrates that marriage will last forever:

Personal attachment is a very happy foundation for friendship; yet, when even two virtuous young people marry, it would, perhaps, be happy if some circumstances checked their passion; if the recollection of some prior attachment, or disappointed affection, made it on one side, at least, rather a match founded on esteem. In that case they would look beyond the present moment, and try to render the whole life respectable, by forming a plan to regulate a friendship which only death ought to dissolve. (73)

By discussing the issues of femininity, education and marriage, Wollstonecraft aspires to release women from the despotism of men. She thinks that women must achieve full equality with men, because the derogatory status of women will corrupt men and the entire society. The only way to reverse this degradation is to make women the partners of men. She thus writes, “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them, as part of the human species, labor by reforming themselves to reform the world” (45).

IV An Overview of the Text and Its Context

Since the publication of Horace’s Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto in 1764, the Gothic novel starts to dominate the English literary market. The Gothic Novel is a
combination of the old romance and the modern novel. 6 Clara Reeve explains this idea in her preface to The Old English Baron:

[The Castle of Otranto] is an attempt to unite the various merits and graces of the ancient Romance, and modern Novel. To attain this end, there is required a sufficient degree of the marvellous to excite attention; enough of the manners of real life to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic to engage the heart on its behalf. (4)

Thus Englishmen enjoy the mingled narratives of the delineation of medieval world and the eighteenth-century life and values. However, the representation of the female in this genre reflects the derogatory status of women. In the Gothic novels, female characters are nothing but plot devices; they function as victims for the villains to abuse, or as beautiful women in distress for the heroes to rescue. Gothic novelists’ emphases of the passivity and submission of female characters reveal that women are the possessions of their husbands and fathers. Whether they are daughters or wives, women are objects for men to control or to exchange.

Ann Radcliffe changes the style of the Gothic novel; she infuses sensibility and the liberal feminist thought into her works. One feature strikingly distinguishes her works from the works of other Gothic novelists is the reversal of the weak, submissive characteristics of women. Emily St. Aubert is the protagonist of The Mysteries of Udolpho. She is innocent and sensitive, but she is not a fragile young woman. She is

---

6 According to Miles, Old Romance is “the product of the Gothic societies of the Middle Ages….glamorizing chivalry’s fantastical and marvelous adventures” (36). In the meantime, Miles explains that “Modern novel” is “a ‘truthful’ representation of contemporary manners” (38).
independent, intelligent, self-sufficient, and demanding the freedom to choose her own spouse and her own way of life without the interference of parents or guardians. Emily represents a young woman’s resistance to the social and cultural subjection of her sex. Through Emily, Radcliffe shows the subordination of women and the problematic assumption of the rigid difference between the characteristics of the sexes.

In the period of the Enlightenment, the characteristics of men and women are associated with the divisions of reason and feeling, public sphere and private sphere. These binary oppositions of sexual difference attribute the debased status of women to their nature. The cause of this injustice is not the nature of women, but the unequal power relations between men and women. Nevertheless, the eighteenth-century sensibility has “a place for women, albeit women still subject to definition by patriarchal values . . . and the emotions still associate with women, whatever subjectivity is the subject of discourse, women or the female would tend to be placed in the foreground” (Kelly 25).

According to Abrams’s A Glossary of Literary Terms, sensibility is a “moral philosophy” that has developed as “a reaction against seventeenth-century Stoicism (which emphasizes reason and the unemotional will as the sole motives to virtues)” (190). Abrams explains that the most important aim of sensibility is to oppose “Thomas Hobbes’s claims, in Leviathan (1651), that a human being is innately selfish and that the mainsprings of human behavior are self-interest and the drive for power and status” (190). Sensibility reaches its heyday in the eighteenth century because it develops “complex intellectual significance in the realm of moral philosophy and
aesthetic” (Castle 671). Terry Castle writes:

In the works of Hume, Shaftesbury, and perhaps even more importantly in the sentimental fictions of Richardson, Sterne, Mackenize, and Rousseau, and others, sensibility became identified with the capacity to be moved—by the suffering of others, by works of art, by the beauties of the natural world. Sensibility was at once the palpable sign of a feeling ‘heart’ and the foundation of taste. One might refine one’s powers of sensibility: through carefully modulated exposure to beautiful and ennobling objects, persons, and ideas, one could cultivate one’s moral and aesthetic sensitivities, for the ultimate benefit of both self and society.

(677)

The excessive indulgence of feeling is a very dangerous thing. Alexander Pope, describes the danger of the unrestrained sensibility in his *An Essay on Man*:

Why has not Man a microsopic Eye?

For this plain Reason, Man is not a Fly.

Say what the Use, were finer Optics given,

To inspect a Mite, not comprehend the Heaven?

Or touch, if tremblingly alive all o’er,

To smart and agonize at every pore?

Or quick Effluvia darting through the Brain,

Die of a Rose in aromatic Pain? (193-200)

Women are traditionally regarded as the “more delicate and susceptible sex”
(Castle 677), and are considered to be more vulnerable to the overburden of feelings. In his *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility*, Syndy McMillen Conger explains that the late eighteenth century’s “writers of advice books to women stress their vulnerability to fleeting sensory impressions and passions, hence to irrationality, distraction, immorality, and disease” (xlv). Conger indicates that “medical man like George Cheyne assumes that women are more sensitive and susceptible to diseases of the nerves. In short, that . . . women’s nerves are normatively distinct from men’s normatively making them creatures of greater sensibility” (xlv). Conger later shows that “the physiological biases contribute to the gradual gendering of sensibility. The philosopher Adam Smith distinguishes stoical ‘manly’ virtue from the ‘feminine’ tender virtues; as an aesthetician, Burke associates rugged sublimity with masculinity and tender beauty with femininity” (xlv-xlv). Thus, sensibility has lost its ground and it becomes a pejorative term. As Conger maintains that “Fielding and Smollett offer readers alternative masculine versions of sensibility in their benevolent misanthrope; others such as Sterne and Rousseau give sensibility a slightly exaggerated erotic edge; and still others (Cleland, M.G. Lewis and Sade) celebrate physical, phallic versions of sensibility” (xlv).

During the 1790s, sensibility gradually loses its early positive meaning. The idea becomes a vulgar fashion, and its definitions are synonymous with weakness—passivity, self-denial, unrestrained melancholy, fainting fit, excessive refined manners, sexuality, and immorality. This is “the false sensibility—a combination of irascibility, misplaced tenderness, stupidity, and physical delicacy”
Men regard the false sensibility as femininity. Under the influence of the false notions of femininity, women glorify the false sensibility. Most of the women waste their lives on cultivating excessive feeling and physical beauty; therefore, the false sensibility interferes with the mental progress of women. Women thus become the “objects of pity” and “sensual love” (Wollstonecraft 9).

As a woman novelist, Radcliffe strongly resists the false sensibility, because the degenerating tones of sensibility result from the manipulation of men, not the nature of women. She endeavors to bring sensibility to its proper stage. She emphasizes the early altruistic, the intellectual, and the moral facet of sensibility. Gillain Skinner contends that this type of sensibility is the “virtuous sensibility” (10). In The Mysteries of Udolpho, the “virtuous sensibility” is based on reason, feeling and the value of philanthropy. Radcliffe uses the “virtuous sensibility” to reverse the inferiority of women, to help women to defend their own interests, to form the independent judgment of their own, and to disengage their minds from the confinement of the unnatural formation of femininity.

Radcliffe adapts the “virtuous sensibility” to shape the characterization of Emily; therefore, she is gentle, beautiful and persevering. She suffers considerable adversity from the oppression of her aunt and uncle; however, she has not been devastated by her sufferings. The “virtuous sensibility” protects her from collapsing and guards her from losing her good nature. Emily has the fortitude to defend her own right of marriage and to pursue her happiness and her independence without yielding to the authority of men. Through Emily, Radcliffe attempts to present a kind of woman who
is intelligent, self-possessed, and self-respecting. She wants to reject the distorted view of the nature of the sexes and to reverse the social inferiority of women. In this way, Radcliffe expresses her expectation of women’s fulfillment of liberty within marriage and family. Though Emily is only a fictional character and her independence is in fiction not in reality, Radcliffe still conveys an important message to women. Her protagonist functions as a model of independent woman to encourage the female readers to develop their reason, to accomplish the worthiness of their personality, and to fight for their own rights.