In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe vividly describes the majesty of Pyrene, the violent storm of the Mediterranean, the breathtaking views of Gascony, the villain’s horrible, dark deeds in castles and the adventures of the protagonist. To the 1790s readers, this novel provides them with all sources of “Gothic” delight. They not only read this novel but also enjoy it very much. The popularity of Radcliffe and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* does not cease until the 1840s. However, Radcliffe’s achievement does not merely lie in the exciting Gothic novels she produces. As a female novelist, she also concerns herself with the oppressed social status of women.

Radcliffe believes that the subordination of women results from the unequal power relations between the sexes. The circumstances in which women are situated provide them with few chances to reverse their unequal social status, because the social systems privilege men only. Considering the difficulties her fellow women had met, Radcliffe indicates that the only means to free women from enslavement is to change their thought.

Radcliffe expresses her concern with the inequalities in women’s social status; therefore, she focuses her description on sensibility, issues of women’s rights and the meaning of independent women in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The most important theme of this novel is Radcliffe’s perspective on sensibility. To Radcliffe, the eighteenth-century sensibility is a ground for women, but she indicates that sensibility
includes two different aspects: first, the stress of the reinforcement of women’s weaknesses; second, the emphases on virtue and intellect. For Radcliffe, her attitude to the different facet of sensibility is very wise. She criticizes the corrupt notions of sensibility, but she praises the valuable qualities of sensibility. Radcliffe explains that there are two types of sensibility, the false sensibility and the virtuous sensibility. The false sensibility stresses women’s inclinations to hypocrisy, self-interest, submission, their indulgence of excessive passion and their dependence on beauty. The virtuous sensibility emphasizes the function of education, the value of benevolence and the importance of reason. Many eighteenth-century women regard the false sensibility as femininity and they never doubt the assumption of women’s natural inferiority. Radcliffe uses her characters and plots to attack the false sensibility in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. She reveals that femininity is not natural because it is socially constructed. The cause of women’s inferiority is the false sensibility, and she thinks that women should reject it. In addition, Radcliffe points out that the virtuous sensibility is the source of women’s power, because it helps women to form their virtue and their fortitude. Under the influence of the virtuous sensibility, women turn out to be rational and enlightened persons, and they are not inferior to men any more.

Radcliffe’s viewpoint of women’s rights is another important theme in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. In the middle part of this novel, Radcliffe depicts the protagonist’s opposition to the profit-oriented marriage. Using the protagonist as an example, Radcliffe reveals that the upper middle-class women are the victims of
their families. The cause of women’s misfortune is the vanity of their families. To the upper and middle classes, nothing is more important than the benefit of their families. The happiness and future of women are disregarded, and many parents sell their daughters to profit from marriages. Radcliffe contends that marriage should not be based on the exchange of fame and wealth. She believes that the value of marriage should be based on love, mutual respect and morality. She illustrates that the ideal relationship between the sexes is to make women the companion of men; therefore, the status of men and women demands fundamental change.

In this novel, Radcliffe shows that the wretchedness of women exists not only in the family but also in the society. The law and the custom of primogeniture deprived women of their right to inherit property. Due to the lack of social justice, women were under the threat of oppression. Using her protagonist as an example, Radcliffe shows that the law needs fundamental changes, because women are not equal individuals until the law protects their dignity and their rights. By urging the necessity of the law’s protection, Radcliffe also encourages women to fight against injustices, because women’s opposition to their inequalities will lead them to liberation.

At last, Radcliffe elaborates over the meanings of independent women. She explains that an independent woman is financially, spiritually and emotionally independent from men. She will have the ability to make right decision and to be the mistress of her own destiny.

In discussing Radcliffe’s ideas of sensibility, women’s rights and their
independence, we realize that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is not only a Gothic novel but also a feminist text. However, some critics do not think that this novel is a feminist text. They fail to consider the difference between feminists and the majority of women. A critic like Jack G. Voller contends that Radcliffe writes a “fairy tale” (54) to the upper, middle-class young women. He also argues that Radcliffe’s opinion about the social roles of women is very conservative, because at the end of this novel, the protagonist still has to cast herself into home and marriage. In other words, Voller thinks that the writer of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* intends to reinforce the domination of men; therefore, women belong to home and marriage. Nevertheless, Voller ignores a very important fact. The only means to ensure the happiness of most of the eighteenth-century women was marriage and home. Except a few women elite no woman can survive outside this pattern of life. Radcliffe thinks that it is impossible for the majority of women to disengage themselves from home and marriage in a short period of time. Contemplating the difficulties of women, Radcliffe believes that the best way to reverse the inferior social status of women is to increase women’s power over their families and husbands. Thus, she puts her emphasis on women’s interest in intellectual improvement, and she aspires to turn women into respected members of their families. To Radcliffe, it takes a long time to change the social position of women; therefore, she shows that it is better to improve the abilities of women than to change the social roles of women. She points out that the roles of women are still daughters and wives, but they could be rational, self-possessing and virtuous persons. Women should be equal to men, and they
should have major influence on their families. Once women achieve equality in the family, the fulfillment of women’s liberation is possible.

Radcliffe believes that novel writing is a “political act” (Mayer 123) because a novel not only interprets the phenomena of the world but also changes the thoughts of the readers. In this novel, she presents the women in a different way of living. Using the protagonist as an example, she shows that the purposes of women’s life are not procreation and housekeeping. She illustrates that a woman can marry the one she loves, and she also can establish her own happy family without the interference of parents. By describing her vision of how good women’s life could be, Radcliffe improves the images of women. The protagonist is an intelligent and virtuous woman; therefore, she has the power to fight for her own happiness actively. Radcliffe expects that women can be the masters of their own life and the captains of their own fate, because women’s rejection to subservience determines their achievement of equality.

Being a writer is the only means for an eighteenth-century woman to have access to the public sphere. Radcliffe’s influence on the 1790s women is immense. As a popular woman novelist, Radcliffe uses her novel to challenge the rigid conventions that limit the liberty of women. She herself stands as the example of a professional and liberal woman. Thus, the achievement of Radcliffe is great. She infuses the thought of the equality between the sexes into The Mysteries of Udolpho. Through her novel, many women can understand the necessity of “a revolution in female manners” (Wollstonecraft 45).