Sophia Lange

Inheritance and Indebtedness in William Godwin's Fictions

A New Approach to the Godwinian Novel

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STUDIEN ZUR ENGLISCHEN ROMANTIK

(Neue Folge)

Band 25

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Lange, Sophia: Inheritance and Indebtedness in William Godwin's Fictions.
A New Approach to the Godwinian Novel / Sophia Lange. -
WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2025
(Studien zur Englischen Romantik, 25)
Zugl.: Diss., Dortmund, Univ., 2023
ISBN 978-3-98940-073-3

Cover illustration: William Hogarth. *A Rake's Progress*,
Plate 1: The Young Heir Takes Possession Of The Miser's Effects.
Engraving, 35.5 x 41cm. 1735 (Detail)

Cover design: Brigitta Disseldorf

ISBN 978-3-98940-073-3

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
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Internet: https://www.wvttrier.de
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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I am immensely grateful for the invaluable support of Prof. Gerold Sedlmayr, whose calming guidance and belief in my work over the past years has majorly contributed to my academic self-perception. Secondly, I would also like to express gratitude for the advice provided by Prof. Angela Esterhammer, whose precise feedback via Zoom or in person helped to shape the structure of this work. Next, I am indebted to the feedback of my wonderful colleagues at the ISLK of TU Dortmund University, especially Dr. Christian Lenz, Dr. Cyprian Piskurek, Dr. Mark Schmitt, and all other colleagues who have regularly participated in the *OS Research Seminar: Literary and Cultural Theory* and offered their invaluable comments on my research. Thank you also to Dr. Marie Hologa, of whose academic support in joint research endeavours and personal support in life-matters I am immensely appreciative. Furthermore, I am also grateful for the discussions and feedback provided in the brilliant research communities of the *German Association for the Study of British Cultures* and the *German Society for English Romanticism*. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends, especially my parents, who read numerous research papers and listened in on conferences, whether they were sure who William Godwin was or not. And, most importantly, this work is dedicated to you, Felix. Thank you for your patience, support, and love when I needed it most.

A Very Brief Note on the Text

In all quotations employed in this work, the original spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

Abbreviations

Caleb Williams (*CW*)	William Godwin. *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*. Edited by Maurice Hindle. Penguin Books, 2005.
Cloudesley	William Godwin. *Cloudesley. A Tale*. Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830.
Commentaries	William Blackstone. *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Four Volumes. 16th edition with the last corrections of the author. A. Strahan, T. Cadell, and J. Butterworth and Son, 1825.
Commonwealth	William Godwin. *History of the Commonwealth of England from Its Commencement to its Restoration*. Four Volumes. Colburn, 1824-1828.
Enquirer	William Godwin. *The Enquirer. Reflections on Education, Manners, And Literature*. G.G. and J. Robinson, 1797.
Fleetwood	William Godwin. *Fleetwood, or The New Man of Feeling*. Richard Philipps, 1805.
Mandeville	William Godwin. *Mandeville: A Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England*. Edited by Tilottama Rajan. Broadview Press, 2016.
Memoirs	William Godwin. *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (J. Johnson, 1798), in *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin, Vol. I*, edited by Mark Philp, Routledge, 2016, pp. 39-51.
Political Justice (*PJ*)	William Godwin. *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. Edited by Isaac Kramnick. Penguin Books, 2015.
Reflections	Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*. Reprinted from Vol. II of "Burke's Complete Works" in *Bohn's Standard Library*. George Bell and Sons, 1897, pp. 277-518.
St Leon (*SL*)	William Godwin. *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*. Colburn and Bentley, 1831.
Thoughts on Man	William Godwin. *Thoughts on Man, His Nature, Productions and Discoveries*. Effingham Wilson, 1831.
Vindication	Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. A. J. Matsell, 1833.

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1. Introduction: William Godwin. Radical Philosopher and Revolutionary Writer

On July 8, 1822, celebrated poet Percy Bysshe Shelley set sail from Livorno for Lerici in his new boat, the *Don Juan*, never to return. Lost at sea during a terrible storm, Shelley's decomposed body was discovered washed ashore ten days after the tragic incident and when his remains were cremated at the seashore in mid-August, news of his death had already reached London. Deeply moved by his son-in-law's sudden death, of which he had received no news from his estranged daughter Mary Shelley, philosophical writer William Godwin sent a letter to rekindle the previous close connection between father and daughter that had become immensely strained through her elopement with Percy in 1814 and Godwin's strong disapproval. The sending of such a letter could have provided excellent opportunity for the philosopher to make up for past failures and re-engage in a meaningful relationship with his daughter. In reality, however, Godwin rather chose to employ his letter as a means of reprimanding Mary for her failure to inform him of her husband's death and, to make matters worse, he dared to express hope that given their similarly wretched conditions due to Mary Wollstonecraft's sudden death in 1798, their misery could bring them closer together. For the purpose of the project proposed here, it is essential to provide a full transcript of the letter based on a brilliant reading by Hoare Nairne as part of the *Great Writers Inspire* series from the University of Oxford (2010):

> Dear Mary,
>
> I heard only two days ago the most afflicting intelligence to you and in some measure to all of us that can be imagined. The death of Shelly on the 8th old. I have had no direct information; the news only comes in a letter from Leigh Hunt and Miss Kent. And therefore, were it not for the consideration of the writer, I should be authorised to disbelieve it. That you should be so overcome as to not be able to write is perhaps but too natural, but that Jane could not write one line I could never have believed and the behaviours of the lady at Pisa towards us on the occasion is peculiarly cruel. Leigh Hunt says you bear up under the shock better than could have been imagined, but appearances are not to be relied on. It would have been a great relief to me to have had a few lines from yourself. In a case like this, one lets one's imagination loose among the possibilities of things and one is apt to rest upon what is most distressing and intolerable.
>
> I learned the news on Sunday; I was in hopes to have my doubts and fears removed by a letter from yourself on Monday. I again entertain the same hope today and am again disappointed. I shall hang in hope and fear on every post knowing that you cannot neglect me forever. All that I express to you about silence and not writing to again is now put an end to in a most melancholy way.
>
> I looked on you as one of the daughters of prosperity, elevated in rank and fortune, and I thought it was criminal to intrude on you for ever the sorrows of an importunate old man and a beggar. You are now fallen to my own level. You are surrounded with adversity and with difficulty and I no longer hold it sacrilege to trouble you with my adversities. We shall now truly sympathise with each other. And whatever misfortune or ruin

> falls upon me, I shall not now scruple to lay it fully before you. This sorrowful event is perhaps calculated to draw us nearer to each other. I am the father of a family, but without children. I and my wife are falling fast into infirmity and helplessness, and in addition to all our other calamities, we seem destined to be left without connections and without aid. Perhaps now we and you shall mutually desire consolation from each other.
>
> Poor Jane is, I am afraid, less still more helpless than you are. common misfortune, I hope, will excite between you the most friendly feelings.
>
> Shelley lived, I know, in constant anticipation of the uncertainty of his life, though not in this way. and was anxious in that event to make the most effectual provisions for you. I am inpatient in what way that has been done and perhaps you will make me your lawyer in England if any steps are necessary. I am desirous to call on Longdale, but I should call with more effect if I had authority and instructions from you. Mama desires me to say how truly and deeply she sympathises in your affliction, and I trust you know enough of her to feel that this is the language of her heart. I suppose you will hardly stay in Italy. In that case we shall be near to and support each other.
>
> Ever and ever affectionately yours,
>
> William Godwin
>
> I have received your letter dated. it had no date since writing the above. It was detained for some hours by being directed to the care of Monroe, for which I cannot account. William wrote to you on the 14 of June and on the 23 of July. I will call on Peacock and Hogg as you desire. Perhaps William's letter and perhaps others have been kept from you. Let us now be open and unreserved in all things.[1]

While the tone and structure of Godwin's letter are fascinating enough to spark further research, what is particularly interesting are the clear *dependencies* that are brought to the fore in a father's complaint of lack of money to a daughter who has just lost the love of her life. At the same time, the text is nonetheless ridden with feelings of guilt and deep regrets concerning the estranged relation between Godwin and Shelley despite their differences of opinion. To researchers interested in economic relations and the effects of patriarchal societies on the situation of females in the Long 18th Century, this letter provides a fascinating account of role-reversal with a father now almost begging for his daughter's support rather than acting as controller of her economic fate. Given that Mary Shelley and William Godwin were two major actants of Britain's literary landscape at the time, it must be of immense relevance how their relation reflects the individual's deep entanglements in monetary dependencies in a society that was still shaped by patriarchal ideas of primogeniture. How precisely those socio-political regulations of inheritance and property rights affected the lives of men and women alike, especially regarding feelings of indebtedness inevitably created through both gender-based hierarchies as well as generational pressures, is the key focus of this

1 See here for the full audio recording: https://writersinspire.org/content/william-godwin-letter-mary-shelley. It should also be noted that so far, no edited version of this letter exists in scholarly literature. Most likely, the letter will appear as part of Pamela Clemit's current project on *The Letters of William Godwin* with Oxford University Press (2011-present).

project. By focusing on notions of inheritance and indebtedness, the project seeks to engage in larger debates about the history of political thought, the centrality of property rights in early civil rights movements, the specific importance of proto-feminist thought in considerations of gendered economics, as well as the traumatic echoes of both personal and national pasts that continue to haunt the present of the living. In this project, William Godwin will be singled out as a key writer and thinker of the Long 18th Century, himself indebted to both Enlightenment and Romantic traditions, to showcase how the author's oeuvre, spanning more than 50 years of writing, remained invested in questions of ownership and generational conflicts as representations of larger arguments about the relationship between the citizen and the state.

As part of this introductory chapter, a biographical sketch of William Godwin will be provided in the following (1.1), which is intended to highlight his private experiences of monetary relations as well as his engagement with historical epistemology and socio-political developments in his present. I will briefly relate which personal, national, and global developments have shaped the construction of his philosophical treatises and fictional texts to show how the author remained firmly invested in Britain's political and literary landscapes over the course of his impressive 50-year career. To do so, I will mainly draw on Godwin's autobiography, his letter correspondences and diary entries, as well as a biography of the author by Richard Gough Thomas (*William Godwin. A Political Life*. Pluto Press, 2019). A subsection will also be devoted specifically to the enduring reputation of William Godwin's thought despite varying periods of celebratory public appraisal and open hostility expressed against the writer. The closing section of this introductory chapter (1.3) then engages with the specific terminology relevant for this project. While definitions of 'inheritance' and 'indebtedness' predominantly feature here, the terminology is expanded to include detailed discussions of the multi-layered concepts of 'debt', and explanations of the decidedly relational nature of the proposed concepts, catering to the dependencies addressed in the introductory letter that, amongst other influences, sparked this investigation.

The second chapter provides an overview of Cultural Materialism as the chosen theoretical framework for this project. Cultural Materialism is used as a framework to legitimise the claim that insights about a specific historical and socio-political period can be gained via the investigation of novels and personal pieces of writing as cultural artefacts. In doing so, the works of Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson are prioritised to underline the advantages and limits of using materialism as a basis for historical analyses. A unitarian approach to Cultural Materialism is proposed in this chapter as a means of catering to the multidimensional practices and processes that create what Williams refers to as the 'structures of feeling' of a specific historical moment. Another critical engagement that is formative for the analyses undertaken here is Lawrence Grossberg's concept of 'radical contextuality,' which allows me to investigate the effects of social, historical, economic, or political contingencies on the lives of individuals in their specific settings. Lastly, Grossberg's understanding of Cultural Studies' methodology will briefly be explained to underscore my approach to the Godwinian oeuvre, mostly conducted via close reading and careful contextualisation of his texts.

Chapter 3 then engages with the decidedly 'Godwinian novel,' a term which is indebted to Pamela Clemit's formative engagement with the philosopher and the reverberations of his specific genre poetics into the literary oeuvre of other writers during his lifetime. The interconnectedness of landed property and political subjectivity are illustrated in more detail to underscore the centrality of property as "a cornerstone of Western economic ideology" (Anolik 13), which is a key component of all Godwinian novels discussed here. Afterwards, chapter 3.1 singles out Godwin's first major fictional success *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) as a key Jacobin text and prime example of the author's fictional reworking of his philosophy and the realities of his contemporary Britain. Detailed attention will be paid to the novel's engagement with the reading of bodies in hegemonic structures and the socio-economic dependencies created through inherited laws of primogeniture and coverture. Given that *Caleb Williams* will not receive major critical attention in this project due to the various scholarly analyses that have been provided over the last three decades, chapter 3.2 then makes the transition to Godwin's novels written after his initial success of the 1790s. The author's later novels offer several similarities, especially regarding their construction as confessional narratives not of economic dependents but of the propertied, whose trauma-ridden tales deliberately challenge our reading experiences. The centrality of the reader in the Godwinian fictional oeuvre is stressed here to position us as participators in "trial[s] of judgment" (Rajan, "Justice" 345), seeking to derive truths from the confessional tales that are equally disturbing and pitiful. In consequence, the final subchapter 3.3 elaborates on the function of reading in Godwinian novels, which "seek to create a dialogic relationship with their readers" (Wallace 31) and inspire posterity for political activism. In this, Godwin's essay "Of History and Romance" (1797) and the recent findings of J. Louise McCray on the philosopher's endorsement of collective reading in *Godwin and the Book. Imagining Media, 1783-1836* (2021) receive special attention.

The following major chapter 4 is then dedicated to the analyses of notions of inheritance and indebtedness in Godwin's novels written after *Caleb Williams*. First, *St Leon. A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799) is scrutinised regarding the silencing function of inheritance and the establishment of exclusionary indebtedness through socio-economic structures in an increasingly capitalist present. These ideas certainly also feature in the second novel discussed here, namely *Fleetwood, or The New Man of Feeling* (1805), which represents Godwin's play on the popular genre of the sentimental novel. In this text, however, inheritance emerges primarily as a binding force that has the power to violently subjugate and annihilate economic dependants. This annihilating force of inheritance can also be perceived as a key feature of the third novel, *Mandeville. A Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England* (1817), which represents Godwin's most open engagement with the repercussion of personal and national pasts for experiences of the present. Here, indebtedness is understood as creating mental enclosures, marginalising rightful heirs, and forcing them into social oblivion by obliterating their socio-political bodies. The violent exclusion of heirs is the connecting element to Godwin's fourth novel written after *Caleb Williams* and published more