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The Development of Philosophical Ideas in the Novels
of William Godwin and Mary Shelley :
With a Focus on the Doctrine of “Necessity”

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William Godwin (1756-1836) was known as a radical political thinker and distinguished novelist, and his new philosophy espoused in his *Political Justice* (1793) was considered one of the most influential and controversial in the period of the pre-post French Revolution. Though most of his works are now consigned to oblivion, some of them surely left their mark on the history of British political thought and literature. Literary studies of Godwin's novels, however, have had a marked tendency to focus on their relevance to and influence on the works of the Romantic poets including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Percy Shelley, and little notice has been taken of the originality of his novels and his philosophical theories which would offer the most essential elements of comprehension of his works. His daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) was also one of the most prominent British novelists in the nineteenth century. Her *Frankenstein ; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) has been referred to as a Godwinian novel, and the influence of Godwin and his philosophy on the novel has long been indicated by many critics. Nevertheless, the discussions have been limited and less adequate compared to those about the influence of Mary's husband, Percy Shelley, on her novel and ideas.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine the novels of Godwin and Mary, based on his original philosophy in *Political Justice*, through analyzing how he incorporates and develops the main principles of his political treatise in his fictional works as well as how Mary deals with his theoretical ideas in hers. And by so doing, this study tries to show the scope of the father's and daughter's literary achievements and the need for greater recogni-

tion of their value. For this reason, this thesis is to start with a sketch of the crucial characteristics of Godwin's philosophical ideas in *Political Justice*, about which little is known at the present day. It is followed by the speculations about the influence his ideas exerted on British society and intellectuals and about their significance in Britain in the struggle for social reform and expansion of individual liberty.

In *Political Justice*, Godwin focused first on presenting his underlying assumption that the improvement of social conditions as well as of human beings was necessary. There he engaged in inquiring as to the mode in which human happiness and improvement might most successfully be introduced into society, denouncing all the accepted dogmas and all kinds of political institutions and authority which were obstacles to human improvement. Then he indicated the possibility and validity of the gradual abolition of government, presenting his alternative vision of a future society composed of autonomous rational individuals of impartial judgment and universal benevolence.

Additionally, Godwin introduced the progressive idea of human perfectibility. Central to the whole philosophical theory in *Political Justice* is the doctrine of necessity. According to the doctrine, human beings are the offspring of their circumstances and have no innate characters or ideas. As all the workings of material universe are strictly subject to the law of necessity, the operations of human minds and all resulting actions are also determined or occur according to the law, and therefore inevitable. That assumption leads to the denial of human free will. Under that law of necessity, if their social and educational conditioning is properly favourable for enlightenment, individuals are all perfectible, that is, susceptible of perpetual improvement in morality and intellect. Godwin claimed that the amelioration and progress of society could lead to the perpetual improvement of humankind, and vice versa.

After the great success of *Political Justice*, Godwin attempted to exploit his fictional works as an agent for disseminating his original and revised thoughts among those whom his works could reach. His novels written in the 1790s, *Things As They Are ; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) and *St Leon ; A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), are most closely related to *Political Justice* and referred to as the fictional translations of its radical philosophy. In each novel, the consistency in Godwin's anarchical criticism of the existing regime is well achieved in his delineation of the exclusive workings of political in-

stitutions and social convention. He is also very persuasive when demonstrating the social determination of human character, habits and opinions. Each novel successfully illustrates the spirits and characters of political institutions deeply intruding into human minds of every rank, providing plenty of examples of the destructive impacts of ideological social prejudices upon the dispositions of individuals.

Godwin's attempt to weave his ideas and fiction skillfully together in stories was so radical and distinctive that nineteenth-century critics could distinguish his literary heirs, in other words, the novelists of the Godwin school. One of them is Mary Shelley, whose familial ties with Godwin and ardent reverence for him feature prominently in her novels. The principal object in her novels comes from his philosophical ideas in *Political Justice*, in particular his doctrine of necessity. Adopting her father's ideas, narrative technique, manner and style, however, she attempted to reevaluate them in her novels, and, at one point, refute his ideal thoughts. In the light of literary studies, the novels of Godwin and Mary mutually enhance the value of one another. Also the father-daughter relationship produces no small effect on their ethical and political philosophies as well as on their works.

Of all the six novels Mary composed, *Frankenstein* is considered to be the most challenging, a work written in the spirit of the Godwin school, showing the resonance of his philosophy and echoing its moral significance. Her re-reading of his *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams* and *St Leon* during her composition of *Frankenstein* demonstrates her great debt of intellectual and philosophical dimensions to his works and ideas. Regarded as one of the most important Godwinian novels, *Frankenstein* is, however, never loyal to his philosophy. In fact, the novel reveals her agreement and disagreement with his principal tenets.

It is the adoption of the doctrine of necessity that allows *Frankenstein* to be labeled as a Godwinian novel. On the other hand, Mary's treatment of the law of necessity manifests her refutation of his idealism in *Political Justice*. Through emphasizing the protagonists as human beings of passion, *Frankenstein* presents the fatalistic necessity. A more careful reading of the novel leads to the notion that *Frankenstein* is the product of the mixture of anatomized Godwinian ideas, the mixture of Mary's acceptance and rejection of his philosophical theories and also that of her veneration and defiance of her father.

The first chapter of this thesis analyzes the characteristics of Godwin's philosophical

ideas in *Political Justice* and their significance in the period of controversy in Britain following the French Revolution. Consulting his background, we also view how Godwin formulates and develops his philosophical ideas in *Political Justice*.

The second chapter studies Godwin's most controversial novel, *Caleb Williams*. Although *Caleb Williams* is referred to as the offspring of *Political Justice*, there is some philosophical discrepancy between them. In fact, the novel assumes no optimistic views of a rational order to come and gives no promise of human perfectibility. On that point, it seems that Godwin's theories get away from his original intention as expounded in his novels. In this chapter, we examine the source of the contradiction between Godwin's philosophical intentions and his *Caleb Williams*. This chapter reveals a lack of clarity in his treatment of the doctrine of necessity in the novel, which implies some flaws in his own theory.

St Leon is examined in the third chapter of this thesis. Along with *Caleb Williams*, it is also classified as a Jacobin novel. The novel manifests Godwin's confusing treatment of his view of the method for reforming society and of human faculty for enlightenment. This chapter considers some significant changes in Godwin's philosophical thoughts towards the possibility of social reform and human perfectibility. After witnessing the course of the French Revolution and the rapid waning of the revolutionary movement in the late 1790s, Godwin had to review his optimistic political theory and attempted to modify some of the ideas voiced in *Political Justice*. That is to say, in *St Leon* Godwin shows his resignation to the difficulty of necessary social improvement and human progress.

Finally, the fourth chapter examines Mary's adoption and examination of Godwin's philosophy in her first novel, *Frankenstein*. Mary embraced her father's philosophical theories. While adopting his ideas in her novel, however, she attempted to reappraise them. Through her speculation on the further decline of revolutionary ideas in the early nineteenth century and her hard experiences in the real world, Mary gradually formulated some queries about Godwin's theories in *Political Justice*, evolving her own ideas as to the doctrine of necessity. This chapter sees how Mary tries to examine her doubts on Godwin's ideas in *Frankenstein* and explores her philosophy of human nature and life.

Godwin and Mary shared the underlying assumption that humans have no free will and are governed by the law of necessity. Their protagonists are acutely conscious of the pas-

siveness of humanity. The description of their protagonists as machines without internal engines raises a philosophical question in the reader's mind : If human beings are mere machines operated on by external forces, how can they value life and carry on living? This is a serious problem for every character under the law of necessity in their novels. At the same time, it could be a universal question directed towards individuals of all ages. Godwin's and Mary's works are the products of their respective life-long struggles to discover the truth of the law of necessity. A deepening understanding of the doctrine of necessity, of which was their life-long inquiry, would lead us to an appreciation of the true value of their literary works.