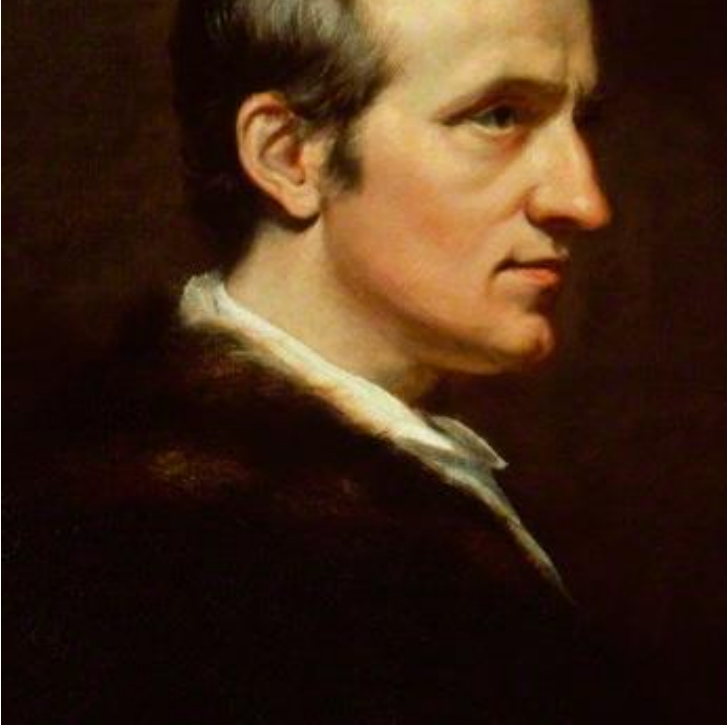


WILLIAM GODWIN

Biography

- Born 1756 in England
 - Godwin was raised in a cold and firm Calvinist household
 - ↳ From age 2 he was distanced from his family by tutors; corporal punishment
 - By age 6 he had decided to become a nonconformist preacher (like dad and grandf.)
 - His studies emphasized dissenting views, including left-leaning intellectual pursuits
 - In his 20s, he rebelled against the church. Did controversial writings
 - Moves to London, becoming a journalist
 - In March 1797, he secretly married Mary Wollstonecraft (a writer and feminist), and adopts her daughter Fanny
 - ↳ The first great tragedy of his life was Mary's death 6 months after the marriage, and soon after birth of daughter Mary *Mary writes Frankenstein*
 - ↳ Godwin cares for Mary's two daughters until 1801 when he married a widow with 2 children. A 5th child follows in 1803.
 - Financial burdens forced Godwin to open a small shop publishing children's book.
 - He was plagued with financial problems for the remainder of his life, relying on friends and supports for aid.
 - The complications of Godwin's professional life were challenged by those of his personal life
 - ↳ 1814 – son William Jr ran away at age 11. Died age 18 (1832, an author)
 - ↳ 1815 – daughter Mary went to Switzerland with (then married) Percy Shelly, and accompanied by stepdaughter Claire Claremont (who was having an affair with Lord Bryon)
 - ↳ Pregnancy from affair, Godwin insists that Mary and Percy marry (wife had committed suicide); this strains their relationships. Wed in 1816
 - ↳ daughter Fanny Wollstonecraft commits suicide at age 22 by overdose (also in love with Percy Shelly)
 - ↳ Claire, meanwhile, discovers she's pregnant by Bryon. Birth 1817. Bryon abandons her, takes the daughter and puts her in a convent...died there at age 5
 - ↳ 1816, best friend dies (Richard Sheridan, the symbol of a passing era)
 - 1825, bankrupt
 - 1828, family reunites
 - 1836, at age 80 he died following a week of fever
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- A portrait of William Godwin, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark coat and a white cravat, looking slightly to the right.

↳ Bryon briefly in self-exile from England following the death of his wife and the scandal of his relation with his half-sister

Philosophy (major ideas)

Highly critical of Christianity

1. It is a human-created system of fictions and falsehoods
2. “Original Sin” with its system of rewards and punishments creates servitude.
3. Christian doctrine is essentially intolerant; it leads to controversies and wars.

Education and environment determine personality and character

Government is the greatest obstacle to human happiness; it usurps private judgement and individual conscience

While not an atheist himself, Godwin was suspicious (and critical!) of any belief which infringed upon humankind’s reasoning power.

Reason leads to truth; truth leads to justice

Humankind is perfectible

↳ Maintains all humans have the potential to be rational and virtuous

All human-created institutions (schools, church, government, laws) create prejudice, impede independence and arrest progress.

Nonviolent reform, not revolution, is the only way to achieve political change

There are no rights, only duties; the fundamental moral duty is universal benevolence