

William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* is an imaginary and aesthetic formulation of his earlier rational critique of society, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, commenting on similar themes of despotic power and corrupt hierarchies while calling for an end to political oppression. Although published on 26 May 1794, Godwin dates his preface as 12 May 1794, conflating his publication with the date that William Pitt's government suspended habeas corpus, a legal recourse that protects individuals from unlawful imprisonment. Pitt's government feared rebellion like the French Revolution, leading to oppressive acts like the Gagging Acts in 1795 that suppressed political meetings, revolutionary thought and speech. William Wordsworth's poetry, like Godwin, criticized current affairs, but did so in a less overtly political and more humanly engaged and sympathetic manner than *Caleb Williams*. Wordsworth's imaginative encounter poems, 'The Discharged Soldier' and 'The Ruined Cottage,' explore the negative effects that wartime Britain had on individuals; poor harvests in the 1790s, rising prices of wheat and bread, and widespread unrest and riots were the major social and political issues of the day, leading to disparities and hardships for all, but unequivocally for the poor. Written approximately five years after Britain and France went to war, Wordsworth reconstructs the protest pamphlet to more sympathetic, emotional, and therefore effective ends. Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Wordsworth's poems 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Discharged Soldier' include and develop solitude in various depictions, through many characters, and to multiple ends. Solitude is explored not only as physical isolation, but also in terms of idleness, being stuck in liminal spaces, and remote from society. Godwin and Wordsworth's literature explores solitude and its effects on psychology to critique the wider social and political events in the time they were writing.

In *Caleb Williams*, Caleb experiences solitude in many situations – in prison, as a wanderer, and as an outsider to society. Caleb's plight and persecution into solitude convey Godwin's political attitude towards Pitt's government and Britain in the 1790s. Caleb's experience of solitude in the prison system highlights the backwardness and despotism of Britain's institutions as Godwin saw it. Caleb's solitude is conveyed in Godwin's visceral and abominable descriptions of the prison system that protest Britain's tyranny and despotism:

‘Go, go, ignorant fool! And visit the scenes of our prisons! Witness their unwholesomeness, their filth, the tyranny of their governors, the misery of their inmates! After that, show me the man shameless enough to triumph, and say, England has no Bastille!’¹

Godwin’s comparison of England’s prisons with France’s Bastille is a commentary on England’s lack of liberation and a denigration of the English prison system being as antiquated and unjust as the Bastille, which was stormed by the French populous as a symbol of oppression. Godwin stresses the despotism of the British prison system to advocate for change in these systems as Caleb’s overwhelmingly negative experience of solitude forces him into psychological escapism. To ameliorate the solitude of incarceration, Caleb takes an escapist approach - ‘I found out the secret of employing my mind [...] Accordingly, I tasked the stores of my memory and my powers of invention’ (192). He resists the ‘squalid solitude of my dungeon’ by escaping into himself as a distraction from the horrors around him (193). Godwin’s attention on Caleb’s mind explores how solitude affects the individual and how oppression can negatively impact psychology; Caleb’s experience of solitude in a particularly feudal and domineering prison climate causes him to internalize his own oppression. Pamela Clemit argues that this focus on ‘individual experience’ has broader political implications that work to ‘dramatize the inner workings of hierarchical society.’²

Besides mitigating solitude with an escapist outlook to protect himself from a feudal prison system, Caleb experiences solitude as a wanderer and outcast of society; this solitude due to persecution and rejection is noxious to Caleb’s psychological wellbeing and cause frenzy and madness in the original ending of *Caleb Williams*, and extreme guilt and inability to overcome oppression in the published ending. In either ending, there is no escape from the hegemonic power of the oppressor. As a wanderer and outcast, solitude takes on a different meaning, as one who no longer belongs to society. Caleb’s social placement is a Godwinian political commentary on society and who gets to partake in it. Caleb considers, ‘My resentment was not restricted to

¹ All references for *Caleb Williams* are taken from William Godwin, *Things as They Are, or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (London: Penguin Books, 2005) 188.

² Pamela Clemit, “*Caleb Williams*: The Paradigm of the Godwinian Novel,” in *The Godwinian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45.

my prosecutor, but extended itself to the whole machine of society,' stressing that those who are subject to injustices and treated unequally by society will in turn resent and reject society (190). Caleb's removal from society is perhaps his most solitary existence in his plight and what leads to his suffering in both endings. Godwin's description of suffering is a 'meticulous analysis of psychological states,' Clemit argues, that conveys the significant effect of solitude on Caleb's mentality.³ Godwin's depiction of Caleb on the fringes of society and unable to overcome subjugation and political inequality is a powerful condemnation of 'Things as They Are' and the futility of attempting to subvert authority. Neither ending depicts an acceptable way for society to go forth; thus, Godwin urges a reformist ideology calling for a new way to be paved through the narrative of Caleb's relationship with solitude.

Wordsworth's use of solitude is more complex than the politically charged rhetoric of Godwin; he employs blank verse to adapt conversations and encounters into poetic form. Like Godwin, Wordsworth uses depictions of solitude to develop protest, but focuses his literature on the context of war and economic hardship, with a concentration on human emotion and cultivating sympathy. Nicholas Roe argues that Wordsworth's 'sympathetic identification' was a motif seen in protest pamphlets that impelled his 'imaginative engagement with social victims and outcasts.'⁴ Such 'victims' and 'outcasts' are seen in his poems 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Discharged Soldier.' In 'The Ruined Cottage,' a peddler tells the story of Margaret to the speaker in a circular rhythm in which he returns many times to Margaret's cottage to witness her desolation. Motifs of solitude such as wandering and frenzy draw comparisons to *Caleb Williams* and are seen in the characters of Margaret and her husband Robert. Margaret experiences solitude after Robert abandons her to enlist in the war and this solitude causes a psychological breakdown symbolized in the cottage's gradual degradation. Margaret's physical alteration - 'her eye-lids drooped, her eyes were downward cast' and 'her face was pale and thin, her figure too / Was changed' - and mental decline evident in her behavior that alternates between frenetic and

³ Clemit, "The Paradigm," 48.

⁴ Nicholas Roe, "'War is Again Broken Out': Protest and Poetry, 1793-1798," in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 132.

hopeful, to depressed and disappointed, are represented by the cottage that ‘sunk to decay.’⁵ Wandering in the solitude of a liminal space of hope and disappointment that her husband will return is what nourishes Margaret’s psychological breakdown and ultimately destroys her. Like Caleb’s experience as a social outcast, Margaret’s years long experience of solitude, lingering in ‘unquiet widowhood, / A wife, and widow’ cause her to breakdown into psychological disarray (484-5). Jonathan Wordsworth signals Wordsworth’s ‘extraordinary psychological insight’ that is evident in the prominence of the inner workings of the mind in the poem; he argues that ‘all the emphasis is on Margaret’s state of mind, none on the plot.’⁶ Wordsworth’s use of solitude therefore has political reverberations through his focus more on the effect of the social context on individuals rather than the actual context. The effect of this focus cultivates more sympathy as an imaginary rendering of wartime Britain than a pamphlet would, for instance.

Robert also experiences the negative psychological implications of solitude. His solitude emanates from lack of labor, as the peddler divulges that there has been ‘hardships of that season,’ a ‘time of trouble,’ and that ‘shoals of artisans / Were from their daily labor turned away’ (193, 207-8). Robert therefore does not work and tries to entertain himself with trivial crafts, but ‘this endured not’ (230). His temper changes, he becomes idle, then he begins to wander; his disposition soon changes for the worse as he would snap from cruel to light and then play in ‘wild freaks of merriment’ with the children (239). This frenzy as a symptom of solitude appears later in Margaret and may take influence from *Caleb Williams*. Wordsworth read the novel in 1795 and besides adapting Caleb’s psychological mania to Robert, also constructs similar Godwinian themes such as injustice.⁷ Wordsworth portrays the plight of Robert and Margaret in such a visceral and emotional manner to evoke pity towards their situations, a strategy seen in social and political protest. Wordsworth’s use of poetry to criticize wartime Britain develops an

⁵ All line references for Wordsworth’s poems will be taken from Nicholas Roe, ed., *Wordsworth: Selected Poetry* (New York; London: Penguin Books 1992), 416, 396-7, 513.

⁶ Jonathan Wordsworth, “Introduction,” in *Ruined Cottage; The Brothers; Michael* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 5-6.

⁷ Roe, “Protest and Poetry,” 132.

imaginary potential for protest and the use of solitude and its influence on individuals reinforces the emotional narrative that challenges the wider destruction happening in the country.

Wordsworth develops solitude in 'The Discharged Soldier' to again criticize wartime Britain by showing an example of the destruction that the war experience has done unto this dismissed soldier. Much detail of the poem is given to the soldier's vague and pitiful description. He is introduced as an 'uncouth shape' in a dismal state - 'You might almost think / That his bones wounded him' (38, 44-45). His 'visage' was 'wasted,' his 'cheeks sunken,' and his figure 'half-sitting and half-standing,' (49-53). Much evidence suggests that the soldier is a ghostly figure, existing in liminality, not belonging to one place or another. For example, he is 'half detached / From his own nature,' has a 'strange half-absence' about him, and his 'garb' was 'faded yet entire' (58-59, 142, 54-55). The soldier's solitude derives from him being 'alone,' but more significantly in that he, like Caleb, has no place to exist in society, as his liminal position demonstrates (60). The soldier's ghostly appearance and character are why he is unmoving: he is stunted by desolation and a lack of belonging. As a 'discharged soldier,' he neither belongs in the military nor at home; he has nowhere to go and his solitude subjects him to wandering. The psychological portrait that Wordsworth gives the reader reveals the poor, lonely situations of those incapacitated by war; by indulging in a more holistic and emotional view of a discharged soldier than a newspaper could give, for example, Wordsworth heightens our sympathetic response to social and political events. Wordsworth's protest is furthered in his complex depiction of solitude. In the beginning of the poem, solitude is pleasant for the speaker:

Above, before, behind,
 Around me, all was peace and solitude:
 I looked not round, nor did the solitude
 Speak to my eye, but it was heard and felt.
 Oh happy state! (24-28)

Through two vastly different depictions of solitude, one that is brought on by horrors experienced during war that psychologically and physically wrecked the soldier, and the other that the speaker finds respite and tranquility in, Wordsworth emphasizes the contrasts between

what those are experiencing on the military front and what civilians get to experience at home. He contends that solitude, especially in nature, can and should be a pleasant, spiritual, and positive experience, but those who are shattered by oppression, violence, and destruction are not entitled to that same experience.

Godwin and Wordsworth's depictions of solitude in their literature allow them to cultivate characters that are victims and outcasts, explore the inner workings of the mind, and examine the negative effects that social and political events had on individuals. This examination allows for a wider commentary on society and call for change. Godwin's narrative of Caleb's persecution and solitude as a prisoner and outsider to society is an aesthetic commentary on the hegemonic power structures and tyrannical tendencies of Pitt's government that Godwin detested. Wordsworth's encounter poetry explores the psychological effect that wartime Britain and solitude from broken families and trauma had on individuals to create a sympathetic response. The preoccupation with protest reveals the politically charged nature of the Romantics in the 1790s and the Jacobian and reformist ideologies of Godwin and Wordsworth at the time of their writing.

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