

SECTION TWO: MARY SHELLY'S FAMILY AND FRIENDS



LEFT: John Keenan (active 1791–1815) after John Opie (1761–1807), *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 1804, oil on canvas, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. CENTER: Richard Rothwell (1800–1868), *Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, painted 1831, exhibited 1840, oil on canvas, © National Portrait Gallery, London. RIGHT: George Dawe (1781–1829) after James Northcote (1746–1831), *William Godwin*, 1802, mezzotint, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

MARY SHELLY'S CHILDHOOD

In 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft gave birth to Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (who would later become Mary Shelley). Only ten days later, Wollstonecraft died due to complications from childbirth.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an important **feminist** thinker. For her time, Wollstonecraft was a rare example of a female author who could support herself financially through her career. Her most famous books were written in response to Edmund Burke's defense of the French monarchy and the traditional structures of society. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Mary Wollstonecraft argued that religious and civil liberties should be a person's birthright. Soon after, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she argued for the equal education of women. Wollstonecraft believed that without education reform, especially a national system with co-education, women would continue to be subjugated, and both men and women would suffer from the inequality.

William Godwin, Mary Shelley's father, was also one of the most celebrated and radical thinkers in Britain. In 1793, he published *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, which argues that individuals should think freely without institutions such as religion and marriage controlling their thoughts. Often considered the father of anarchist thought, Godwin believed that contracts (including social contracts and marital contracts) and even everyday promises hindered human advancement by binding individuals to decisions made based on the inherently partial understanding available at one moment in time. He believed that truly progressive societies and individuals should be free to change course in response to new information.

Wollstonecraft and Godwin met in 1791. Despite their similar beliefs, it was not love at first sight. It would take five years of other relationships and life events before the pair fell in love. Although Wollstonecraft and Godwin did not believe in marriage as an institution, they married to protect the rights of their daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (Mary Shelley). When Wollstonecraft died soon after childbirth, William Godwin raised Mary and her half-sister, Fanny, by himself.



LEFT: Edward Ellerker Williams (1793–1822), *Portrait of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1822, watercolor over black chalk and graphite on wove paper, The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Mrs. W. Murray Crane, 1949. 1949.3; RIGHT: Giovanni Salucci (1769–1845), *Vue de la ville de Genève & de plein-Palais*, 1817, hand-colored etching. Bibliothèque de Genève, Centre d'icongraphie genevoise. (View from Mary Shelley's travels in Switzerland.)

In addition to the stress of being a single father, William Godwin's livelihood was in jeopardy. Due to the French and American Revolutions, the British government began to suppress freedom of expression. Godwin suffered from financial difficulties in both selling his books and being censored in their content.

William Godwin eventually married again—to a woman who lived next door, Mary Jane Clairmont. She brought two children of her own, Jane (who later went by the name Claire Clairmont) and Charles, into the family. In 1803, Mary Jane gave birth to a son, William Godwin, named after his father. The Godwins were often financially strapped, despite running a successful children's bookshop and publishing company.

Mary Shelley did not get along with her stepmother and it was a crowded house of five children. She grew up reading her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's writing, looking at her mother's portrait hanging in the parlor, and experiencing the great expectations of being the child of two famous writers. Mary's father took her on walks to her mother's grave and it became her private place to read.

When Mary Shelley was sixteen, she met the handsome, famous, and wealthy poet Percy Bysshe (P. B.) Shelley. William Godwin was P. B. Shelley's intellectual hero and Godwin hoped to ask him for a loan. Mary and P. B. Shelley fell in love, despite the fact that he was already married. Mary Shelley was inspired by her parents' lack of convention in their relationship, and she and P. B. Shelley ran off together in July of 1814, bringing her stepsister Claire along for the ride. This would start off a chain of events resulting in a series of scandals, disownments, and deaths.



For further reference please see the [family tree](#) and [biographies supplements](#).

MARY SHELLEY'S CIRCLE AND THE SUMMER OF 1816

By 1816, the lives of Mary, P. B. Shelley, and her family and friends were still not sorted out. Mary Shelley's relationship with her father, William Godwin was strained, as Godwin still hoped to secure funding from P. B. Shelley, Godwin did not realize that P. B. Shelley was cut off from his family money due to his beliefs, such as arguing in defense of atheism and rejecting his first wife.

Mary Shelley's stepsister Claire wanted a handsome and famous poet of her own, and she began to pursue Lord Byron, the infamous author of *Childe Harold*. Claire convinced Mary and P. B. to join her on a trip with Byron to Switzerland. The landscapes of this vacation —such as the Plainpalais public gardens or rowing on Lac Léman, with the peak of Mont Blanc looming across the water— would later appear in *Frankenstein*. Byron and his friend John William Polidori rented the Villa Diodati in Cologny, a town near Geneva. Byron and the Shelleys became good friends.

However, violent rains due to a volcanic eruption kept the vacationers indoors during the “year without a summer.” Inspired by the unseasonably gloomy weather, the group would read aloud from a volume of ghost stories, *Fantasmagoriana*, German tales translated into French with titles like “The Black Chamber” and “The Dead Bride.” This atmosphere motivated Byron to challenge the group to a ghost story writing contest, an origin story for *Frankenstein* that has taken on its own legendary proportions.



Mary Shelley was inspired, and decided, as she recalled in the introduction to the third edition in 1831, that she wanted to write something to “curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart” (8). More than a contest was at stake. Her father was demanding money from her husband, unaware that P. B. Shelley was cut off from his family funds. She was being publicly slandered for her non-traditional relationship. If Mary Shelley could support herself through her writing, it would not only solve their financial woes but also be a tribute to her mother's independence through publishing. And finally, Shelley was “very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame” (qtd. in Denlinger, 111). For several days she struggled to come up with something and then one night, as she described it: “I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together” (9). Mary Shelley's vision of a man playing God was her own breakthrough moment of creation.

OBJECTS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

OBJECT: JOHN KEENAN, AFTER JOHN OPIE, *PORTRAIT OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT*, 1804, OIL ON CANVAS

A portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, painted by John Opie when she was pregnant with Mary Shelley, hung over the fireplace in the parlor of the Godwin-Clairmont household. Wollstonecraft remained a central figure in the household even in death—Mary and P. B. Shelley first declared their love for each other in 1814 at her grave.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

-  A portrait is a cultivated view of a person, designed to demonstrate select aspects of its subject. In this guide, students will explore four different portraits. Ask students to look carefully at this portrait and discuss what it reveals about Mary Wollstonecraft. What does it tell them? What does it not tell them?
-  Although Mary Shelley never knew her mother, the portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft hung in a prominent place in the Godwin home, even after her father remarried. Do you think seeing this portrait every day influenced Mary's writing of *Frankenstein*? **DISCUSS.**
-  The American statesman Aaron Burr owned this copy of Mary Wollstonecraft's portrait. He raised his daughters guided by her philosophy.
 - Ask students if they have images of their heroes or those they admire hanging in their room or home. Who are they and why do you admire them?
 - What are other examples of books, films, or public personas who have influenced the discussion of women's rights?



John Keenan (active 1791–1815) after John Opie (1761–1807), *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 1804, oil on canvas, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

Tell students that Wollstonecraft's philosophy of education—including the idea that women should be educated with men and be given the opportunity to earn a living—was essential to her writing.

ASK STUDENTS TO DISCUSS: How does the notion of education come up in the novel? Think about the Creature's education before he finds Victor. What connections can students make between Wollstonecraft's thoughts on the topic and the way Mary Shelley deals with the theme in the novel?




OBJECT: GEORGE DAWE, *PORTRAIT OF WILLIAM GODWIN*, 4 OCTOBER 1802, MEZZOTINT

Like Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin was famous as an author. This portrait of Godwin was reproduced many times and sold in print shops. Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) was embraced by radical thinkers. It argues for human enlightenment and critiques political institutions such as property, marriage, and monarchy, arguing that they inhibit individuals and social progress. Godwin wanted people to think for themselves unconstricted by these institutions. When Britain went to war with France and became more conservative, Godwin's popularity suffered. He made later editions of the *Enquiry* less radical. Percy Bysshe Shelley sought Godwin out for his earlier radical ideas. This portrait of Godwin portrays him in the dignified manner he wanted others to see.



George Dawe (1781–1829) after James Northcote (1746–1831), *William Godwin*, 1802, mezzotint, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

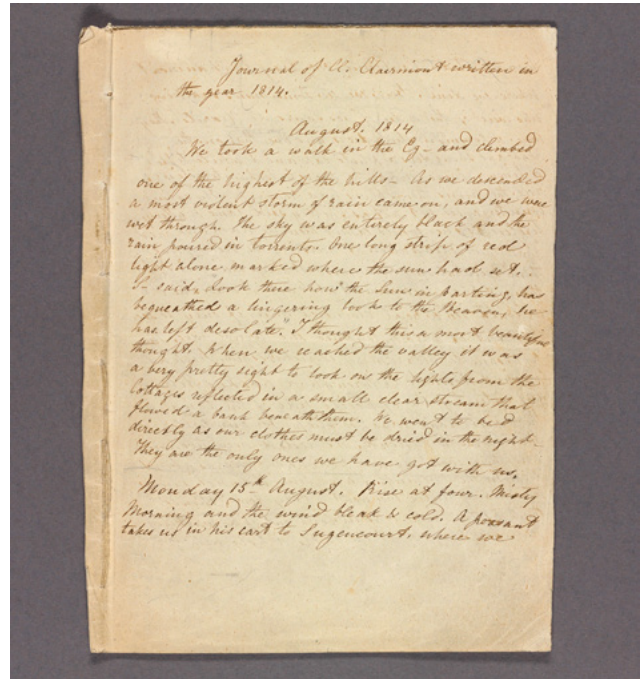
DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

-  What do students notice about this portrait? How do they read his posture and facial expression? Note how the subject is depicted in a side view, called a profile, like an image on a coin.
-  Share with students that the subject is William Godwin, Mary Shelley's father. He was famous enough to have a print made from his portrait and sold at print shops. Which people in our society have their images reproduced and sold, and why?
-  Godwin was famous for his political philosophy. He believed, radically for the time, that people should use reason to think for themselves and not be constricted by the institutions of society such as marriage and religion. Whose political ideas influence us today, and how?

OBJECT: CLARA MARY JANE CLAIRMONT, JOURNAL OF SUMMER 1814, CA. 1814

According to Elizabeth C. Denlinger, author of the catalogue for the Morgan exhibit,

When Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Godwin, and Claire Clairmont eloped to France in July 1814, they packed like bookish teenagers. Mary Godwin brought all her early letters and papers, which she left by accident in Paris, to the dismay of biographers. They had little money and no changes of clothes. Shelley forgot his watch but remembered his three-volume pocket Shakespeare. All kept journals recording the miseries of their journey (rats, dirt, rain, dreadful food, unhelpful drivers, sprained ankles) and the rewards, as well—an al fresco reading of *As You Like It*, for instance: “Shelley said poetry read in a room never came so near the soul as if read in a beautiful spot, in the wide open air and under the wide open Heaven.” Ascending toward Switzerland, Clairmont wrote: “We were so happy ... Shelley in an ecstasy declared how great was his joy—How great is my rapture he said, I a fiery man with my heart full of Youth, and with my Beloved at my side, I behold these lordly immeasurable Alps.” (106)



Clara Mary Jane Clairmont (1798 - 1879), *Journal of summer 1814*, ca. 1814, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- ⚡ Look together at different days of **Claire's journal**. These pages document a time of strong emotions for Claire and the Shelleys, who had essentially run away from their old lives for an adventure abroad. Ask students if the journal's topics have any connection to their own lives. Why or why not? Would they have liked to join this traveling party? **EXPLAIN**.
- ⚡ Think about *Frankenstein* and discuss how the novel captures these swings in mood. Find excerpts and/or make lists of scenes that illustrate both highs and lows and discuss which types of moments Shelley describes with positive or negative emotions—and how.
- ⚡ Tell students that at the time that Claire Clairmont wrote this journal, the dominant literary movement was Romanticism—an aesthetic movement starting at the end of the eighteenth century that emphasized emotion and individualism as well as glorification of the imagination and nature. How do the actions and reflections of the Shelleys and Clairmont exemplify this movement? What does a journal entry like this tell us about the time in which they lived and the values of those times or their reactions to the values of those times?

ACTIVITIES

1. JOURNAL ENTRIES:

Ask students if they keep diaries or journals. If not, do they keep blogs or other social media accounts of their lives? Ask them to compare the different forms.

For this activity, students will keep journals or diaries for a week, writing entries at least once a day. This can be done digitally in a blogging format, for instance, or by hand. At the end of the week, tell students to look back over their entries and reflect on the content. What kinds of events and experiences did they record? Compare to the events recorded in Claire Clairmont's journals.



Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont were both teenagers during the summer of 1814. Ask students to discuss how their early nineteenth-century teenage activities compare to teenagers today. Based on what we know about their lives, how has life changed? How do the journal entries illustrate these differences? How do they illustrate what has remained constant about being a teenager?



The Shelleys' era was imbued with the values and ideals of Romanticism. Discuss this movement and what it valued. Ask students to think about their own journal or diary entries. What do they emphasize most? What do the entries demonstrate about their values? How do these emphases reflect the political, social, and aesthetic aspects of our current time and place?



As an alternative or extension to this activity, students can write a journal entry for a character in *Frankenstein*. How would they compare this character's entry to their own and to Clairmont's?

2. DEBATING DEMOCRACY:



Mary Shelley's parents were important voices in the political debate sparked by the French Revolution. At this time people discussed whether democracy as a concept for society would tend toward savagery or toward civilization. Mary Wollstonecraft argued for civilization. Ask students to think back to the novel. Which passages deal with political institutions and governments? Encourage students to think, for instance, about the experiences Victor and Justine have with the justice system. How does this element of the novel relate to political philosophy and arguments about political institutions?

3. TIMELINE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS:

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was well received. At that time, most journalists were credited only by their initials, so few readers knew that "MW" was a woman. When her publisher, encouraged by the popular reaction, revealed Mary Wollstonecraft's gender, she began to receive new and harsher criticism.

Undeterred, Mary Wollstonecraft proceeded to write her sequel, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which pushed boundaries further and argued for revolutionary societal change. Horace Walpole, writer of the first Gothic novel and Member of Parliament, called her a "hyena in petticoats." Mary Wollstonecraft's writing began conversations and her work contributed to the development of modern feminism.



For this activity, organize students in small groups to create a timeline of women's rights. What has changed in terms of laws, behavior, and expectations from the mid-eighteenth century (when Wollstonecraft was born) to today? Students should share their timelines with the class and compare them to political and scientific timelines for the same periods. How do the changes for women align with political and scientific changes over time?



As an alternative, choose a different focus for the timeline. Students could explore human rights through the lens of race, religion, sexual and gender identity, freedom of expression or even compare rights between different cultures, systems of government or countries.



As an extension to this activity, encourage students to add "projected" changes to their timeline. What do they think might change or what do they hope might change 50, 100, or even 200 years from today?

See Supplement on [Vindication of the Rights of Women and Political Justice](#)



MATERIALS SUPPLEMENTS FOR THIS SECTION

1. [Godwin-Shelley Family Tree](#)
2. [Biographies for Godwin-Shelley Family Tree](#)
3. [Claire's journal passages](#)
4. [Vindication of the Rights of Women and Political Justice](#)