August 30, 1797 saw the birth of Mary Godwin, daughter of illustrious philosophers Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Born to such “glorious parents” (XII: 2) as Percy Bysshe Shelley later styled them in *Laon and Cynthia; or The Revolution of the Golden City*, baby Mary seemed destined for great things. Her birth was shadowed, however, by the death of her mother from puerperal fever only ten days afterward. Godwin was left a widower with two young girls to raise: Mary and her half-sister, Fanny Imlay. According to Charlotte Gordon, biographer of both Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft, Godwin set about training them to be perfectly well-behaved (9), and, in Mary’s case, as he later wrote, to bring her up “like a philosopher, even like a cynic” (qtd. in Seymour 72).

Such an upbringing does not, at first, sound particularly cheerful and, in fact, seems to contrast with the idealistic tone of *The Enquirer*, a collection of essays Godwin wrote prior to his daughter’s birth, while he and Wollstonecraft were deliberating on the education their child would receive. There he writes, “The true object of education . . . is the generation of happiness” (Godwin, *Enquirer* 1). Mary and Fanny were taught to remain still and quiet for hours, a posture that Godwin’s close friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge would find rather unnerving (Gordon 9).

In 1801, Godwin married Mary-Jane Clairmont, a woman the young Mary soon grew to despise for her petty tyranny. Mary-Jane thought Godwin was far too lax with his daughter and sought to remedy the damage thus done by treating Mary with “unmerited severity” (Gordon 28). In 1806, Mary; her father and stepmother; half-sister Fanny; and Jane and Charles, Mary-Jane’s children, left the rural home called the Polygon for a house on Skinner Street in Holborn. This area was the infamous prison district—Fleet Prison,
Bridewell, and Newgate were all within walking distance of the Godwins’ new home. At night, Mary would have been able to hear the sounds of animals being slaughtered; in the morning, she would have seen their carcasses hanging in the double row of butcher shops in Fleet Market (Seymour 57).

Mary’s tender years were thus spent in a condition that served as a microcosm of the challenges the Western world as a whole was facing. She played with the children of French refugees from that country’s recent revolution (Gordon 5) and listened to and sometimes took part in discussions of philosophy, culture, and dizzying scientific discoveries with her father’s distinguished friends and guests. She learned of vast inequality and stinging injustice by living a stone’s throw from the city’s most feared prisons, and, indeed, it is not a stretch to conjecture that Mary considered her own home a prison, with Mary-Jane as the cruel warden. The rapidly changing world in which the young Mary Godwin, later Shelley, came of age continued its frenzied pace through the mid-nineteenth century as well, and it is within this context, the period from 1816–1838, that her novels came to fruition. These works must, therefore, be read as a product of their historical, political, and social contexts. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s novels thus particularly demonstrate profound anxieties resulting from the significant, often chaotic, cultural turmoil during which they were produced.

An Enlightened Upbringing
Mary Shelley was nourished upon the food of Enlightenment political ideals as a child. Her parents were both heavily influenced by the theories expressed in the works of such notables as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke, the founder of British Empiricism, wrote *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), where he explains that people develop ideas and understanding as a result of their own experiences (109–110). This notion is played out in *Frankenstein* (1818) when the creature narrates how he came to understand that his presence causes fear—an old man and villagers run from him, and Felix De Lacey drives him from the cottage (*NSW* I: 79, 105; 101). Therefore, his experiences cause him to avoid contact
with humans. Another of Locke’s best-known works, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), argues that people were endowed with basic, inalienable rights (11–15) and that government originated with the citizens, so therefore, rulers had responsibility toward the people (137, 141). If the government/ruler infringed upon the peoples’ rights, Locke claims, then the people have the right to overthrow that government and replace it with another ruling body that will better carry out its duties and respect the rights of its citizens (*Two Treatises* 218). This idea would have a tremendous impact on the political state of the world in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Like Locke, Rousseau also argues that society and government are social constructs born of the desire for self-preservation. Prior to their development, Rousseau explains in his *Second Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), humans existed in a state of nature characterized by a general peacefulness and an antipathy toward seeing suffering in their fellow humans (26–37). Shelley portrays this most clearly in *Frankenstein* in the creature’s narrative; he exists in a state of benevolent love for the humans he observes, particularly the De Lacey family, until his nature is corrupted by society’s rejection of him (*NSW* I: 82–107). We also see a version of this principle enacted twice in *Mathilda* (completed in 1819, published in 1959), Shelley’s second novel, when two characters retreat from civilization in an effort to find internal peace. The narrator’s father, after confessing his incestuous desire for his daughter, flees to a remote seaside location, where he eventually commits suicide after being unable to return to a natural state of feeling despite his self-imposed exile from society (*NSW* II: 36–39). The titular protagonist attempts a similar method of self-exclusion after her father’s death when she retreats to an isolated cottage in the woods and waits for death to overtake her, a literal return to nature in which her body will be committed to the earth (*NWS* II: 44). While still in London, Mathilda suffers from thoughts “too harrowing for words,” but “I lost all this suffering when I was free; when I saw the wild heath around me, . . . then I could weep, gently weep, and be at peace” (*NSW* II: 43). By removing herself from society, she hopes, perhaps,
to return to a natural state of innocence, one free of the devastating knowledge of her father’s feelings for her.

William Godwin synthesized and expanded upon the works of Locke, Rousseau, and other philosophers to develop his own radical positions. He entered British literary and intellectual circles in the 1780s, but it is his 1793 work, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* that made his reputation as the father of modern notions of anarchism. Drawing from the philosophies of prominent Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, Charles Montesquieu, and David Hume, he argues that government corrupts society by fostering dependence and ignorance but will one day become obsolete through increased knowledge and understanding (Godwin *Political Justice* 305–306). He focuses on ideals of equality and individual private judgment as a form of self-governance that will help people to break free of the yoke of government enslavement (Godwin, *Political Justice* 72–81). As such, Godwin rejects the legal authority of government, private property (*Political Justice* 414–418), marriage (445–448), and even orchestras and concerts (444) as undermining individual liberty. Though he later revised his position against marriage, among other things, Godwin maintained notoriety as an immoral anarchist and was attacked and derided by his opponents for the rest of his life. As such, Mary doubtless grew up conscious of both the admiration and esteem that her father’s famous friends held toward him and the scorn that his enemies and those who did not understand his positions leveled at him publicly. It is no wonder, then, that the father-figures within Shelley’s novels, namely *Lodore* (1835), *Falkner* (1837), and *Mathilda*, are often characterized ambivalently, perhaps in a reflection of her own attitudes and the feelings she perceived from those around her.

If it seems strange for a child to grow up learning about the theories of Locke, Rousseau, and their ilk, it is because it was. Mary Shelley had an unusual education for any child in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but her opportunity for, and parental encouragement of, learning was more remarkable because of her gender. The meaningful education of girls was not considered necessary or desirable during this period. Instead, girls and young
women of the Godwins’ social station were expected to be trained in the “polite arts,” including music and/or singing, drawing and perhaps painting, French, dancing, and the like. In other words, their role was to be ornamental.

Mary’s own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, railed against this practice in her 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She herself had seen the ills of this practice visited upon her own family. Gordon explains that Wollstonecraft’s father, an abusive alcoholic, squandered the family’s fortune and, after her mother Elizabeth died, left her and her younger sisters to shift for themselves (46–48). Wollstonecraft worked as a governess and ran a school, where she developed many of the practices she advocated in *A Vindication*. She promoted healthy eating, plenty of vigorous exercise, and expected all of her pupils—male and female alike—to develop and use their sense of reason (Gordon 69). She even believed that each student’s education should be modeled on an individual course, depending upon their own abilities and inclinations (Gordon 68). Generally accepted in the twenty-first century, such notions were considered revolutionary in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Though the young Mary’s education at the hands of her father did not entirely conform to the tenets of her mother’s philosophy, she was able to explore Wollstonecraft’s writings while growing up, and such principles are perhaps most prevalent in her 1835 novel *Lodore*. Cornelia, later Lady Lodore, personifies all of the dangers and follies, including pride, stubbornness, and vanity, that result from the poor education women were so often destined to suffer. The titular character, Lord Lodore, practices a more sensible, yet nonetheless traditional, educational mode in bringing up their daughter Ethel, whom he has brought to America at the tender age of three (*NSW* VI: 16). He wishes “to educate her to all the perfection of which the feminine character is susceptible”; he decides “to make her all that woman can be of generous, soft, and devoted,” and strives “to cultivate her tastes and enlarge her mind, yet so to control her acquirements, as to render her ever pliant to his will” (*NSW* VI: 18). Ethel, the narrator rather derisively explains, “was taught to
know herself dependent; the support of another was to be necessary to her” (NSW VI: 19).

Ethel is contrasted with her friend Fanny Derham, who is “unlike every other child” (NSW VI: 79) in that she “loves philosophy, and pants after knowledge, and indulges in a thousand Platonic dreams” (NSW VI: 79). Fanny’s knowledge is not simply limited to dead languages and abstract philosophies, though. She is aware of the power a real education can proffer upon its possessor: to be of use. Mary Wollstonecraft’s driving argument in A Vindication is that women who are educated rationally will grow up to be better sisters, wives, and mothers; in other words, they should be taught to help others and be useful. Fanny expresses this sentiment later in the novel, saying “I aspire to be useful. . . . It is by words that the world’s great fight, now in these civilized times, is carried on; I never hesitated to use them, when I fought any battle for the miserable and oppressed” (NSW VI: 213). Fanny models a successful application of Wollstonecraft’s brand of education.

Shelley succinctly sums up the differences in the methods of the two fathers in educating their daughters, writing:

The one fashioned his offspring to be the wife of a frail human being, and to make it her duty to be yielding, and to make it her duty to devote herself to his happiness, and to obey his will. The other sought to guard his [daughter] from all weakness, to make her complete in herself, and to render her independent and self-sufficing . . . The one brought up his child to dependence; the other taught his to disdain every support, except the applause of her own conscience. (NSW VI: 218)

These two young women continue to exemplify the respective weaknesses and merits of their different educations through the conclusion of the novel. Ethel continues a blissful, dependent existence with her husband Edward and her mother, who has overcome her poor education and made herself of the greatest use possible to her daughter and son-in-law, while Fanny, who inherits enough money to be financially independent, continues through the world as “a useful lesson, at once to teach what goodness and