

Caleb williams: realism out of romance



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, the titular protagonist Caleb is purportedly writing to prove his innocence after his former master, Mr. Falkland, destroys his reputation. However, in the postscript, once Falkland has died after being convicted for his crimes, Caleb appears to regret his actions. He represents himself and Falkland as idealized and romantic versions of their respective roles; a good master who acts prudently in the face of adverse conditions, and a loyal servant who mistakenly betrays his master. Closer inspection of Caleb's ambiguous syntax, though, reveals implications that he does not think as highly of Falkland as he claims. This reveals him as an unreliable narrator who may have more realistic feelings than he portrays.

Before the postscript, Caleb decides to attempt to bring Falkland to justice. When he arrives at court to see Falkland ill, however, he seems to no longer wish to incriminate him. "Would to God," he says, "it were possible for me to retire... without uttering another word! I would brave the consequences... rather than add to the weight of misfortune with which Mr. Falkland is overwhelmed" (Godwin 331). This is the first indication that he may not be speaking honestly. If he were most concerned with Falkland's well being, he would refrain from "uttering another word" and "brave the consequences," as he said. Rather, he gives a lengthy speech which details Falkland's crimes, implying that he may truly desire to add to Falkland's misfortunes.

Despite the concern for Falkland that Caleb portrays himself as having, he appears to speak in ways meant to deliberately upset his former master. "When I mentioned the murder," he writes, "I could perceive in him an involuntary shuddering" (335). He says he "mentioned" the murder like it

was in passing, with no motive. However, this resembles earlier moments in the account, such as his conversation with Falkland about an innocent man who would have been executed if not for the presence of the real criminal, where Caleb would “introduce, by insensible degrees to the point I desired” (121), meaning he would touch upon issues he believed were sensitive to Falkland to see how he would react, attempting to discover if he was Tyrrel’s real murderer. In court, he already knows that Falkland is the murderer, so his “mention” of the murder seems to be intended not only to incriminate Falkland, but to cause him further grief.

Throughout the scene, Caleb praises Falkland and castigates himself for bringing his former master to this fate. Much of the praise, however, is worded in ambiguous ways that can also be interpreted negatively. While Caleb says that Falkland “is of a noble nature” and has “qualities of the most admirable kind” (334), he does not outright say that Falkland is either noble or admirable. Earlier, in fact, Caleb stated that Falkland “was worthy of reverence,” that he “loved him,” and that he “was endowed with qualities that partook of divine” (331). His strongest praises are all in the past tense, focusing on how his master was before the persecution began rather than how he is currently, suggesting this praise is no longer applicable.

After the court scene, when Caleb is finishing his account, many of the praises and laments directed at Falkland can also be interpreted as criticisms. He writes “It was fit that he should praise my patience, who has fallen victim, life and fame, to my precipitation!” (336.) Though Caleb expresses his guilt in the final clause, it is initially unclear to whom the “

who" refers to, as the "life and fame" of both characters has in some way fallen victim to the "precipitation" of the other. Simply changing the final "my" to "his" would make this sentence into a condemnation of Falkland. Caleb may have left the beginning of the sentence ambiguous to make the reader think about their expectations, have them determine which character they find guiltier, and perhaps shock the reader with his condemnation of himself. Later, he appears to be praising Falkland again in saying "Thy intellectual powers were truly sublime, and thy bosom burned with a godlike ambition," (characteristics which are still possible in an evil and hated character), "But of what use are talents and sentiments in the corrupt wilderness of human society?" (336). Rather than saying "what use were your talents," he leaves his syntax ambiguous to suggest that he is not talking about Falkland, and is perhaps asking what use his own talents were in the face of the corruption he faced from Falkland.

Throughout his account, even when pursued by Falkland, Caleb praises him, portraying himself as a faithful servant who would support his master under any circumstance, and Falkland as a good master who acted properly and within the limits of reason. These are both romantic ideals which make very unrealistic characters. Despite the positive portrayal of Falkland, though, we can see by his actions that he does not act in conventionally proper ways at all times, making Falkland a more realistic character that acts according to his passions and emotions. Caleb, in the final scenes of his account, shows through his suggestions that he has not always been an entirely reliable narrator. As his account is meant to clear his name, it would not benefit him to be harshly critical of a man he had sentenced to death, even after what

Falkland did to him. Therefore, for the sake of his reputation, it would be realistic of him to write in a way that criticizes himself while praising his tormentor. As he said, the spectators of the court “ manifested their sympathy in the tokens of [his] penitence” (334), showing that he knows what he needs to do to gain the sympathy of others. Though Caleb portrays himself and other characters as unrealistic and romantic archetypes, Caleb as portrayed by Godwin is a realistic character who has his own opinions, but knows how to express them prudently to get what he wants.