

Encyclopaedia Britannica – Life of Shelley

Percy Bysshe Shelley, (born Aug. 4, 1792, Field Place, near Horsham, Sussex, Eng.—died July 8, 1822, at sea off Livorno, Tuscany [Italy]), English Romantic poet whose passionate search for personal love and social justice was gradually channeled from overt actions into poems that rank with the greatest in the English language.

SHELLEY was the heir to rich estates acquired by his grandfather, Bysshe (pronounced “Bish”) Shelley. Timothy Shelley, the poet’s father, was a weak, conventional man who was caught between an overbearing father and a rebellious son. The young Shelley was educated at Syon House Academy (1802–04) and then at Eton (1804–10), where he resisted physical and mental bullying by indulging in imaginative escapism and literary pranks. Between the spring of 1810 and that of 1811, he published two Gothic novels and two volumes of juvenile verse. In the fall of 1810 Shelley entered University College, Oxford, where he enlisted his fellow student Thomas Jefferson Hogg as a disciple. But in March 1811, University College expelled both Shelley and Hogg for refusing to admit Shelley’s authorship of *The Necessity of Atheism*. Hogg submitted to his family, but Shelley refused to apologize to his.

Late in August 1811, Shelley eloped with Harriet Westbrook, the younger daughter of a London tavern owner; by marrying her, he betrayed the acquisitive plans of his grandfather and father, who tried to starve him into submission but only drove the strong-willed youth to rebel against the established order. Early in 1812, Shelley, Harriet, and her older sister Eliza Westbrook went to Dublin, where Shelley circulated pamphlets advocating political rights for Roman Catholics, autonomy for Ireland, and freethinking ideals. The couple traveled to Lynmouth, Devon, where Shelley issued more political pamphlets, and then to North Wales, where they spent almost six months in 1812–13.

Lack of money finally drove Shelley to moneylenders in London, where in 1813 he issued *Queen Mab*, his first major poem—a nine-canto mixture of blank verse and lyric measures that attacks the evils of the past and present (commerce, war, the eating of meat, the church, monarchy, and marriage) but ends with resplendent hopes for humanity when freed from these vices. In June 1813 Harriet Shelley gave birth to their daughter Ianthe, but a year later Shelley fell in love with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, daughter of William Godwin and his first wife, née Mary Wollstonecraft. Against Godwin’s objections, Shelley and Mary Godwin eloped to France on July 27, 1814, taking with them Mary’s stepsister Jane (later “Claire”) Clairmont. Following travels through France, Switzerland, and Germany, they returned to London, where they were shunned by the Godwins and most other friends. Shelley dodged creditors until the birth of his son Charles (born to Harriet, November 30, 1814), his grandfather’s death (January 1815), and provisions of Sir Bysshe’s will forced Sir Timothy to pay Shelley’s debts and grant him an annual income.

Settling near Windsor Great Park in 1815, Shelley read the classics with Hogg and another friend, Thomas Love Peacock. He also wrote *Alastor; or The Spirit of Solitude*, a blank-verse poem, published with shorter poems in 1816, that warns idealists (like Shelley himself) not to abandon “sweet human love” and social improvement for the vain pursuit of evanescent dreams. By mid-May 1816, Shelley, Mary, and Claire Clairmont hurried to Geneva to intercept Lord Byron, with whom Claire had begun an affair. During this memorable summer, Shelley composed the poems “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and “Mont Blanc,” and Mary began her novel *Frankenstein*. Shelley’s party returned to England in September, settling in Bath. Late in the year, Harriet Shelley drowned herself in London, and on December 30, 1816, Shelley and Mary were married with the Godwins’ blessing. But a Chancery Court decision declared Shelley unfit to raise Ianthe and Charles (his children by Harriet), who were placed in foster care at his expense.

In March 1817 the Shelleys settled near Peacock at Marlow, where Shelley wrote his twelve-canto romance-epic *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City* and Mary Shelley finished *Frankenstein*. They compiled *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* jointly from the letters and journals of their trips to Switzerland, concluding with “Mont Blanc.” In November, *Laon and Cythna* was suppressed by its printer and publisher, who feared that Shelley’s idealized tale of a peaceful national revolution, bloodily suppressed by a league of king and priests, violated the laws against blasphemous libel. After revisions, it was reissued in 1818 as *The Revolt of Islam*.

Because Shelley’s health suffered from the climate and his financial obligations outran his resources, the Shelleys and Claire Clairmont went to Italy, where Byron was residing. They reached Milan in April 1818 and proceeded to Pisa and Leghorn (Livorno). That summer, at Bagni di Lucca, Shelley translated Plato’s *Symposium* and wrote his own essay “On Love.” He also completed a modest poem entitled *Rosalind and Helen*, in which he imagines his destiny in the poet-reformer “Lionel,” who—imprisoned for radical activity—dies young after his release.

Thus far, Shelley's literary career had been politically oriented. *Queen Mab*, the early poems first published in 1796 as *The Esdaile Notebook*, *Laon and Cythna*, and most of his prose works were devoted to reforming society; and even *Alastor, Rosalind and Helen*, and the personal lyrics voiced the concerns of an idealistic reformer who is disappointed or persecuted by an unreceptive society. But in Italy, far from the daily irritations of British politics, Shelley deepened his understanding of art and literature and, unable to reshape the world to conform to his vision, he concentrated on embodying his ideals within his poems. His aim became, as he wrote in "Ode to the West Wind," to make his words "Ashes and sparks" as from "an unextinguished hearth," thereby transforming subsequent generations and, through them, the world. Later, as he became estranged from Mary Shelley, he portrayed even love in terms of aspiration, rather than fulfillment: "The desire of the moth for the star,/ Of the night for the morrow,/ The devotion to something afar/ From the sphere of our sorrow."

In August 1818, Shelley and Byron again met in Venice; the Shelleys remained there or at Este through October 1818. During their stay, little Clara Shelley (b. 1817) became ill and died. In "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills" (published with *Rosalind and Helen*), Shelley writes how visions arising from the beautiful landscape seen from a hill near Este had revived him from despair to hopes for the political regeneration of Italy, thus transforming the scene into "a green isle. . . / In the deep wide sea of Misery." He also began *Julian and Maddalo*—in which Byron ("Maddalo") and Shelley debate human nature and destiny—and drafted Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*. In November 1818 the Shelleys traveled through Rome to Naples, where they remained until the end of February 1819.

Settling next at Rome, Shelley continued *Prometheus Unbound* and outlined *The Cenci*, a tragedy on the Elizabethan model based on a case of incestuous rape and patricide in sixteenth-century Rome. He completed this drama during the summer of 1819 near Leghorn, where the Shelleys fled in June after their other child, William Shelley (b. 1816), died from malaria. Shelley himself terms *The Cenci* "a sad reality," contrasting it with earlier "visions . . . of the beautiful and just." Memorable characters, classic five-act structure, powerful and evocative language, and moral ambiguities still make *The Cenci* theatrically effective. Even so, it is a less notable achievement than *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama*, which Shelley completed at Florence in the autumn of 1819, near the birth of Percy Florence Shelley, Mary Shelley's only surviving child. Both plays appeared about 1820.

In *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley inverts the plot of a lost play by Aeschylus in a poetic masterpiece that combines supple blank verse with a variety of complex lyric measures. In Act I, Prometheus, tortured on Jupiter's orders for having given mankind the gift of moral freedom, recalls his earlier curse of Jupiter and forgives him ("I wish no living thing to suffer pain"). By eschewing revenge, Prometheus, who embodies the moral will, can be reunited with his beloved Asia, a spiritual ideal transcending humanity; her love prevents him from becoming another tyrant when Jupiter is overthrown by the mysterious power known as Demogorgon. Act II traces Asia's awakening and journey toward Prometheus, beginning with her descent into the depths of nature to confront and question Demogorgon. Act III depicts the overthrow of Jupiter and the union of Asia and Prometheus, who—leaving Jupiter's throne vacant—retreat to a cave from which they influence the world through ideals embodied in the creative arts. The end of the act describes the renovation of both human society and the natural world. Act IV opens with joyful lyrics by spirits who describe the benevolent transformation of the human consciousness that has occurred. Next, other spirits hymn the beatitude of humanity and nature in this new millennial age; and finally, Demogorgon returns to tell all creatures that, should the fragile state of grace be lost, they can restore their moral freedom through these "spells":

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;
To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates.

Prometheus Unbound, which was the keystone of Shelley's poetic achievement, was written after he had been chastened by "sad reality" but before he began to fear that he had failed to reach an audience. Published with it were some of the poet's finest and most hopeful shorter poems, including "Ode to Liberty," "Ode to the West Wind," "The Cloud," and "To a Sky-Lark."

While completing *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*, Shelley reacted to news of the Peterloo Massacre (August 1819) in England by writing *The Masque of Anarchy* and several radical songs that he hoped would rouse the British people to active but nonviolent political protest. Later in 1819 he sent to England Peter Bell the Third, which joins literary satire of William Wordsworth's *Peter Bell* to attacks on corruptions in British society, and he drafted *A Philosophical View of Reform*, his longest (though incomplete) prose work, urging moderate reform to

prevent a bloody revolution that might lead to new tyranny. Too radical to be published during Shelley's lifetime, *The Masque of Anarchy* appeared after the reformist elections of 1832, *Peter Bell the Third* and the political ballads in 1839–40, and *A Philosophical View of Reform* not until 1920.

After moving to Pisa in 1820, Shelley was stung by hostile reviews into expressing his hopes more guardedly. His "Letter to Maria Gisborne" in heroic couplets and "The Witch of Atlas" in ottava rima (both 1820; published 1824) combine the mythopoeic mode of *Prometheus Unbound* with the urbane self-irony that had emerged in *Peter Bell the Third*, showing Shelley's awareness that his ideals might seem naive to others. Late that year, *Oedipus Tyrannus*; or, *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, his satirical drama on the trial for adultery of Caroline (estranged wife of King George IV), appeared anonymously but was quickly suppressed. In 1821, however, Shelley reasserted his uncompromising idealism. *Epipsychidion* (in couplets) mythologizes his infatuation with Teresa ("Emilia") Viviani, a convent-bound young admirer, into a Dantesque fable of how human desire can be fulfilled through art. His essay *A Defence of Poetry* (published 1840) eloquently declares that the poet creates humane values and imagines the forms that shape the social order: thus each mind recreates its own private universe, and "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World." *Adonais*, a pastoral elegy in Spenserian stanzas, commemorates the death of John Keats by declaring that, while we "decay / Like corpses in a charnel," the creative spirit of *Adonais*, despite his physical death, "has outsoared the shadow of our night."

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.

The verse drama *Hellas* (published 1822) celebrates the Greek revolution against Turkish rule and reiterates the political message of *Laon and Cythna*—that the struggle for human liberty can be neither totally defeated nor fully realized, since the ideal is greater than its earthly embodiments.

After Byron's arrival in Pisa late in 1821, Shelley, inhibited by his presence, completed only a series of urbane, yet longing lyrics—most addressed to Jane Williams—during the early months of 1822. He began the drama "Charles the First," but soon abandoned it. After the Shelleys and Edward and Jane Williams moved to Lerici, Shelley began "The Triumph of Life," a dark fragment on which he was at work until he sailed to Leghorn to welcome his friend Leigh Hunt, who had arrived to edit a periodical called *The Liberal*. Shelley and Edward Williams drowned on July 8, 1822, when their boat sank during the stormy return voyage to Lerici.

Mary Shelley faithfully collected her late husband's unpublished writings, and by 1840, aided by Hunt and others, she had disseminated his fame and most of his writings. The careful study of Shelley's publications and manuscripts has since elucidated his deep learning, clear thought, and subtle artistry. Shelley was a passionate idealist and consummate artist who, while developing rational themes within traditional poetic forms, stretched language to its limits in articulating both personal desire and social altruism.