

WRITERS' GALLERY



PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY
(1792–1822)

LIFE

Early years Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 into a prosperous aristocratic family. He was educated at Oxford where his political and philosophical readings led him to co-write a dissertation, *The Necessity of Atheism*, the first open profession of atheism to be printed in England, for which the Oxford authorities expelled him. Shelley's father demanded a public retraction of the pamphlet, but Shelley refused and instead eloped to Scotland with the sixteen-year-old daughter of a coffee house proprietor. This caused a permanent break with his family.

Political writings The couple spent some time in Ireland, where Shelley got involved in promoting political rights for Catholics.

He returned to Wales, where he tried to set up a commune of 'like spirits'. During this period he wrote pamphlets promoting 'free love' and condemning, among other things, royalty, meat-eating and religion. In 1813 he published his first major poem, *Queen Mab*, which contained many of his early political and philosophical ideas.

A tempestuous life In 1814 he moved to London, where he came under the influence of the philosopher William Godwin and fell in love with his sixteen-year-old daughter, Mary. He left his wife, Harriet, who had just had their first child and was expecting a second. The death of his grandfather temporarily solved Shelley's financial problems and allowed him and Mary to elope abroad accompanied by Mary's fifteen-year-old stepsister, Jane 'Claire' Clairmont.

Having travelled around Europe, the three settled in Geneva where, in the summer of 1816, they were joined by Lord Byron (► pp. 32–39), who became Claire's lover. It was during this period of relative tranquillity that Shelley composed some of his best poems. Mary gave birth to their son, William, and began work on her novel, *Frankenstein* (► pp. E88–95).

In the autumn of 1816 Harriet drowned herself in Hyde Park in London, so Shelley was free to marry Mary. He returned to England and tried to win custody of his two children by his first marriage, but his reputation as an atheist worked against him. During his time in England he associated with Keats and other literary figures, and worked on political pamphlets and essays.

Self-exile in Italy Disillusioned with Britain, in debt and suffering from ill-health, Shelley moved with his family to Italy, where he wrote the deeply melancholic *Stanzas Written in Dejection* and *Prometheus Unbound*, a lyrical drama in four acts.

The death of his adored son 'Will-mouse' was a personal tragedy and caused his wife Mary to have a nervous breakdown. The family settled in Tuscany. The summer of 1819 witnessed an extraordinary burst of creative energy. Shelley wrote some beautiful lyrics including *To a Skylark*, *The Cloud* and perhaps his best-loved poem, *Ode to the West Wind* (► Text E14). His political writing was inspired by the news from England and included the sonnet *England 1819* (► Text E16). The period at Pisa saw the birth of his youngest son, Percy Florence, and the publication of his famous *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). In 1822 Shelley moved his family to Lerici. In August 1822 he was drowned in the bay of La Spezia. His body was cremated on the beach at Viareggio in the presence of Byron and other close friends.

WORKS

Queen Mab and The Revolt of Islam Shelley's early works are characterised by intense political passion. In the poem *Queen Mab*, for example, Shelley attacks such 'evils' as commerce, the monarchy, marriage, religion and the eating of meat. In place of these vices he proposes republicanism, free love, atheism and vegetarianism. *The Revolt of Islam* is a long allegoric poem which transposes a highly personalised version of the French Revolution into an Oriental setting. The poem contains many autobiographical references, and introduces the theme of struggle and renewal which is present in much of his later work.

Italian period (1818–1822) Shelley's writings during his period in Italy include some of his finest work:

The Cenci (1819), a verse tragedy based on the true story of Beatrice Cenci, who was executed for murdering her father in Rome at the end of the sixteenth century. The story, which involved incest and atheism, fascinated Shelley and so he made it the basis of a play which shows strong Shakespearean influences.

Prometheus Unbound (1820): a lyrical drama in four acts. Prometheus, the giant who in Greek mythology stole fire from heaven and gave it to man, becomes a hero who embodies the moral salvation of Man from tyranny.

Odes The year 1819 also saw the composition of some of Shelley's finest lyrics: *Ode to Liberty*, *The Cloud*, *To a Skylark* and *Ode to the West Wind*. The latter is considered by many critics to be Shelley's greatest short poem. In it the poet asks the spirit of the West Wind to be both destroyer and preserver, and to regenerate hope and energy in Nature, in the poet himself and in mankind in general. It is written in five majestic stanzas, each taking the form of a sonnet. The musical patterns, which are built on *internal rhyme**, *assonance** and *run-on lines**, clearly show the poet's mastery of his art.

A Defence of Poetry (1821) is an essay in which Shelley argues that poetry can reform the world. In it he claims that the poet is a missionary, a prophet and a leader who, through his quest for the eternal truths of beauty, can show the way to a better society.

Reputation As a writer, Shelley has been criticised for his obscure symbolism, intellectual arrogance and intense self-pity. However, in his greatest works he transcends these limitations and conveys a message of hope and aspiration through strikingly beautiful prose and poetry.

TASK

The many personal tragedies he experienced did not deter Shelley from spreading his message of hope for a better world. Discuss this statement, making reference to the information you have read about his life and works.