

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822),



Shelley was one of the younger generation of English Romantic poets.. Like his friend, Byron, his lifestyle earned him great disapproval. He drew no essential distinction between poetry and politics, and his work reflected the radical ideas and revolutionary optimism of the era. He rebelled against English politics and conservative values. Like many poets of his day, Shelley often used mythological themes and figures from Greek poetry He believed that hope frees the imagination.

**"The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"**
(from 'Ode to the West Wind', 1819)

Shelley was born in Sussex, into a wealthy, conservative family. In 1810 he entered Oxford University but was expelled at the end of his first year for publishing *THE NECESSITY OF ATHEISM*, which he wrote with another student. Shelley's father continued to pay him a small annual allowance but took away his inheritance after he eloped with 16-year old Harriet Westbrook, the daughter of a London hotel owner. The pair spent the following two years travelling in England and Ireland, distributing pamphlets and speaking against political injustice. Shelley tried to set up a small community of free spirits. He moved to Wales after finding out that he was watched by Home Office spies because of his radical activities and writings. While living there he was attacked by a shepherd who fired three shots at him. Shelley continued his nomadic living and published in 1813 his first important poem, the atheistic *QUEEN MAB*.

**"How wonderful is Death,
Death and his brother sleep!"**
(from *Queen Mab*, 1813)

The poet's first marriage was a failure. In 1814 Shelley traveled abroad with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, the daughter of the philosopher and anarchist William Godwin, and Mary's young stepsister Jane Clairmont. During this journey Shelley wrote an unfinished novella, *THE ASSASSINS* (1814). The combined journal, *SIX WEEKS' TOUR*, reworked by Mary Shelley, appeared in 1817. After their return to London, Shelley came into an annual income under his grandfather's will. His wife Harriet drowned herself in 1816. Three weeks later, Shelley married Mary Wollstonecraft. His favorite son William was born in 1816 - William died a few years later in Rome.

**"The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,
The life that wears, the spirit that creates
One object, and one form, and builds thereby
A sepulchre for its eternity."**

(from 'To Divide is Not to Take Away')

Shelley spent the summer of 1816 with Lord Byron at Lake Geneva, where Byron had an affair with Clairmont. Shelley composed *HYMN TO INTELLECTUAL BEAUTY* and *MONT BLANC*. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley started her famous novel *Frankenstein*. In 1817 Shelley published his political pamphlet *THE REVOLT OF ISLAM*, a poem, where the principal characters, originally brother and sister, become lovers. In the poem 'Ozymandias' (1818) Shelley commented on the fleeting nature of fame and power. Ozymandias is the Greek name for King Ramses II of Egypt. His ruined statue is in the desert. On the pedestal is written: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" but there is nothing to see but sand.

In 1818 the Shelleys and Clairmont moved to Italy, where Byron was living. In 1819 they went to Italy. Shelley's works from this period include *JULIAN AND MADDALO*, an exploration of his relations with Byron, *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*, a lyrical drama drawn from the classic Greek dramatist Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. **"Peace is in the grave. / The grave hides all things beautiful and good: / I am a God and cannot find it there."** *THE CENCI* was a five-act tragedy based on the history of a 16th-century Roman family, and *THE MASK OF ANARCHY* was a political protest which was written after a massacre **"One by one, and two by two / He tossed them human hearts to chew."**

In 1822 Shelley began to write *THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE*. He sailed to welcome a friend arriving in another city. Shelley had never learnt to swim or sail. He had forecast his death by drowning many times. During the stormy return voyage his small boat sank and Shelley drowned on July 8, 1822. The fish-eaten bodies were washed ashore. In the presence of Lord Byron, they were burned on the beach - his heart was given to his wife, who carried it with her in a silken shroud everywhere she went for the rest of her life. Shelley was later buried in Rome. There is a rumor that an old Italian seaman confessed on his deathbed that he had been a crewmember on a boat that collided intentionally with Shelley's ship in order to steal money hidden on board.