

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Born: August 04, 1792 in Field Place, England

Died: July 08, 1822 in Viareggio, Italy

Other Names: Victor; The Hermit of Marlow

Nationality: British

Occupation: Poet

The English romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) ranks as one of the greatest lyric poets in the history of English literature.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born at Field Place near Horsham, Sussex, on August 4, 1792. He was the first son of a wealthy country squire. Shelley as a boy felt persecuted by his hardheaded and practical-minded father, and this abuse may have first sparked the flame of protest which, during his Eton years (1804-1810), earned him the name of "Mad Shelley." In the course of his first and only year at Oxford (1810-1811), Shelley and his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg issued a pamphlet provocatively entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*. Their "atheism" was little more than a hieroglyph connoting their general revulsion against establishment authoritarianism. However, both students were expelled from the university.

This event--soon combined with the influence of *Political Justice* by anarchist reformer William Godwin--merely intensified Shelley's rebelliousness against accepted notions of law and order, both in his private life and in the body politic. In the summer of 1811 Shelley met and married Harriet Westbrook, and he tried to set up, with her and Hogg, one of those triangular relationships that were to become characteristic of his love life, presumably because he saw in them a way to materialize his noble ideal of freedom in love and togetherness in human relationships. In the early months of 1812 Shelley evinced more than theoretical interest in the Irish cause, another manifestation of his desire for political reform.

Shelley's First Poems

Shelley attempted to convey his views on these and sundry other topics in *Queen Mab* (1813), a juvenile allegorical romance that, nevertheless, contained the germ of his mature philosophy: the ontological notion that throughout the cosmos there is "widely diffused/A spirit of activity and life," an omnipresent nonpersonal energy that, unless perverted by man's lust for power, can lead mankind to utopia.

By the summer of 1814 Shelley had become closely involved with Godwin, his debts, and his daughter Mary. For a brief while, the poet contemplated settling down with both Mary (as his "sister") and Harriet (as his wife); but the latter did not agree, and in late July Shelley eloped to the Continent with Mary, taking along her half sister, Claire Clairmont.

Shelley's *Alastor*

Back in England, Shelley was increasingly driven to the realization that utopia was not just around the

corner, and this may have prompted the writing of *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude* in December 1815. This ambiguous poem is a dialectical analysis of the tragic irony in the poet's fate as he is caught between the allurements of extreme idealism and his awareness that the very nature of man and the world precludes the achievement of his highest purpose. *Alastor* represents a transient but necessary phase in Shelley's evolution. He was henceforth to return with unrelenting determination to his dual poetic task of defining the romantic ideal of universal harmony and of striving to bring about the reign of love and freedom in human society.

The first fruits of this ripening were the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and *Mont Blanc*, which were planned in 1816, during a stay in Geneva. Both poems constitute an impressive statement of Shelley's fundamental belief in an everlasting, benevolent "Spirit," the hidden source of splendor and harmony in nature and of moral activity in man.

The Revolt of Islam

The winter of 1816/1817 was a period of great emotional disturbance for Shelley. Harriet died, presumably by suicide, in December, and the courts refused to grant Shelley the custody of the two children she had borne him. In addition, he was beginning to worry about his health. However, there were encouragements as well. Partly thanks to Leigh Hunt (to whom he gave financial help with his customary generosity), Shelley was gaining some recognition as an original and powerful poet.

During the spring and summer of 1817, Shelley composed his most ambitious poem to date, *The Revolt of Islam*. In this work the crude allegorical didacticism of *Queen Mab* gave way to genuine, although at times still turgid, symbolism. The theme of love between man and woman was adroitly woven into the wider pattern of mankind's love-inspired struggle for brotherhood. Like the French Revolution, the failure of which had preoccupied Shelley for a long time, *The Revolt of Islam* ends in disaster. But the poet had now come to a mature insight, absent from *Alastor*, into the complex interplay of good and evil. Man's recognition of his boundaries is the first step to wisdom and inner liberty; martyrdom does not put an end to hope, for it is a victory of the spirit and a vital source of inspiration. *The Revolt of Islam* illustrates a discovery that often signaled the romantic poet's accession to wisdom and that John Keats described, in April 1819, as the recognition of "how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul."

Exile and Prometheus Unbound

In March 1818 the Shelleys (still accompanied by Claire Clairmont) left England, never to return. The bulk of the poet's output was produced in Italy in the course of the last four years of his short life. Though life in Italy had its obvious rewards, this period was by no means one of undiluted happiness for Shelley. He was increasingly anxious about his health; he was beginning to resent the social ostracism that had made him an exile; exile itself was at times hard to bear, even though the political and social situation in England was most unattractive; and his son William died in June 1819.

However, although a note of despondency can be perceived in some of his minor poems, such as the *Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples*, the major ventures of Shelley's later years testify to the relentless energy of an imaginative mind steadily concerned with fundamentals and ever eager to diversify its modes of expression. In *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-1819), Shelley turned to mythical drama to convey, in a more sensitive and complex way, the basic truth that had been expressed

through the narrative technique of *The Revolt of Islam*. Moreover, the same dialectical reconciliation of the puzzling dualities of life received more purely lyrical shape in the *Ode to the West Wind* of October 1819.

Dramas and Social Tracts

Like the other romantic poets, Shelley was aware of the limitations of lyrical poetry as a medium of mass communication. He, too, endeavored to convey his message to a larger audience, and he experimented with stage drama in *The Cenci* (1819), a lurid but carefully constructed tragedy that illustrates the havoc wrought by man's Jupiterian lust for power, both physical and mental, in the sphere of domestic life.

Shelley's interest, however, lay in wider issues, which he now began to tackle in unexpectedly robust satires and with scathing polemical aggressiveness, venting his social indignation in the stirring oratory of *The Masque of Anarchy* (1819); in *Peter Bell the Third* (1819), a parody of William Wordsworth and an ironic comment on the elder poet's political and artistic disintegration; in *Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swell-foot the Tyrant* (1820), a mock tragedy on the royal family; and in *Hellas* (1821). The last of his major political poems, *Hellas* celebrates the Greek war of liberation, in which Lord Byron was involved in more active ways; it crowns a large series of minor poems in which Shelley, throughout his writing career, had hailed the resurgent spirit of liberty, not only among the oppressed classes of England but also among the oppressed nations of the world.

Final Poems and Prose Works

Shelley's concern with promoting the cause of freedom was genuine, but his personality found a more congenial outlet in his "visionary rhymes," in which the peculiar, dematerialized, yet highly sensuous quality of his imagery embodied his almost mystical concepts of oneness and love, of poetry and brotherhood, without destroying their ethereal ideality. Such themes remained the fountainhead of his inspiration to the last, but--as he was nearing 30--with a more urgent, yet less strident sense of the unbridgeable gap between the ideal and the real. He conveyed this sense with poignantly subdued elegiac tones in *The Sensitive Plant* (1820) and in the poem that he composed on the death of John Keats, *Adonais* (1821).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Wordsworth had been about the same age, some 20 years earlier, when they had expressed, in *Dejection* and the *Immortality Ode*, their disenchanting consciousness and stoical acceptance of the decay that life and experience had brought to their visionary powers. Shelley too, it seems, came to be affected with a similar dismaying sense of fading imagination; his response, however, was significantly different from theirs. Far from submitting to the desiccating consequences of growth, he wrote the *Defence of Poetry* (1821), one of the most eloquent prose assessments of the poet's unique relation to the eternal. And, in 1822, he focused on the poet's relation to earthly experience in *The Triumph of Life*, which T.S. Eliot considered his "greatest though unfinished poem." This work contains an impassioned denunciation of the corruption wrought by worldly life, whose "icy-cold stare" irresistibly obliterates the "living flame" of imagination.

Shelley's death by drowning in the Gulf of Spezia near Lerici, Italy, on July 8, 1822, spared him--perhaps mercifully--the hardening of the spirit that, in his view, had destroyed Wordsworth.

In the twentieth century several of Shelley's works were adapted for film and television. These include the 1986 television miniseries *Zastrozzi: A Romance* and the horror movie *Gothic* that same year.

Further Readings

- Newman Ivey White, *Shelley* (2 vols., 1940), is still the standard biography. Other biographical studies include Edward Dowden, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1909); Edmund Charles Blunden, *Shelley: A Life Story* (1947); A. B. C. Whipple, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: The Final Years of Byron and Shelley* (1964); Jean Overton Fuller, *Shelley: A Biography* (1968); and George Bornstein, *Yeats and Shelley* (1970). A convenient introduction for the general reader is Desmond King-Hele, *Shelley: His Thought and Work* (1960).
- For general critical studies of the poetry see Carlos H. Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (1948); Peter Butter, *Shelley's Idols of the Cave* (1954); Neville Rogers, *Shelley at Work: A Critical Inquiry* (1956; 2d ed. 1967); Milton T. Wilson, *Shelley's Later Poetry: A Study of His Prophetic Imagination* (1957); Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959); Ross Greig Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (1964); and George M. Ridenour, ed., *Shelley: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1965).
- Other aspects of Shelley's thought are studied in Ellsworth Barnard, *Shelley's Religion* (1936); Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (1950); Earl J. Schulze, *Shelley's Theory of Poetry: A Reappraisal* (1966); and John Pollard Guinn, *Shelley's Political Thought* (1969). More specifically concerned with Shelley's philosophy are A. M. D. Hughes, *The Nascent Mind of Shelley* (1947); J. A. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley* (1951); and C. E. Pulos, *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism* (1954).
- Since Harold Leroy Hoffman wrote *An Odyssey of the Soul: Shelley's "Alastor"* (1933), several studies have been devoted to single works: Bennett Weaver, *Prometheus Unbound* (1957); Donald H. Reiman, *Shelley's "The Triumph of Life"* (1965); and Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound": A Critical Reading* (1965). For assessments of Shelley's influence and reputation see Sylva Norman, *Flight of the Skylark: The Development of Shelley's Reputation* (1954), and Roland A. Duerksen, *Shelleyan Ideas in Victorian Literature* (1966).
- "Percy Bysshe Shelley," IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0791222/> (November 14, 2011).

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