

MARY SHELLEY



Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born on August 30, 1797 to William Godwin, an essayist, philosopher, and political activist, and Mary Wollstonecraft, a feminist activist who died less than two weeks after Mary's birth. With two young daughters Mary and Fanny in his care, William sought companionship from neighbor Mary Jane Clairmont, an unmarried mother of two children William and Claire (Jane).

In addition to the teachings of a governess and tutor, Mary Godwin had access to the family's robust library. Mary was exposed to the thoughts and teachings from her famous father's visitors and followers including acknowledged great minds of the time.

Mary was often at odds with her stepmother and suffered whippings for impertinence. Therefore, Mary found solace in reading and learning often with her stepsister. When the relationship with her stepmother became unmanageable, Mary was sent to live with her fathers' friends in Scotland.

Between June 1812 and March 1814, Mary lived in Scotland. Upon her visits to London, she met and began a relationship with Percy Bysshe Shelley, who idolized her father. In June 1814, Mary and Percy left

England for France to forge a life together. Though Percy Shelley was still married to his first wife, Harriet Westbrook, he proposed marriage to Mary as soon as he divorced. Later that year, the couple returned to England and lived in hiding to avoid his first wife and previous back debts. Percy petitioned Mary's father William for relief of his debt.

In February 1815, Mary gave birth to a premature daughter who died the following month. The couple settled in Bishopgate, England, and a second child William was born.

In the summer of 1816, they traveled through continental Europe. While staying in Switzerland, the couple and Mary's stepsister, Claire, rented a house near another British writer Lord Byron. The summer proved wet and unseasonable; Byron suggested the group take to writing ghost stories to pass the time. During this contest, Mary Shelley drafted the short story of *Frankenstein*. With the encouragement of Percy, the tale took on a greater length. Mary's story, the best of the group, was so frightening to Byron that he ran "shrieking in horror" from the room. (*Frankenstein* was published anonymously in 1818. Since Percy wrote the Preface and book was dedicated to his mentor William Godwin he was presumed to be the author.)

In December 1816, Shelley's first wife Harriet drowned herself. Within two weeks, Percy and Mary were married in St. Mildred's Church in London on December 30th. Early the next year, the couple moved to Marlow, England where their third child Clara Everina was born. To escape increasing debt and to improve Percy's health, the family left England and moved to Italy where both of the surviving children died. Clara died in September 1818, and William died in 1819. Mary, now in her early twenties, was miserable. Her depression eased when her son Percy Florence was born in Florence, Italy, in November 1819. He would become the only Shelley child to survive to adulthood. Mary began a new novel, *Valperga*.

Tragedy struck on July 8, 1822, when Percy drowned during a shipwreck near Genoa, Italy. With her one surviving child, Mary was a widow at age 24. She spent the rest of her life writing original works and tending to the works of her late husband. She became the keeper of Percy Bysshe Shelley's fame and was editor of his posthumous works. Percy's works helped to support Mary and Percy Florence. Edited by Mary, Percy's

Posthumous Poems was published in 1824. Mary negotiated with her father-in-law Sir Timothy Shelley, who did not want his son's works published or his family's name published in the press during the remainder of his lifetime. *The Last Man* (1826) is Shelley's best-known work after *Frankenstein* because it tackles the subject of mass catastrophe in society.

In 1841, her son graduated from Trinity College, and he asked his mother to accompany him on a tour of Italy and Europe. During her travels, she compiled notes about her travels. Her son married in 1848, and Mary lived with him and his wife until she died on February 1, 1851 in London. Mary was buried in Bournemouth, England.

Sources:

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/mary-shelley-biography>

<http://quantumleap.indianahumanities.org/frankenstein/>

Brantley, Margaret, *Supplementary Materials of Frankenstein by Mary Shelley*, Simon and Schuster Paperback copyright 2004

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