

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

Along with Lord Byron and John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley is among the most respected and admired of the second generation of English Romantic poets. Best known for his extended visionary poems, such as *Queen Mab* and the *Triumph of Life*, and his short verse poems (including “Ozymandias” and “Ode to the West Wind”), Shelley is also famous for his once controversial and radical political ideals and his often-proclaimed social idealism. He is perhaps best known, though, as the husband of the novelist Mary Shelley (author of *Frankenstein*, a novel which Percy Shelley is himself now credited with co-authoring).

While Shelley’s childhood was decidedly happy and rustic, his atheism and radical politics led to his expulsion from college and estrangement from family at an early age. His personal life was considered rather radical and controversial for his time, especially given his pronounced leftist political ideals and the abandonment of his first wife in favor of a woman named Mary Goodwin, who would become his second wife. Though he began composing and publishing poetry at a young age, Shelley’s career as poet did not truly get underway until he met the English poet Lord Byron in 1816. This meeting resulted in a life-long friendship between the two that served to inspire and influence some of Shelley’s finest poetry, including his great poems “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and “Mont Blanc.” Shelley was also a friend of the poet John Keats, for whom he wrote the elegy poem “Adonis.” Shelley drowned a month before his 30th birthday in a supposed boating accident that many, today, consider to be a possible murder by his political rivals.

Today, Shelley is considered by critics and readers to be among the greatest of the second generation of English Romantic poets. Unlike Lord Byron, though, Shelley did not receive full critical and popular recognition until after his death. Several generations of later poets and intellectuals—including, most notably, Karl Marx, George Bernard Shaw, and William Butler Yeats—were inspired by Shelley’s political and social idealism and radicalism. Shelley is also much admired for his lyrical and psychologically powerful poetry, which offers a striking, visceral style as well as strong messages on behalf of social justice, liberty, and non-violence.