

Mary Shelley

Early Life

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley was born on August 30, 1797, the daughter of two prominent radical thinkers of the Enlightenment. Her mother was the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and her father was the political philosopher William Godwin, best known for *An Inquiry Concerning Political Justice*. Unfortunately, Wollstonecraft died just ten days after her daughter's birth. Mary was raised by her father and stepmother Mary Jane Clairmont.

When she was 16 years old, Mary fell in love with the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who visited her father's house frequently. They eloped to France, as Shelley was already married. They eventually married after two years when Shelley's wife Harriet committed suicide.

The Writing of *Frankenstein*

In the summer of 1816, the Shelleys rented a villa close to that of Lord Byron in Switzerland. The weather was bad (Mary Shelley described it as "wet, ungenial" in her 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*), due to a 1815 eruption of a volcano in Indonesia that disrupted weather patterns around the world. Stuck inside much of the time, the company, including Byron, the Shelleys, Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont, and Byron's personal physician John Polidori, entertained themselves with reading stories from *Fantasmagoriana*, a collection of German ghost stories.

Inspired by the stories, the group challenged themselves to write their own ghost stories. The only two to complete their stories were Polidori, who published *The Vampyre* in 1819, and Mary Shelley, whose *Frankenstein* went on to become one of the most popular Gothic tales of all time. In her 1831 introduction, Shelley described the first inklings of her story: "I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion." Her novel, published in 1818 and revised and republished in 1831, is also often credited as one of the first science fiction novels.

Personal Life

After the deaths of three young children, Shelley gave birth to her son Percy Florence in 1819. Percy Florence would live to adulthood and eventually inherit the estate of his grandfather, Sir Timothy Shelley. In 1822, Shelley's husband Percy Bysshe Shelley was drowned with his friend Edward Williams when a sudden storm appeared while they were sailing from Livorno to Lerici in Italy. He was 29 years old.

Mary Shelley returned to England a year after her husband's death and supported herself and her son as a writer and editor. She wrote the novels *The Last Man* (1826), *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1835), and *Falkner* (1837) as well as numerous articles and stories. She also edited and promoted the works of her late husband. She lived her last years with her son and his wife and died in 1851, apparently of a brain tumor.

For more information

- Encyclopedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Wollstonecraft-Shelley>
- Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-wollstonecraft-shelley>
- British Library: <https://www.bl.uk/people/mary-shelley>
- National Portrait Gallery: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw05761/Mary-Wollstonecraft-Shelley>