**A short biography of Mary Shelley**

**Personal Background**

Mary Wollestonecraft (Godwin) Shelley was born on August 30, 1797 in London, England to philosopher William Godwin and feminist Mary Wollestonecraft; both her parents were noted writers in the 1800s. Her father's most famous book was Political Justice (1793), which is a critical look at society and the ethical treatment of the masses. Godwin's other popular book Caleb Williams (1794) examines class distinctions and the misuse of power by the ruling aristocracy. Mary Wollestonecraft, her mother, was a leading feminist writer who espoused her views in her famous work A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792). They married in 1797 to protect the rights of the forthcoming child. When their daughter Mary was born, William and Mary had only been married for five months. Four weeks after giving birth, Mary Wollestonecraft died of complications. Thus, Mary Shelley never knew her mother. Her father remarried a woman by the name of Mrs. Clairmont when the young Mary was four years old.

Mary's learned father, who had frequent guests in their home all through her formative years, guaranteed her education. A voracious reader, Mary borrowed books from her father's extensive library. She enjoyed writing at a young age, and her passion was to write stories intended for a very limited audience. The influence of her famous father's home cannot be understated with a constant stream of writers, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It was at home that Mary developed into a person of letters, following in the family tradition of writers and thinkers.

Between June 1812 and March 1814, Mary lived with relatives in Scotland. It was upon her return visits to London when she met Percy Bysshe Shelley, who idolized her father, and their relationship began. Mary and Percy left England for France in June 1814 to begin a life together. Shelley was still married to his first wife, Harriet Westbrook. Within four years of being married, Percy met Mary, and a new marriage was proposed as soon as the first marriage was dissolved. In late 1814, Mary and Percy returned to England and lived in hiding to avoid his first wife and previous back debts. It was at this time that Percy petitioned Mary's father William for relief of his debt.

In February 1815, Mary gave birth to a daughter, who was born prematurely and who subsequently died in March of the same year. The couple settled in Bishopgate, England and a second child, William, was born.

In the summer of 1816, a tour of continental Europe was proposed. At a stop 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. It was during this summer that the form for Frankenstein was to take shape. The story was first only a few pages, but 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 in 1818.

In November 1816, Fanny, Mary's half-sister, committed suicide. A few weeks later, in December 1816, Shelley's first wife Harriet also killed herself. Within two weeks, Percy and Mary were married in St. Mildred's Church in London on December 30, 1816. Early the next year, the couple moved to Marlow, England and a third child, Clara Everina, was born. In 1818, the Shelley's left England for Italy to escape mounting debt and to improve Percy's health. It was during this time that both small children died; Clara died in September 1818, and William died the following June, in 1819. Mary was miserable and disconsolate at 21 and 22 years of age. She did recover somewhat later in November 1819 when her son Percy was born in Florence, Italy. He would become the only Shelley child to survive to adulthood. Mary did not remain idle as a writer during this time, as she began a new novel, Valperga.

On July 8, 1822, Mary's life was forever altered when her husband was drowned at sea in a boating accident off the coast of Livorno (sometimes called Leghorn), Italy. By now, her life was seemingly connected to tragedy, with the deaths of three children, her mother, and her husband, and the suicides of Percy's former wife and Mary's half-sister.

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. This was done to raise the necessary funds to support herself and her son. In 1824, *Posthumous Poems* was published, which was edited by Mary. She had begun negotiations 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 again during 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 Mary died in London and was buried in Bournemouth, England.

[*https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/mary-shelley-biography-2*](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/mary-shelley-biography-2)

*Frankenstein* **was dreamed up (literally) by Mary Shelley while she was staying in Switzerland in 1816. This was a time of great scientific, political and social change. Knowledge of these developments, and Shelley's eventful life, will help you understand the novel:**

**Mary Shelley**

* Born in 1797, Mary was the daughter of William Godwin - a famous writer with *revolutionary* ideas - and Mary Wollstonecraft, herself a writer and arguably the world's first feminist.
* Her mother died days after giving birth to her - the first of many tragedies in Shelley's life. Some of these tragedies would later inspire events in *Frankenstein*.
* In 1812, Mary met the poet Percy Shelley. Percy and his wife Harriet were frequent visitors to the London home of Mary's father.
* Mary ran off to France with Percy in 1814. She gave birth to his child in 1815 - but the baby died just 12 days later.
* Harriet drowned herself in 1816, allowing Percy to marry Mary soon after. The general public was outraged.
* After coming up with the idea for her novel in Switzerland, *Frankenstein* was published two years later in 1818 - Mary was still only 20.
* Mary's second son, William, died aged three in 1821.
* Percy drowned in 1822.
* Mary and Percy's great friend, the writer and poet Lord Byron, died in 1824. Mary was devastated by this, and the loneliness caused by the death of so many of her friends and family.
* Mary died in 1851. Although she wrote many other books, none matched the success of *Frankenstein*.

**Age of revolution**

Mary Shelley was born into a world of scientific, artistic and political *revolution*. Her father and husband were famous radical thinkers and writers, and both of them (along with other important *philosophers* of the day) had a large influence on Mary and her novel.

One of her father's main ideas was that everyone should act only for the good of mankind; otherwise, selfishness would lead to the breakdown of society. This view influenced *Frankenstein* in that Victor largely thinks and acts only for himself, ignoring the wishes of the Monster (for example, by not creating a wife for it), thereby endangering mankind by giving it a reason to do harm. Victor is also a bad parent, deserving punishment for abandoning his creature.

Many people see this book as promoting the *revolutionary* ideas that dominated the political world at the time, since Victor challenges authority (God) by creating life himself. The Monster is also revolutionary in its hostility towards authority (its 'father'). Yet both the Monster and Victor are punished with death - leading other people to conclude that Shelley is critical of political revolution.

When writing this book, Mary was influenced by the scientific revolution of the time. She had heard about one man, Galvani, who had supposedly re-animated dead tissue, and another, Aldini, who had wired up a criminal's corpse to a battery so that his jaw appeared to move and a fist to clench. Such discoveries were discussed at the holiday home of the Shelleys in the weeks before *Frankenstein* was written.

**Literary background**

The most important literary style to influence the novel was *Gothic horror*. Mary said her story was born out of long days and nights on holiday with Percy, Byron and another friend, when persistent rain had kept them indoors with only the works of German Gothic writers for amusement. This led to the idea of a ghost-story contest, for which the young Mary wrote her initial draft, inspired by a nightmare she'd had. The Gothic features of the story include its horrific descriptions, use of overpowering emotions and exotic, often remote, settings.

Other writers to influence Mary were Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had read his poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to Mary when she was four. She later remembered being terrified by this, but used similar themes of discovery and isolation in her story. Another poem, *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, also inspired her. In *Frankenstein*, the Monster compares himself to the main character, Satan (the devil).

[*http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english\_literature/prosefrankenstein/0prose\_frankenstein\_contrev1.shtml*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/prosefrankenstein/0prose_frankenstein_contrev1.shtml)