

P. B. Shelley

Life

He was expelled from Cambridge after publishing the pamphlet

He married really young with Harriet Westbrook →they lived a nomadic life and moved around the UK

He spent some months in Ireland (which so not independent) →the Republic of Ireland (Eire) has existed since 1921 →before it was a british colony (partially)

The northern part (Ulster) was and still is part of the UK

In Ireland Shelley supported irish independentists and made political propaganda that supported the rebellion against UK →it was strange for a british citizen and a member of the upper class

He shared the radical and anti-colonial ideas of Byron

Harriet and Shelley had two children →when they returned to London, they eventually divorced →Shelley fell in love and eloped (run away for love) with Mary Godwin (who will become Mary Shelley)

They went to Switzerland and then Italy, where Shelley died

Mary was the daughter of two relevant british intellectuals of the time:

- William Godwin →radical philosopher known for elaborating the doctrine "radical idealism" = tyranny and monarchy were going to disappear and be replaced by democracy →unstoppable process started with the French Revolution
- Mary Wollstonecraft →proto-feminist (proto because she anticipated feminism, which became a social movement in the 20th century with suffragettes) →she wrote "A vindication of the rights of woman" and the main points are:
 - women lived in a situation of social inferiority and marginality due to their lack of proper education →and her daughter was educated by the father
 - in order to achieve the same rights of men, they had to be given access to education

Shelley was into philosophy and started to visit Godwin's house →he was one of his disciples →and here he meets Mary

Shelley's wife committed suicide because of the abandonment of the husband →he also wanted the custody of the children, but the judge denied it

His children were brought up by Shelley's parents

After Harriet's death he was a widower and was legally allowed to marry another woman →for this reason he married Mary

They had 3 children →2 died

Shelley died too, during a storm while he was sailing in Liguria → Mary became a widow and return to England

He was buried in the protestant cemetery of Rome

Works

Most famous: philosophical and lyrical poems (while Byron narrative)

- "Necessity of atheism" → see previous notes
- philosophical/meditative poems → "Mont Blanc" = meditative poem on nature and its sublime aspects + relationship between mankind and nature
- verse drama (like Byron) → plays written in poetry and philosophical → "The Cenci" and "Prometheus Unbound" → themes: political freedom, self sacrifice, fight against tyranny
 - Prometheus is the titan who rebelled against Zeus and stole the fire for humans
 - Cenci is set in renaissance Italy → the protagonist is a young woman named Beatrice Cenci (powerful aristocratic roman family) and takes place in Rome → she had a violent and abusive father, so she killed him → she knew she was going to be sentenced to death, but did it to free his family
 - both characters as symbols of titanism (rebellion against an unjust authority)
- lyrical poems → "Adonais", "Ozymandias", "Ode to the West Wind" → and reflect on freedom and how it is going to triumph over tyranny (radical idealism) → are all political except "Adonais":
 - it is an elegy = poem revolving around the theme of death, intended as both a personal loss of the speaker and a universal theme of mankind
 - it is about the death of John Keats (another member of the second gen. of british romantics) → he died at 25 and was Shelley's friend → he caught tuberculosis
 - Adonais is a mythological character, a young man killed by a wild boar → the gods turned the meadow into a bed of roses → Keats and Adonais both died of a premature death and are compared for this reason
- "A defence of poetry" → published in 1821 → it is an essay and written in prose

A defence of poetry

Peacock had written the essay "The four ages of poetry" →main point: in such an age of progress as the 19th century, poetry had become useless

Shelley disagreed and wrote this essay →here he:

- stressed the everlasting importance of poetry →it has to do with the sphere of emotions, which is something that characterizes humans
- defines poetry: "Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that comprehends all science."
- "It [poetry] exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed...it strips the veil of familiarity from the world" →same point of view of Wordsworth, "coloring effect of imagination" →here it is beauty
- define poets: "Poets...are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." →different from the one of Wordsworth, who says they are men among men →while Blake said that poets were prophets

Main themes

- religion →he was an atheist and God was for him a social construction →the king was considered legitimate because of God
- nature →mainly in its sublime aspects and its relationship with mankind
- politics (largely) →political freedom, showing titanism
- language and its limitations →typical of the romantics of 2nd gen.
- love →a force moving the world and believed in free love →he had different relationships
- was into science and had a passion for philosophy →he embraced Godwin's radical idealism, but he also embraced neoplatonism →he believes in two worlds: the material and the one of ideas →but he says that the material one is inferior but can be interesting anyway
- material reality is like a veil, like a "many-coloured glass" staining true reality →the material world is not dull and is interesting nevertheless