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# UNIT 31 THE POET OF VOLCANIC HOPE : P. B. SHELLEY

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## 31.0 OBJECTIVES

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The main objectives of this unit are to enable you,

- a) to appreciate the main events in Shelley's life, his ideas and character;
- b) to acquire a background for his major works;
- c) to appreciate the influence of certain persons and historical events on Shelley's life; and
- d) to prepare yourself for a study of Shelley's poetry in the next unit.

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## 31.1 INTRODUCTION

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'I believe' wrote Herbert Read in his essay 'In Defence of Shelley', 'that the knowledge which comes from a complete understanding of a poet's personality is the best basis for the appreciation of his poetry.' This view may not be universally true. Many people appreciate Homer, Valmiki, Vyasa, Tulsi and Aurobindo without a knowledge of their lives. The same can perhaps be said even about the poetries of William Blake and T.S.Eliot but can we be sure that a knowledge of their lives would not enrich our appreciation not only of the poetries of Blake and Eliot but also of the epic poets of the East and West. So much for the relevance of biography to the study of poetry in general.

The case of Wordsworth and even more Shelley is different. Shelley's poetry is, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, 'to an unusual degree, entangled in political thought, and on a political thought now generally unpopular.' Lewis went on :

His belief in the natural perfectibility of man justly strikes the Christian reader as foolishness; while, on the other hand, the sort of perfection he has in view is too ideal for dialectical materialists. His writings are too generous for our cynics; his life is too loose for our 'humanist' censors.

This unit will help you discover Shelley's unorthodox ideas and still more his so called 'loose' life. It will still more than that, force you to answer certain fundamental

questions about a good life which may not have puzzled you before. For, you cannot differ from I. A. Richards who wrote :

... the fact that a critic, however eminent, does not understand something, if a point at all, is a point against the critic, not against the poet.

And Richards continues,

As with his peers, when we judge Shelley, it is not Shelley who is judged.

So in reading Shelley you have to be watchful, as much of the poet as yourself, for your judgment on Shelley would at the same time be an observation on yourself, your beliefs, your attitudes.

Some of you may not read the whole of 31.2 at one go. You may read it sub-section by sub-section but read them consecutively. Some of you may like to read 31.2 a couple of times. Do as you consider proper. Answer the questions at the end of 31.2 after you have given yourself some time to consider the whole story in your mind once again.

In case you want to read the next unit on *The Triumph of Life* first you could do so but after having read it you may like to come back to this unit on Shelley's life. Hope you would enjoy reading about Shelley now and later his poem prescribed for you, in the next unit.

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## 31.2 SHELLEY : A BRIEF SKETCH OF HIS LIFE

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Shelley has remained a poet of contradictions of gargantuan proportions in so far as his influence on the intelligentsia is concerned. To Eliot, Shelley was humourless and pedantic. However, his friends found him 'full of life and fun'. Some considered Shelley a softie, others, thought of him as a villain. While D.H. Lawrence (1888-1935) took him to be 'transcendentally male', to Charles Kingsley (1819-75) he was 'utterly womanish'. While some early twentieth century critics thought that there was 'no brain work' in Shelley's poetry and that it was 'antipathetic to the play of the critical mind' others found him to have been 'the solitary intellectual'. 'His ideas' wrote Graham Hough in the fifties, 'come from his own mental processes, from study, from visions of the future or dreams of the past, not from the world around him...' While the Victorians looked upon him as 'the Divine' poet and found his lyrics 'absolutely perfect' his contemporary reviewers had called his work a 'dish of carrion', 'drivelling prose run mad' and 'the production of a fiend, ... calculated for the entertainment of devils in hell'. In fact a lot of the sympathy for or antipathy towards Shelley the poet is shaped by one's prejudice in favour of or against Shelley the man. For Shelley, although married twice, disapproved of matrimony, as well as royalty, non-vegetarian diet and religion. Although, like Byron, he came from a conservative background, like him Shelley was a republican, if not an anarchist.

### 31.2.1 Birth and childhood

Shelley shares with Byron the distinction of having been born in an old aristocratic family. Shelley's ancestors had been Sussex aristocrats since early in the seventeenth century. His grandfather Sir Bysshe Shelley made himself the richest man in Horsham, Sussex. However, his father Timothy Shelley was a conventional Whig M.P. (later baronet) who took his views from the Duke of Norfolk. The poet, born on 4 August, 1792, was his and Elizabeth (Pilford) Shelley's eldest child and thus in line for the baronetcy.



P.B. Shelley

Percy had four younger sisters and a baby brother. He loved to play with them and take them on his knees and tell stories out of books on which his own imagination had been fed. He took them to romp around in the fields, often dropping them across inconvenient fences. Once when he dropped his brother on a strawberry bed he called him a 'bad Bit'. On the northeast of Shelley's house was St. Bernard's Wood inhabited by an old dragon and a headless spectre and in the Warnham Pond lived a great tortoise. These and a snake that lived in the garden which was somehow killed by the gardener's scythe and an alchemist that lived in the garret were his constant subjects for childhood preoccupations. Young Shelley once dressed his sisters as fiends and led them in the garden at night with a fire stove flaming with chemicals. This interest grew as he learnt more about chemistry and electricity.

### 31.2.2 Education at Sion House Academy, Eton and Oxford

From the age of six until ten he learned Latin and Greek from Rev. Evan Edwards, a Welsh parson. In 1802 he went to Syon House Academy at Isleworth, near London. It was here that the scenes of the prison house began to close upon the growing boy. Medwin, his cousin and schoolfellow described Syon House 'a perfect hell' to Shelley where he developed the habit of sleepwalking for which he was punished.

The two years at Syon House, however, was only a foretaste of Eton, surrounded and persecuted as he was by adolescent boys and unsympathetic, hidebound masters. Shelley was sensitive, and deeply imaginative. He disliked sports and thus became, in the eyes of his fellows, 'Mad Shelley' and his existence at Eton was a little hell.

However, Eton and Syon House were visited by an amateur travelling lecturer called Adam Walker. We can gain an idea of his lectures from his *A System of Familiar Philosophy* (1799), a book with more than 500 quarto pages and hundreds of illustrations. Walker Exhibited his Orrery (a clockwork model of the planetary system, named thus after Charles Boyle, 4th Earl of Orrery) to the children. The objects, however, that fascinated Shelley the most were chemistry and electricity, perhaps owing to the possibility of noisy and spectacular experiments that revealed before him the secrets of nature.

Shelley went up to University College, Oxford in the autumn of 1810. However, by that time he had had *Zastrozzi* (1810), and *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* (with his beloved sister Elizabeth) published. *St. Irvyne or The Rosicrucian* a Gothic romance like *Zastrozzi* was published in 1811. Meanwhile the Oxford printers published his collection of poems 'The Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson'. The poem, *The Wandering Jew*, after it was returned by Campbell with discouragement was sent to Ballantyne and Co. of Edinburgh. However, the events moved too swiftly to admit of the Edinburgh company issuing the poem.

On the very first evening at Oxford in October 1810 Shelley met another beginner called Thomas Jefferson Hogg (1792-1862) from Norton, Yorkshire. The two of them instantly took such liking for one another that they spent their days and evenings together almost to the complete exclusion of all others. They were inevitably seen as oddities. The two friends, however, were quite unlike one another. Hogg was self-centered and worldly, self-confident and gross in nature. Shelley was one spark of the ideal in his life. Yet Hogg was devoted to him and they collaborated in writing *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811).

Having published the pamphlet they sent copies of it to the masters of the colleges and the bishops. When Shelley was called by the master and two-thirds of the Fellows of University College to answer queries regarding it he refused to reply and was 'contumacious'. So, Shelley was expelled from the university. When Hogg heard about it he too claimed a hand in the work and was expelled likewise.

The two friends left Oxford for London on March 26, 1811. Hogg, persuaded by his father, left Shelley. But the Medwins and Groves helped Shelley during the six weeks he had to spend in London. As Timothy Shelley would have nothing to do with a wayward and obdurate son Percy's sisters sent him their pocket-money through a friend called Harriet Westbrook. Harriet was the daughter of a retired tavern-keeper in London. Shelley, though interested in his 'little friend', as he called her, was not touched by her. However, in the meantime Harriet was reproached at school for being friendly with a youth of Shelley's principles and suffered minor annoyances.

By the middle of May 1811 a settlement was reached between Shelley and his father in which his maternal uncle Captain Pilford, who lived near Field Place and was always helpful to Shelley, played an important part. By that arrangement Shelley was to get an allowance of £ 200 a year and his entire freedom. Shelley was shocked that his father cared more for social conventions and had no real personal convictions. In July Shelley went to Wales, to visit his cousins, the Groves, where he briefly though violently fell ill. He recovered and was delighted with the mountain scenery, then new to him. During his walks here he once met a beggar whom he gave something and followed him a mile in order to enter into a conversation with him. Finally the beggar told him, 'I see by your dress that you are a rich man. They have injured me and mine a million times. You appear to me well intentioned, but I have no security of it while you live in such a house as that, or wear such clothes as those. It would be charity to quit me.' The incident evidently created a lasting impression on Shelley's mind.

On his last visit to Field Place he had met one Miss Hitchner, school-teacher of 29, who held a high place in his esteem and he began his long correspondence with her on metaphysics and education. The Westbrooks were also in Wales and Harriet continued to write to Shelley about her despondence, unhappiness at home, even contemplated suicide and capped it all with an expression of a desire for Shelley's protection. 'Her letters' Shelley wrote to Miss Hitchner, 'became more and more gloomy. At length one assumed a tone of such despair as induced me to leave Wales precipitately. I arrived in London. I was shocked at observing the alteration in her looks. Little did I divine its cause. She had become violently attached to me, and feared that I should not return her attachment. Prejudice made the confession painful.

It was impossible to avoid being much affected; I promised to unite my fate to hers.' It was obvious that there was no love on Shelley's side and he confessed as much to Hogg whose advice he sought regarding their marriage. The two friends had learned from Godwin that the institution of marriage was irrational. In these circumstances Shelley married Harriet on the 28th or 29th of August 1811 in Edinburgh. Harriet was 16 and Shelley 18 years of age. Hogg joined them on their holiday and with him the Shelleys came to York where he was studying law. Here Hogg tried to seduce Harriet who told this to Shelley and the newly wedded couple immediately fled the city.

### 31.2.3 Life with Harriet Westbrook

For long Shelley had cherished a wish to meet and be with the Lake Poets - Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. So he took a cottage at Keswick and was invited by the Duke of Norfolk to Greystoke. The duke had earlier interceded on his behalf with Timothy Shelley. Now Shelley was penniless and 'in danger of every day being deprived of the necessaries of life.' The condition became less precarious when in December Mr Westbrook allowed Harriet £200 a year and a month later Shelley's father made an equal allowance to him to prevent 'his cheating strangers.' At Greystoke Shelley had met Calvert who introduced him to Robert Southey (1774-1843). Shelley had always admired Southey and his *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) had long been his favourite. Shelley was to model his *Queen Mab* (1813) after Milton and *Thalaba*. 'Here is a man at Keswick', wrote Southey, 'who acts upon me as my own ghost would do; he is just what I was in 1794.' Southey also contributed to Shelley's domestic comfort in material ways. However, Shelley was somewhat disappointed with Southey's platitudes upon morality, faith and the impracticality of the youth.

It was at Keswick that occurred one of the first of personal assaults on Shelley. On 19 January 1812, at around seven in the evening there was some noise at Shelley's door. When he went to see what was happening he was struck to the ground and was stunned by a blow. It was understood that his chemical experiments had created suspicion among the people against him.

Earlier on on the third of the same month he had written to William Godwin whose *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* Shelley had read with the highest regard and veneration for the intellectual powers of the author. On the 16th he sent him a sketch of his own life.

While at Keswick Shelley's thoughts turned to Ireland and he contemplated going there for the sake of catholic emancipation. He wrote his, 'Address to the Irish People' and early in February set off for Dublin in spite of the dissuasion of Calvert and Godwin.

Fifteen hundred copies of Shelley's 'Address' were printed which he distributed freely in Dublin. He also wrote 'Proposals for an Association' which was published on March 2, 1812. Shelley had been introduced to Curran and through him he made himself known to the leaders. On the 28th of February he joined O'Connell in addressing the people and spoke for an hour. Shelley was greeted both with hisses and applause - applause for bringing out the wrongs of Ireland, hisses for his plea for religious toleration. In Dublin Shelley also involved himself in acts of practical philanthropy. However, Godwin dissuaded him from his activities. 'Shelley' Godwin wrote him, 'you are preparing a scene of blood.'

Shelley left Ireland on 4 April 1812 and settled ten days later at Nantgwilt near Cwm Elan, the seat of his cousins, the Groves. Here he met T.L. Peacock (1785-1866) for the first time. Peacock introduced him to his London publisher Hookham and inculcated in Shelley a love for the Greek and Latin classics.

In June Shelley migrated to Lynmouth in Devon. Eaton, who had published Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* in a periodical had been sentenced for doing so and Shelley wrote his 'Letter to Lord Ellenborough' in the publisher's defence. Shelley went a little further. He wrote a new satirical poem 'The Devil's Walk' and put it and the 'Letter' in bottles and balloons and set them adrift by sea and air. This hurt his servant Dan Healy who had followed him from Ireland. He was imprisoned, as he failed to pay two hundred pounds, the fine imposed on him for posting Shelley's 'Declarations' on the walls of Barnstable. Shelley could not pay the fine but provided the prisoner with fifteen shillings a week to make his confinement comfortable. Another result of the publication of the 'Declaration of Rights' was that the government put Shelley under surveillance and his activities began to be watched by a spy called Leeson.

It is at Lynmouth that *Queen Mab* is first heard of. Shelley's first major poem to be published, *Queen Mab* was conceived in December 1811 and composed between June 1812 and February 19, 1813, when Shelley wrote to his publisher friend that it was 'finished & transcribed.' However, the notes were then still in progress. They are seventeen remarkable pieces - often considered better than the poem - 'Against Jesus Christ, & the Bishops, & Marriage, & the Devil Knows What', as he himself later put it. The work was extremely popular not only among the working class radicals, and was called the Chartists' Bible, but later also with Bernard Shaw (1856-1950). Shelley had asked Hookham in March 1813 to publish his poem 'on fine paper & so as to catch the aristocrats: They will not read it but their daughters may.'

In September 1812 Shelley moved to Tanyralt, near Tremadoc, in Wales. Here once again he associated himself with one Mr. Maddock who was trying to reclaim some waste land by raising an embankment. Shelley contributed hundred pounds to the project and in October went to London in an effort to gain more subscribers for the undertaking. Here he met Godwin frequently and through him the Newtons, of vegetarian fame, as he had adopted vegetarianism while in Dublin.

Back in London Shelly renewed his friendship with his Oxford friend Hogg who has left an unforgettable picture of the poet's life in these years. Perhaps the most humorous in his account is his portrait of the Field Place school teacher Miss Hitchner who owing to his long expressed wish joined Shelley's household in Wales and the ever present Eliza whom Hogg nicknamed 'Brown Demon' and 'Black Demon' respectively. Miss Hitchner was finally got rid of and an allowance paid to set off the loss due to her giving up her school teaching.

Shelley briefly visited Wales ( November 13, 1812 Tanyralt ) and Dublin ( March 21 , 1813 ) but was back in London where Harriet gave birth to their daughter Ianthe ( June 1813 ) . Shelley was extremely fond of her and would walk up and down the room with it in his arms for a long time. Peacock further tells us that Shelley sang a 'monotonous melody of his own making, which ran on the repetition of a word of his own making'. This word was Yáhmani, Yáhmani. However, Peacock, goes on :

The child has a wet nurse, whom he did not like, and was much looked after by his wife's sister, whom he intensely disliked.

Peacock thought that if Harriet 'had nursed her own child, and if this sister had not lived with them, the link of their married love would not have been so readily broken.'

On March 26, Shelley remarried Harriet at St. George's Church, London in order to ensure the validity of the Scottish marriage and the rights of his children. Next month Harriet left him. She was unhappy about Shelley's wandering life, friends and activities. Shelley's 'Stanza April 1814' and 'To Harriet May 1814' show how much he missed her. In July she was discovered to have been living with Eliza, her sister, at

Bath. It is possible that this protracted absence of Harriet became the immediate cause of the break in their marriage.

### 31.2.4 Early friendship and later marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Shelley met Mary (1797-1851), daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) and William Godwin (1756-1836), on May 5 or 6, 1814. She had just returned to London after a long stay in Scotland. The two instantly fell in love. Peacock, who was a witness to Shelley's life at this time describes the state of agitation he found him in:

Between his old feeling toward Harriet, from whom he was not then separated, and his new passion for Mary, he showed in his looks, in his gestures, in his speech, the state of mind suffering like a little kingdom the nature of an insurrection'.



Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Peacock further described his looks and state of mind,

His eyes were bloodshot, his hair and dress disordered. He caught up a bottle of laudanum and said, 'I never part from this.' He added, 'I am always repeating to myself your lines from Sophocles :

*Man's happiest lot is not to be  
And when we tread life's thorny steep  
Most blest are they who earliest free  
Descend to death's eternal sleep.*

It is probable that Mary persuaded Shelley to undertake a trip to the continent in order to save his life and they left England on 28 July 1814. Jane 'Claire' Clairmont (1798-1879), daughter of William Godwin and his second wife Mary Clairmont joined them on the trip. From Troyes, France, Shelley wrote a letter to Harriet inviting her to join them but she did not do so. However, the party returned, for lack of funds, to London only after six weeks.

Life was not easy for Shelley in London, harried as he was by creditors. In order to avoid them he had to go into hiding and frequently shift lodgings. However, he was

happy, buoyed by his love for Mary. In November (on the 30th) Harriet gave birth to his son Charles Bysshe. His financial problems also soon came to an end with the death of his grandfather Sir Bysshe on 6 January, 1813. Most of Shelley's ruinous debts got paid and an annuity of £1000 (£200 paid directly to Harriet) was settled upon him.

Shelley and Mary took a pleasant cottage at Bishopsgate near the entrance to Windsor Park. From there they made a boating trip upstream on the Thames and after coming back Shelley wrote his first great poem *Alastor, or, The Spirit of Solitude* (1816). It is a non-political poem of haunting beauty written under the influence of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814) published recently. Mary gave birth (January, 24, 1816) to their son William at Bishopsgate. ( Her first child, however, was born the previous year (i.e. February 22, 1815) but had survived only for two weeks.)

In May 1816 Shelley left for Switzerland in the company of Mary and Claire Clairmont. They lived in a cottage on the bank of Lake Geneva. Lord Byron lived close by in Villa Diodati where Milton had lived in 1639. The two poets undertook a 10-day trip round the lake and the two families became very intimate. It was thus that Claire became the mother of Byron's daughter Allegra (born, 12 January, 1817). Meanwhile soon after they returned to England (in September 1816) Shelley was first shocked by the suicide of Fanny Imlay (1794-1816 ; daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft from the American writer Gilbert Imlay whom she met in Paris) and a month later, that is on 9 November, by Harriet's drowning herself in the Serpentine river in all probability because she was soon to become the mother of a child that was not Shelley's.

On the 30th December ( 1816 ) Shelley married Mary at St. Mildred's Church in the presence of her father. After his marriage he tried to recover Ianthe and Charles, his children from Harriet, to his custody but his claim was contested by the Westbrooks. The affair was brought into the Chancery Court and it was stated that Shelley was a man of atheistical and immoral principles . *Queen Mab* was offered as a proof. Lord Eldon gave his judgement on 27th March, 1817, who placed the children with Dr. and Mrs. Hume, nominated by Shelley. However, Shelley could see his children no more than 12 times a year and only in the presence of the guardians. The judge did not place them in the care of the Westbrooks either.

The Shelleys settled in Albion House at Marlow ( February, 1817 ). Hogg and Peacock were their close friends and Godwin and Leigh Hunt ( with his large family) frequent visitors. Through Hunt Shelley met Keats (1795-1821) and Horace Smith (1779-1849), a prolific but minor novelist and poet. Peacock introduced him to the study of Plato who thereafter became his lifelong companion along with Homer, the Greek tragedians and the Bible . Mary put together at Marlow her useful *History of Six Week's Tour* and wrote her famous *Frankenstein* . She also gave birth to Clara on September 2 , 1817. While at Albion House Shelley wrote his longest poem *Laon and Cythna*, his idealized and idiosyncratic version of the French Revolution transposed to an Oriental setting. In order to avoid prosecution it was published with alterations in 1818 as *The Revolt of Islam*.

The Shelley couple were not ideally happy at Albion House. Mary felt uneasy and embarrassed in the presence of Claire who was and was not Byron's wife. She had put Shelley's reputation at stake. So they wanted to go to Venice and turn over Allegra to Byron to rear as his own (which he did ) . Besides, Shelley's health was deteriorating. He suffered from anxieties. He had fears that his children from Mary would also be taken away from him and that his father would have custody over him on the pretext of his madness. Shelley did not share these fears with anyone, not even Godwin. Hence he left England along with his family on the 11th or 12th March 1818, never to return. However, unhappily for both Mary and Shelley, the party included Claire.



### 31.2.5 Migration to Italy

It was Italy that saw the flowering of Shelley's genius. It gave him the sudden confidence that comes from experience and maturity. The change from England was also welcome. He wrote,

no sooner had we arrived in Italy than the loveliness of the earth & the serenity of the sky made the greatest difference in my sensations - I depend on these things for in the smoke of cities & the tumult of humankind & the chilling fogs & rain of our own country I can hardly be said to live. (April 1818)

On his arrival in Italy he first sent Allegra from Milan to her father who was then living in Venice. Byron readily undertook her bringing up and education. The Shelley household moved to Leghorn which along with Pisa became his principal place of residence in Italy. He was drawn to Leghorn because the Gisbornes, old friends of Godwin, lived there.

Maria Gisborne had been brought up as a girl in the east. She was middle-aged when Southey met her. She married Reveley, the student of Athenian antiquities in Rome. Reveley was a radical and in England got associated with Godwin and his circle. When Mary Wollstonecraft died after giving birth to her daughter Mary Maria took her home. When two years later Reveley died Godwin proposed marriage to Maria but she refused. Instead she married Mr. Gisborne with whom she had been living in Italy for some years. Mrs Gisborne and Shelley read Spanish together and she introduced him to Calderon (1600-81) whom Shelley translated in 1822. Shelley got attached to Maria's son Henry Reveley, a young engineer who wanted to put a steamboat on the Mediterranean and Shelley, notwithstanding his difficult condition, invested on it. The project, however, failed and Shelley thought that he had been defrauded. The trouble was later settled amicably.

Shelley did not settle immediately at Leghorn. He stayed at the Baths of Lucca where he completed *Rosalind and Helen* which was begun at Marlow and translated Plato's *Symposium*. Claire was, however, getting anxious about Allegra as she heard more and more about Byron's life in Venice. Induced by Claire Shelley undertook an exhausting journey from the Baths of Lucca to Venice. Claire stayed at Padua as her presence was to be kept a secret. Byron offered Shelley his villa at Este in which he had himself never lived. Shelley wrote to Mary to bring their family to Este at once which she did. Baby Clara could not bear the strain of the journey and died (24 September, 1818) in Venice where she had to be taken for advice. Mary secretly blamed Claire and Shelley for this calamity. While at Este, Shelley entered the greatest creative period of his life. He wrote 'Lines on the Euganean Hills', *Julian and Maddalo* and the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley wrote the second and third acts of *Prometheus* amid the vast ruins of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome and started writing *The Cenci* which was completed in August 1819. In Rome on 7 June, 1819 William, his son died 'after an illness of only a few days' as Shelley wrote to Peacock, 'haunted by calamity as I have been, that I should never recover any cheerfulness again.' (June 1819)

Shelley moved to Leghorn to allow Mary the company of Maria Gisborne. Here he heard about the political unrest and agitation in England and what is known in history as the Peterloo massacre (August 16). Shelley wrote 'The Mask of Anarchy' in September 1819 which was, however, not published until 1832. On 2 October they moved to Florence where his last child Percy Florence was born (12 November). He was named after the poet and the city of his birth and succeeded to the baronetcy. Shelley wrote his famous 'Ode to the West Wind' in Florence in October and the next month wrote a parody of Wordsworth's *Peter Bell* (written in 1798 but published with a dedication to Southey in 1819). It was called *Peter Bell the Third*

as Keats's friend John Hamilton Reynolds's second 'Peter Bell' had already appeared. Shelley mocked Wordsworth's defection from the radical cause and called him 'a solemn and unsexual man.' This poem also was suppressed until 1839. In December Shelley wrote the fourth act of *Prometheus* and on 27 January, 1820 the family travelled to Pisa. This was to be their last station, except for occasional trips to Leghorn and Lucca and the final summer at Casa Magni on the Bay of Spezia.

The immediate purpose of their visit to Pisa was to consult the famous Italian physician Andrea Vacca Berlinghieri. Here he found a friend in one Mrs. Mason, a daughter of the Earl of Kingston of Ireland where Mary Wollstonecraft had served as a governess. However, at Pisa Shelley soon became the nucleus of a large group of people from Ireland, England, Italy and Greece. Life for Shelley at Pisa was made difficult by Godwin by his ever increasing demand for money. Shelley reminded him that he had paid him £4000 to 5000 and in order to do so paid the money-lenders four or five times that amount. Claire caused Shelley trouble by her anxiety for Allegra and her inability to be on good terms with Mary. The discharged servant Paolo tried first to blackmail him and then spread scandals about his personal life which were taken up in Italy and echoed in England. Finally, Claire left the Shelleys to become a governess in Florence but visited them from time to time.

The 'Pisan circle' which Shelley had formed included Professor Pacchiani, Princess Argiropoli, Sgricci, Taffe, Prince Mavrocordato - who was responsible in large measure for *Hellas* (1821), Shelley's lyrical drama on Greek revolt against the Turks - and above all Emilia Viviani, a beautiful 17-year-old heiress 'tyrannized' in a convent at Pisa who made Shelley write his breathtakingly beautiful poem *Epipsychidion* (1821). The title of the poem remains a puzzle perhaps because it is addressed to *epi-psyche* the 'soul out of my soul' or beloved and also because of its ironic reference to the *Epithalamium* the conventional marriage song such as Spenser wrote. In this poem Shelley attacked the institution of marriage as 'the dreariest and longest journey' and praised 'Free' or 'True' love (ll.148-73).

The most important addition in January 1821 to the circle was Edward Williams and his wife Jane. They remained Shelley's companions till the end. His poems on Jane - 'With a Guitar, To Jane,' 'To Jane, The Invitation', 'When the lamp is shattered', 'To Jane (The Keen stars were twinkling)', and 'Lines written in the Bay of Lerici' - were not shown to Mary and have the quality of the poems written for one alone to read.

Mention must be made of Edward John Trclawny (1792-1881) who joined the Pisan Circle on January 14, 1822 whose chief claim to memory was his record of the lives of Shelley and Byron apart from his presence at the cremation of Shelley along with Byron. Shelley had gone to Ravenna to persuade Byron to come down to Pisa to join the circle which he did on 1 November, 1821.

### 31.2.6 The last days

Byron's daughter Allegra had died on 20 April, 1822 and so the Shelleys began their projected summer at San Terenzo, facing Lerici, on the Gulf of Spezia a little early. They rented Casa Magni and occupied it on April 8. The Williamses also moved to San Terenzo on 30th April. On May 12 they received *Don Juan* their schooner. Shelley christened it the Ariel and Williams called it 'a perfect plaything for the summer'. The two friends also made a shallop of canvas and reeds and in one or the other of these vessels Shelley incessantly boated. Shelley wrote *The Triumph of Life* going off by himself in his shallop in moonlight. Mary had never found Shelley in a happier mood. 'If' wrote Shelley, 'the past and future could be obliterated, the present could content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment, "Remain thou, thou art so beautiful."'

Mary, unfortunately was not happy. She was not well. Shelley had been taken seriously ill. One night when with Williams he saw naked Allegra rise from the waves and clap her hands. On another occasion he saw his own image which asked him 'How long do you mean to be content?' Mrs Williams also saw Shelley twice while he was not present. Casa Magni was a place of visions.

Two months had passed by in this retreat and Shelley's old friend Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) was to arrive in Italy to edit *The Liberal* from Pisa. The plan had been conceived by Shelley and was to be supported by Byron. In order to meet the Hunts Shelley, along with Edward Williams and his sailor-boy Charles Vivian set sail for Leghorn on 1 July 1822. Thornton, the eldest son of Hunt always remembered the cry with which Shelley rushed into his father's arms saying, 'I am inexpressibly delighted! You cannot think how inexpressibly happy it makes me.' The Hunts were settled in Byron's *Palazzo* in Pisa and Shelley, Williams and Charles set sail for San Torenzo by the same boat. On the 8th of July 1822 Ariel sank under a squall. The two bodies, i.e. of Shelley and Williams, were found on 18 July. In one of Shelley's pocket was a volume of Aeschylus and in the other, Keats's poems folded back to back as if the reader had been in the act of reading it when he hastily thrust it away with the intention of coming back to the line where he had left.

Trelawny arranged for the cremation at which Byron and Hunt alone were present besides a few natives of the place. Byron and Hunt could hardly maintain themselves. Trelawny snatched Shelley's heart from the flames. His ashes were deposited in the English burying ground in Rome by the side of Keats and his son William. Mary did not marry but lived to write and publish Shelley's writings posthumously.

You have read an account of Shelley's life. Now would you like to answer a few questions which are based on it ?

### Exercise

Answer either a or b set of questions below:

a) When and where did Shelley write the following :

1. *Queen Mab*,
2. *Alastor*,
3. *Prometheus Unbound*,
4. 'Ode to the West Wind', and
5. *The Triumph of Life* ?

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. \_\_\_\_\_  
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4. \_\_\_\_\_  
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5. \_\_\_\_\_  
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b) 1. Would it be fair on our part to ask whether Shelley's relationships with many women was proper ? Give reasons for your answer.

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2. Shelley loved liberty and freedom. Cite instances that support or refute the observation and state if Shelley acted responsibly or otherwise.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 
- 
3. If Shelley had been alive would you have tried to know him closely ? Give reasons for your answer.

### 31.3 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit you read about the troubled life of Shelley, his acquaintances, and his attitude towards them. You got to know about his wide reading; for Shelley, notwithstanding his death at twenty-nine, was one of the most learned of the English poets. You were in this unit, faced with a "morally difficult" poet because we cannot read Shelley without deciding upon some of the fundamental issues of life such as love and marriage, limits to our freedom and the need for restraints, etc.

### 31.4 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

- a.
1. Shelley wrote *Queen Mab* in England and Wales during his early period of political activism in 1812-13.
  2. *Alastor* was written in Windsor Great Park in the latter part of 1815.
  3. The first act of *Prometheus Unbound* was written at Este in 1818. The second and third acts were written in the spring in Rome and the fourth act in December of 1819 at Leghorn and Florence.
  4. 'Ode to the West Wind' was written in the wood that skirts the Arno near Florence in October 1819.
  5. *The Triumph of Life* was written in moonlight while boating in the bay of Lerici in the Gulf of Spezia while the Shelleys were sojourning at Casa Magni in the summer of 1822.
- b. I would not answer those questions, for you can guess what I would have to say from the text of this unit. However, you may discuss your answers with some of your friends because they are not irrelevant to a proper understanding of Shelley's poetry.

### 31.5 FURTHER READING

The best thing would be to read as many of Shelley's poems as you can: *Queen Mab*, *Alastor*, 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', *Mont Blanc*, *Prometheus Unbound* which Yeats called a 'sacred book', and 'Epipsychidion'. You must read the essay 'A Defence of Poetry'. You will find it printed in the *Reader* (See pp. 108-141) that goes with *Literary Criticism and Theory* (MEG05). This essay has been discussed for you in Block III unit 4 of the course. It would be advisable to go through the essay as well as the unit right away.

If you wish to read more about Shelley's life read Newman Ivey White's *Life of Shelley* in two volumes published in 1940. This work was condensed in one volume as *Portrait of Shelley* (1945). Edmund Blunden's *Shelley: A Life Story* (1946) offers vivid details from the poet's life. Kenneth Neill Cameron's *The Young Shelley* (1950) and the sequel to it *Shelley: The Golden Years* (1974) examine the development of Shelley's political thought and his radicalism.

Among the shorter studies of Shelley are Matthew Arnold's 'Shelley' in *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (1881) in which Arnold criticized him as 'an ineffectual angel beating his luminous wings in the void' and George Santayana's 'Shelley, or the Poetic value of Revolutionary Principles' printed in *Winds of Doctrine* (1913) in which he retorted, 'An angel cannot be ineffectual if the standard of efficiency is moral.' We have anthologised for you 'Shelley's View of Poetry' published in 1909 in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* by Andrew C. Bradley in this block. You may read it. You may also read Herbert Read's 'In Defence of Shelley' (pp. 189-287), a

psychological study of the poet at a time when such studies became very popular in literary criticism. In *The True Love of Shelley: Studies in English Romantic Poetry*, Foster and Foster mention, "However, in reading Read's essay you must be careful not to accept his thesis without caution. Shelley Read writes, 'lived in a state of heightened subjectivity due to his unconscious homosexuality.'" Read quotes Dr. McCurdy's words:

...very frequently the alleged object of love is merely a lay figure; the subject in love with his ideal of what he loved one should be. In such a case the subject is happy just in so far as the object of attachment is capable of identifying himself or herself with the ideal. This type of love is narcissistic because what is loved is not another person at all but an autochthonous ideal.

From studies such as McCurdy's Read isolates Shelley a narcissistic type

Read: whatever fascinates you, don't allow yourself to get swamped and read only as much as you can with enjoyment.