Mary Shelley

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (1797-1851) was the child of the political philosopher William Godwin and the feminist author Mary Wollstonecraft. She never knew her mother, who died within a month of her birth. Reared and given a wide, liberal education by Godwin, she began an affair with the married poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1814. A complicated romantic and peripatetic life ensued, but she and the poet married in late 1816 after the death of their first child and the suicide of his first wife. She had three more children with him, only one of whom survived to adulthood.

Her association with Shelley brought her into close contact with many more members of the Romantic literary circle, including Lord Byron. It was Byron who proposed the story-writing challenge during the summer of 1816 that provided the inspiration for Frankenstein. Percy Shelley provided encouragement for her writing, but he too died early, drowning in a storm at sea in 1822. After her husband’s death Mary Shelley oversaw several editions of his poetry, but her own literary output continued as well. Her other works include travel journals and novels in a variety of genres. Critics continue to debate the degree to which her later writings represent a distancing from, or a continued engagement with, the radical and Romantic-Era themes of her youth. She died at age 53 after a number of years of ill health.

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