

# **Shelley's Mary: A Life of Mary Godwin Shelley Short Guide**

## **Shelley's Mary: A Life of Mary Godwin Shelley by Margaret Carver Leighton**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Shelley's Mary: A Life of Mary Godwin Shelley Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>



## Overview

Mature readers should read Shelley's *Mary* because it brings to life the sensitive young woman who wrote *Frankenstein*. The biography exposes readers to the exhaustive allusiveness of *Frankenstein* and familiarizes them with the relationships and tragedies that touched Mary Shelley's life. This knowledge awakens readers to serious cultural and ethical problems still unsolved.

By titling this biography *Shelley's Mary*, the author calls attention to one of the most important relationships of Mary Shelley's life: her love affair and marriage with Percy Bysshe Shelley, the celebrated free-thinking romantic poet.

Implicitly the title signifies both the depth of Mary's devotion to the poet and the subordinate literary position her work has traditionally held when compared with her husband's. Through the details that Leighton provides, the reader is able to grasp the cost of that devotion and subordination to Mary's emotional and professional life. The complex ethical problems caused by Mary's relationship with Shelley suggest that in writing about *Frankenstein's* monster, she may have been writing—in a symbolic way—about the monsters of guilt and frustration that haunted her own life.

Mary Shelley was born to brilliant, famous, unstable parents. Her mother died when Mary was born, and her father's remarriage imposed on Mary a stepmother and a demanding, parasitic stepsister. When Mary eloped with Percy Shelley, he was married to another woman who was pregnant at the time and whose eventual suicide may have been triggered by Shelley's rejection.

Mary herself soon became an unwed mother; she experienced five pregnancies during her eight-year relationship with Shelley, but only one of her children lived to adulthood. Her novel *Frankenstein*, like her life, is filled with sorrows and premonitions of tragedy.

Only four years after its publication, Percy Shelley drowned in a sailing accident.

When read in association with the deeply moving *Frankenstein*, this account of Mary Shelley's tragic early life alerts the reader to the risks involved in pursuing romantic dreams at the expense of practical values. Leighton's biography also instills a sense of respect for the sensitivity and perceptiveness of *Frankenstein*, qualities that have made it one of the most influential novels of the past two centuries.

## About the Author

Like the real-life heroine of Shelley's *Mary*, Margaret Carver Leighton grew up in a learned family where history-making ideas were frequently discussed by important scholars. Leighton was born on December 20, 1896, in Oberlin, Ohio, to Dr. Nixon Carver, a college professor, and his wife, Flora Kirkendall Carver. Early in Leighton's life, her father obtained a position at Harvard University, and Leighton's earliest memories are of the tree-lined streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Like Mary Shelley, Leighton took great pleasure as a young girl in reading, writing, drawing, and attending the theater.

During her father's sabbaticals, Leighton attended schools in France and Switzerland, countries she would revisit when writing *Shelley's Mary*. Leighton graduated from Radcliffe College in 1918 and served as an army nurse just before World War I ended. While living in Westfield, New Jersey, in the 1930s, she served on the local board of education and later was a trustee of the Santa Monica, California, public library.

When Leighton met her future husband, Herbert Leighton, she was working in the advertising department of a publishing company. During their happy, fourteen-year marriage, the Leightons had four children, James, Mary, Thomas, and Sylvia. After her husband's death in 1935, Leighton moved with her four children to a rambling, seaside house in Santa Monica.

Her love of beautiful, natural environments is reflected in her fiction, where she devotes much attention to environmental influences on character. In Santa Monica, Leighton began to write books for young people and occasionally modeled characters after her own children. In 1958, Leighton's *Comanche of the Seventh* won the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Memorial Children's Book Award.

She eventually wrote more than twenty books for children and young adults.

Leighton died on June 19, 1987, in Santa Monica.

# Setting

Leighton's biography reflects the significance of setting to Mary Shelley's life.

Like most writers of the romantic era, Mary assigned almost a mystical power to the forces of nature. During the eight years Mary spent with poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, she and their entourage moved frequently from one scene of natural, awe-inspiring beauty to another. The biography begins at her birth in London on August 30, 1797. The account moves back and forth from England to the Continent—primarily Switzerland and Italy—from 1814, when the sixteen-year-old Mary elopes with the eccentric young Shelley, until 1823, when, soon after Shelley's death, Mary and her only surviving child return to London.

One of the most significant settings in Shelley's *Mary* is the Villa Diodati on Lac Lemman in Switzerland. Here Mary and Percy Shelley, along with Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, are guests of the poet Lord Byron, who is attended by his physician, Dr. Polidori. During the summer of 1816 the party of young romantics entertain themselves during rainy evenings by reading and composing ghost stories. Both the villa and the mountain lake scenery contribute to the mysterious atmosphere that inspires their stories. After one ghost-tale evening, Mary has a nightmare that she eventually reworks into *Frankenstein*.

Leighton also describes other settings that hold important memories for Mary, such as a villa on Lake Como in Italy, and the field and flower-starred meadows near Leghorn, Italy, where she and Shelley walk happily together. The Lake Como setting appears in Mary's novel *The Last Man*, and the Leghorn Meadows bloom eternally in Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark." After Shelley's death in a sea storm on the lake between Leghorn and Pisa in 1822, Mary returns to London. Except for a tour abroad from 1840 to 1843, which she chronicles in *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, she remains there until her death in 1851.

## Social Sensitivity

For the astute young reader, this biography provides a commentary on almost every so-called "modern" young adult problem. Drugs, teen-age pregnancy, parental rejection, suicide, peer influence, and jealousies all enter Mary Shelley's life. Her handling of these problems may not always coincide with the choices of a conscientious parent, but Mary seems to have accepted responsibility for her choices. Indeed, Mary is represented as the most conscientious and loyal member of her circle. Mary's life, like her novel *Frankenstein*, may be read as a cautionary tale, warning readers against rash and selfish actions, even when those actions are apparently meant to lead to idealistic ends.

## Literary Qualities

Like most of Leighton's biographies of famous women, Shelley's Mary is marked by strong characterizations and accurately detailed historical background. Leighton has managed to convey the spirit of Mary Shelley without compromising objective detail. She manages to include enough dialogue and description to give this biography the feel of a novel, although the reader has the sense of always being anchored in reality. If anything, Leighton's sympathetic attitude causes her to overpraise Mary.

Leighton offers insightful suggestions for interpretations of Mary Shelley's works, drawing parallels between Mary's life and her literature, especially *Frankenstein*. For example, Leighton suggests that although Mary outwardly declares her loyalty to her father and even dedicates *Frankenstein* to him, the disastrous effects of Victor Frankenstein's radical experiments in the novel reproach Godwin's impersonal, rational attitude to human relationships. In Leighton's biography, Mary expresses her personal feelings through her fiction, and only in her fictional creations—beginning with *Frankenstein*—is she able to express her misgivings about the direction her own life and the intellectual life of Western culture have taken.



## Themes and Characters

The themes of Mary Shelley's novels often parallel the path of her personal experience. She probes issues in her work that she explores in her life, asking whether total devotion to individual liberty and the unrelenting pursuit of knowledge through experimentation benefit either individuals or societies.

That she spends her life asking and acting out these questions is not surprising, for she is surrounded by radical free-thinking romantics all her life.

Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, is a pioneer feminist writer who dies shortly after Mary's birth. Mary reveres her mother's memory and frequently visits her mother's gravesite. But her father, William Godwin, makes an even deeper impression on Mary. Godwin, a tremendously influential political philosopher, an artist, and an anarchist, claims to have unshakable faith in the powers of reason to bring about ethical behavior.

As depicted in Leighton's book, Mary remains devoted to her father despite his remarriage to a cold, domineering woman and despite his opposition to Mary's elopement with Shelley. Although Godwin's attitude toward the elopement is understandable, his frequent insistence that Shelley provide him with financial aid is less easy to accept. Overall, Godwin appears to be a petulant, egocentric man who lacks the strength of his own convictions.

Next to her father, the most influential character in Mary's life is Percy Bysshe Shelley. An ardent disciple of Godwin's, Shelley falls in love with Mary while visiting the Godwin household. Mary's devotion to him seems complete, although her frequent bouts of depression may be caused by the insecurity of their life together. Extravagant, politically radical, volatile, and somewhat fragile, Shelley is financially irresponsible and subject to irrational outbursts. He often chooses to soothe his fears by moving the family to new lodgings. His great generosity usually pleases Mary, but at times—such as when he invites Claire Clairmont along on their elopement—upsets her greatly. Impetuous, moody, and demanding, Claire always manages Shelley and Mary in *St. Pancras Churchyard* by W. P. Frith reprinted in *Mary Shelley* by Emily W. Sunstein. Little, Brown: Boston (1989).

to be around when she is least welcome.

Claire's liaison with Lord Byron causes great hardships and heartbreak both for herself and for the Shelleys.

Mary soothes her husband's spirit and is able to serve, for her father, as a living reminder of her determined, feminist mother. But underlying these admirable strengths, always tapped by others, are her own fears, insecurities, and frustrations. Bookish and bright, tender and kind, Mary consistently subordinates her own nature in order to gratify



those around her. She views her own writing as less important than Shelley's; always subdues her misgivings about the irresponsible lifestyle they lead; and retreats within herself to deal with the 'deaths of three of her four babies.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Mary's education is unconventional by our standards. Is it adequate for her day?
2. Is Mary in any way responsible for the death of Harriet Shelley?
3. How does William Godwin's attitude toward his daughter affect her?
4. Is the relationship between Claire Clairmont and Mary a beneficial one for Mary?
5. Should the quality of a poet's writing—like Lord Byron's, for example—be judged in any way by the quality of his life?
6. How would you describe the character of Percy Shelley?
7. What can you infer about the quality of medical services in the early nineteenth century from this book?
8. How do you think most modern versions of the Frankenstein story differ from the original?
9. What part of Mary's life would you describe as the happiest? Why?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Make a map showing the various places the Shelleys lived or visited during their eight-year relationship.

Make a list of those places, including a brief description of the events of Mary's life that occurred there.

2. List all of the works written by members of Mary Shelley's family that are mentioned in the novel. Briefly describe the subject matter of each work.

3. Write a report on the artistic and intellectual movement known as romanticism that includes an explanation of Mary Shelley's and Percy Shelley's contributions to that movement.

4. Read Frankenstein and write a plot summary of it. What parallels can you find between its lessons and those of Mary Shelley's life?

5. Read a biography of Percy Shelley and report on the contradictions between Shelley's Mary and the biography you have chosen.

## For Further Reference

Fuller, Muriel, ed. *More Junior Authors*.

New York: Wilson, 1963. Includes a biographical sketch of Leighton.

Spark, Muriel. *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*. Essex: Tower Bridge, 1951. An insightful interpretation of Mary Shelley's life and works.

Levine, George, and U. C. Knoepfmacher, eds. *The Endurance of "Frankenstein": Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. Offers a variety of compelling analyses of Shelley's most famous novel.

## Related Titles

Margaret Leighton wrote several other biographies of women aimed at mature young readers. These books demonstrate Leighton's exceptional ability to integrate historical background with personal detail, and in each Leighton confronts controversial issues—such as violence or drug use—with honesty and decorum. Among these titles are *Judith of France*, the story of Charlemagne's granddaughter, who makes two royal marriages before she finds true love; *Journey for a Princess*, the story of Estrid, daughter of King Alfred of England; *The Story of Florence Nightingale*, a sympathetic portrayal of Florence's early years; and *Cleopatra: Sister of the Moon*, one of Leighton's most celebrated works.

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