

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

LIFE (1792 - 1822)

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born into a rich Sussex family in 1792. At the age of twelve he was sent to Eton, where he spent six unhappy years, often ill-treated by his schoolmates, which probably increased his rebellious spirit. At Oxford he came into contact with the radicalism of William Godwin, the anarchist philosopher. In 1811 for circulating a pamphlet entitled *The necessity of Atheism* he was expelled from Oxford. At the age of 19 he decided to go and live in London where he married Harriet Westbrook. After their marriage they visited Ireland where Shelley tried to urge the people to rebel against the English Government. On his return to England he entered the circle of the radical William Godwin. He soon fell in love with Godwin's daughter Mary and in 1814 they ran away in Switzerland, leaving Harriet behind them. Harriet's suicide and Shelley's marriage to Mary turned public opinion against him and, in the company of Mary, Shelley left England. His home became Italy, where he spent time travelling between Pisa, Venice and Naples. In 1822 Shelley's small boat was caught in a storm and the poet was drowned. His body was recovered later and his ashes were buried in the new Protestant Cemetery in Rome.

ACHIEVEMENT

Shelley is **the perfect embodiment of one view of Romanticism**: that idealistic individualist who rebels against his family and the conventions of his society and remains faithful to his ideals to the end of his life. Shelley's poetry can be divided into longer and shorter works. The greatest of the longer works is *Prometheus Unbound*. Here Shelley draws on the rebellion of the Titan Prometheus against the Olympian gods. Many of his shorter works were written during the years he spent in Italy. They include his great song of natural change *Ode to the West Wind*.

ODE TO THE WEST WIND

In *Ode to the West Wind* Shelley uses the symbolism of waves and leaves and clouds to convey his idea and combine the visible subject with invisible thought. He makes the wildness of the wind into a symbol of his deepest political and poetic aspirations, describing it as one of the great forces of renewal in nature as it sweeps away everything that has gone dead and scatters the seeds of new life.