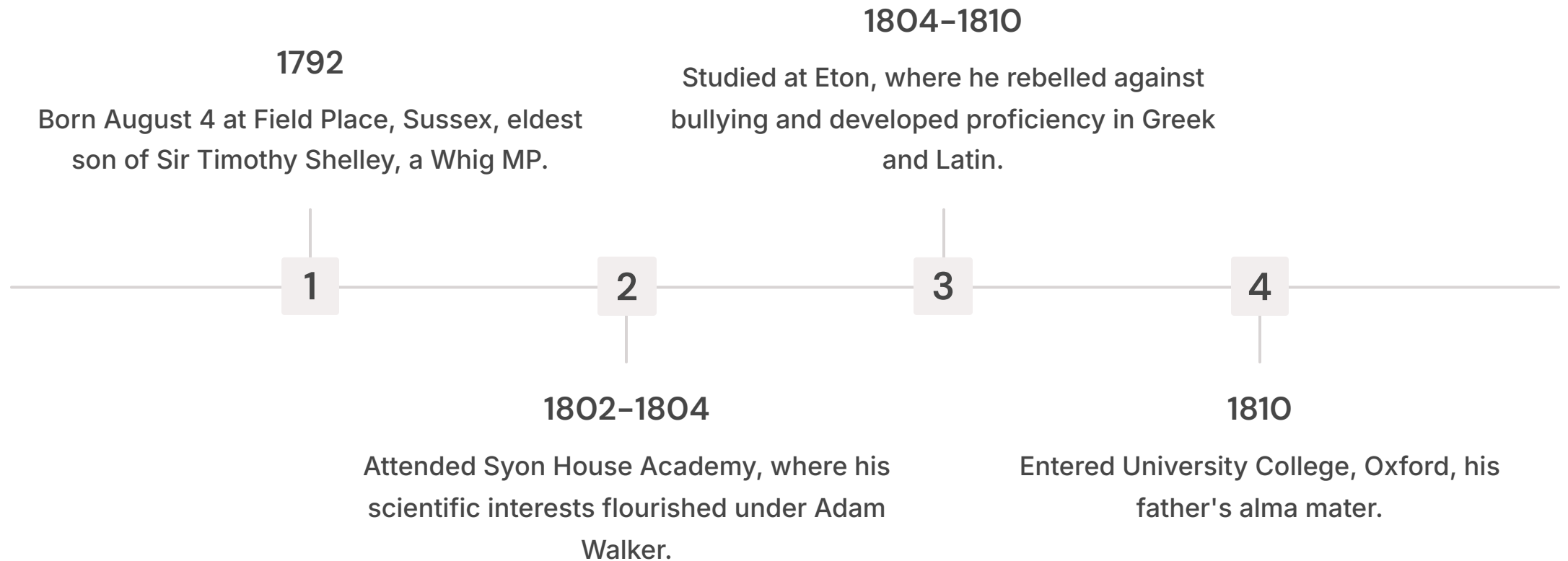




Percy Bysshe Shelley: Romantic Poet, Revolutionary Thinker

Born in 1792 to aristocratic privilege, Percy Bysshe Shelley defied expectations to become one of England's most radical and visionary poets. His brief life was marked by controversy, tragedy, and extraordinary literary achievement before his untimely death at age 29.

Early Life and Education



Scientific Pursuits and Gothic Beginnings

Scientific Fascination

From childhood, Shelley was an avid scientist, conducting chemical experiments and even attempting to treat his sisters' chilblains with electric shocks. His Oxford rooms were filled with scientific equipment including "an electrical machine, an air-pump, the galvanic trough, a solar microscope, and large glass jars."

Early Literary Works

By age seventeen, Shelley had published his first Gothic novel, *Zastrozzi* (1810), followed by *St. Irvyne* and poetry collections including *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* with his sister Elizabeth.

Rebellion and Expulsion



The Necessity of Atheism

Published controversial pamphlet challenging religious authority.



Oxford Expulsion

Refused to deny authorship and was expelled in March 1811.



Elopement

Eloped with Harriet Westbrook, marrying in Edinburgh despite his opposition to marriage.

Political Activism



Irish Campaign

Traveled to Dublin in 1812, distributing his pamphlet *An Address to the Irish People* and advocating for Catholic Emancipation.



Queen Mab

His first major poem contained radical political ideas and extensive scientific notes, later becoming known as "the Chartists' Bible."



Response to Peterloo

Wrote *The Mask of Anarchy* after the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, with its famous call to "Rise like lions after slumber."

A man and a woman in 19th-century attire standing by a lake with mountains in the background. The man is wearing a dark suit and the woman is wearing a long white dress. They are looking at each other and holding hands.

Personal Turmoil and New Love

1

Meeting the Godwins

Became acquainted with philosopher William Godwin and his family in 1812.

2

Falling for Mary

Developed a relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, daughter of his hero.

3

Elopement to Switzerland

In July 1814, eloped with Mary and her stepsister Clare Clairmont.

4

Tragedy and Marriage

After Harriet's suicide in 1816, married Mary in December, but lost custody of his children by Harriet.

Major Poetic Works

Alastor (1816)

Explores a poet's solitary and narcissistic inability to be satisfied with human relationships, criticizing the self-obsessed poet who denies social and political responsibilities.

Prometheus Unbound (1818–1819)

A lyrical drama showing an enlightened Prometheus forgiving the tyrannical Jupiter, demonstrating Shelley's extraordinary array of verse forms and utopian vision.

Adonais (1821)

An elegy for John Keats that reveals Shelley's Platonism and preoccupation with death and posterity, allowing him to imagine "the extinction of the self."

Life in Italy

1818: Departure

The Shelleys and Claire left for Italy, seeking a warmer climate for Percy's health.

1822: The Liberal

Collaborated with Byron and Hunt on a political and literary journal before his untimely death.



1819–1820: Productive Years

Wrote "Ode to the West Wind," "Ode to a Skylark," and "The Witch of Atlas" while living in Pisa and Leghorn.

1821: Emilia Vivani

Met the seventeen-year-old heiress who inspired his poem "Epipsychidion."

Tragic End and Literary Legacy



Untimely Death

On July 8, 1822, Shelley drowned when his boat, the *Don Juan*, sank in a storm off the Italian coast. He was only 29 years old.



Mary's Preservation

After his death, Mary Shelley edited and published his works, though she minimized potential scandal to protect her reputation and their son's inheritance.



Victorian Reception

The Pre-Raphaelites favored Shelley, though they emphasized his effeminate and fragile qualities over his political radicalism.

Critical Reappraisal

▼ New Critics' Objections

T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis objected to Shelley's personality and politics. Leavis found that Shelley "offers the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void," unlike Wordsworth who presented concrete objects.

▼ 1960s-70s Resurrection

Critics like Harold Bloom, Earl Wasserman, and M.H. Abrams revived interest in Shelley, with Wasserman skillfully weaving Shelley's work into a coherent philosophical system based on C.E. Pulos's demonstration of Shelley's "sceptical idealism."

▼ Historical Approaches

Kenneth Neill Cameron set the agenda for historicist readings in 1974, followed by scholars who recovered political and historical contexts. New editions of Shelley's poetry and prose, along with facsimile publications of his notebooks, have enriched modern scholarship.

▼ Contemporary Theoretical Readings

Deconstructive, structuralist, and postmodern critics have found Shelley's questioning of language and meaning particularly responsive to theoretical approaches, especially his final unfinished poem "The Triumph of Life."