John Keats

Ode to a Genius

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Introduction

John Keats is known as one of the great Romantic poets of his time along with Byron and Shelley. He is one of the most studied British poets, yet he only lived to be 25 years old. His literary capabilities at such a young age cause me to wonder what he could have achieved if he had been given time to develop his skills as a writer.

Despite receiving his apothecary's license at the age of 21, Keats decided that he would rather be a poet than a surgeon. His writing career was short, but he wrote some of his best work during his last days. He wrote “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and “Lamia”. His mother and brother also died from tuberculosis. It is believed that he contracted the highly infectious disease while nursing his brother.

John Keats's love life is a happy, yet tragic one. He fell in love with Fanny Brawne, but was never able to marry her because he had tuberculosis and soon died. Fanny's family had also been effected with the disease. There was another girl that caught his attention named Isabella Jones. He had a fling with her, but he loved Fanny more. She moved closer to him and they were able to see each other every day. He revised his love sonnet “Bright Star” for her and gave it to her. He loved her and would have married her, but he didn't have anything to offer.

Keats endured two terrible conflicting emotions. He wanted to marry Fanny, his “Star”, and consummate their relationship, yet he felt death closing in around him. These feelings came through in his poems “The Eve of St. Agnes” and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. His tragic end to life intrigued me more since he did find love before he died. I find their story to be very beautiful. She stayed by him through his illness, and was willing to love someone who she knew would die. His life is one to be celebrated and admired. This is an ode to a genius.
Chronology

1795 – Born eldest to Thomas and Frances Jennings Keats

1800 – Fanny Brawne born in West End

1810 – Keats's father died from being thrown from his horse
        Keats's mother died from tuberculosis, leaving him an orphan at 14.

1811 – Began apprenticeship to a doctor outside of London, wrote poetry on the side

1814 – First poem “An Imitation of Spenser” written at age 19

1815 – Registered as medical student at Guy's hospital

1816 – Received apothecary's license, but decides to write poetry instead
        Keats's first publication “To Solitude” in *The Examiner*

1816 – Shown a copy of Chapman's Homer by friend Charles Cowden Clarke, which
        caused him to write “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer”

1817 – Moved from London to Hampstead
        First book published *Poems by John Keats*, did not sell well
1818  –  Book *Endymion* was attacked by multiple magazines

Developed cough on walking tour that began his sickness

Brother Tom died of tuberculosis

Met the love of his life, Fanny Brawne

1819  –  Returned to Fanny Brawne after spending some time with prostitutes

Wrote last great ode: “To Autumn”

1820  –  Coughed up blood

Consumption identified as a single disease

Wrote last letter

1821  –  Died under care of Severn, a good friend
Websites

http://www.lib.unc.edu/rbc/keats/index.php

This website gives a full biography of John Keats as well as commentary about his most famous works. It's a website celebrating the life and works of John Keats.


This website is a collection of links to his works with commentary and analysis, multiple biographies, and critiques from John Keats himself. It's a great place to find a lot of information from different sources.

http://englishhistory.net/keats.html

This website has biographies, chronology, pictures, images of original manuscripts, copies of most all of his works, and extra documents. It seems to have an expansive collection of documents that are not widely seen about Keats.

http://www.john-keats.com/

This website gives an overview of Keats, a very expansive biography, probably all of his works, and a place to buy books about Keats. It gives extra background information about his poems as well.
Biographical Impressions

John Keats met Fanny Brawne when she became his neighbor while he lived with a man named Brown. He fell in love with Fanny Brawne, but didn't want to admit it at first. When they first met, she irritated him. This turned to fascination before long. He was already in a sort of depressed state after nursing his brother who had tuberculosis and experiencing bad reviews for his poetry. Nevertheless, he kept his love for her private, but secretly had a passionately jealous side to him regarding her that showed itself in his poem “To Fanny”. He hated the idea of anyone taking her away from him, yet he couldn't marry her due to his poor financial situation and illness.

Those around John and Fanny did not agree with their attachment, considering it unlucky. Many people didn't even know that they were engaged at one time. Dilke noticed that he was a jealous type when he wrote, “He don't like any one to look at her or speak to her” (Colvin). He struggled with his feelings of jealousy and passion for Fanny for a while. His friends seem to have been agreed, although they bore her no ill will, in regarding the attachment as a misfortune for him” (Colvin). Some people thought his attachment to Fanny made him more sick than he already was.

While in a relationship with Fanny, he experienced the sweet and bitter sides of love. Fanny felt that since their engagement was going to be a long one, she could have fun in her youth and enjoy the attention of men around her. He was sick and was not able to attend the same parties and social engagements that she did, so he became jealous. There was a time before he died where she lived in his house for a few weeks. He said they were the happiest of his life. He had to leave to go to Italy in hopes of recovering from his illness. It would be the last time he saw Fanny. They wrote to each other while apart.


Biographical Impressions

In his poem “To Fanny”, he writes, “Who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feast? / What stare soutfaces now my silver moon!” (Colvin). He had such passions for fanny, but was never able to allow those to come to fruition. This tormented him and caused him to turn to his poetry even more during his anxiety-driven time. He wrote most of his odes, including “On Indolence” and “On a Grecian Urn”. He also wrote “Bright Star”, which was inspired by Fanny Brawne.

In Bedhampton, he wrote “Eve of St. Agnes”, which he considered to be 'a little poem', but which turned out to be a great romantic masterpiece. His friend, Colvin, wonders at how he came up with the poem. He wonders if he was thinking about it while at the sick-bed of his brother. Had he thought about it while him and Hunt and Reynolds were talking about Boccaccio? He felt a lot of tension from thinking about his jealousies about Fanny.

Keats seems to soothe himself with thought of dying. He writes that he would die for Fanny. He knew that he was going to die, and he wasn't afraid of death. In his last days, he was not allowed to be given Laudinum because his doctor felt that he would use it to commit suicide. His anguish with wanting to be with Fanny but knowing that he couldn't made him look to death as a release from the torture he was enduring. When they performed an autopsy, they saw that his lungs were almost completely destroyed. The doctor said it was the worst case of consumption he had ever seen.
Critical Interpretations

“The Shape of Despair: Structure and Vision in Keat's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn’”

Jason Mauro argues against other critics who say that Keat's Ode on a Grecian Urn causes him to be isolated from his reader by telling his dream. Jason Mauro feels that the Ode allows the reader to participate in his vision rather than just watching his dream. The reader in the poem is in a sine wave with 5 points. The first point is that Keats is in despair, the second point is when he's filled with hope, the third is that there is no hope, but it was a false hope. The fourth point is that the urn is more terrible than his initial despair and that it is poison, and the fifth point is when he accepts that the world is an antidote to the urn's terror. He actually starts off in despair, which ends up being a higher level than what he becomes while looking at the urn. He wishes to climb back to his initial point of despair.

Also, Keats uses repetition within the Ode to demonstrate the consequences of trying to step outside of the world of process. The speaker accuses the urn of “teasing us out of thoughts” (Mauro). Human thought needs the continuity between action and motivation, but the frozen perspective of the urn ruins that continuity, making him a thoughtless beast whose thoughts are always in the present tense. The speaker is initially intrigued by the urn, but in the end is disgusted by it. He is no longer under the spell.
Critical Interpretations

“Dying into Life: Keat's struggle with Milton in Hyperion”

Paul Sherwin analyzes the way Keats tries to compare himself to Milton and falls short, but by doing so, he is limiting his potential. He writes that Keat's “Bright Star” sonnets “distinguishes two kinds of steadfastness and, by implication, two contrary poetics standpoints” (Sherwin 383). At first the star is seen as a more exalted symbol, and then later it is brought down and humanized when it descends from the skies. In “Hyperion”, Keats compares himself with Milton. He also includes a dialogue with “Lycidas” that Milton had used, but the difference is that while Milton overpowers the past, Keats is willing to settle for less. In Milton's dialogue, Milton emerges as a new and greater sun. Keats ends with finding home in the image of Ruth who has no home. Paul Sherwin analyzes the way Keats tries to compare himself to Milton and falls short, but by doing so, he is limiting his potential. In Keats's poem “Hyperion”, Keats addresses his feelings of being overpowered by Milton and it is like a war against Milton's power. He also brings Wordsworth into the equation. Keats recognizes that Wordsworth understood the human heart and mind better than Milton, but he attributes that to the more enlightened time rather than to a superior genius. Keats worries that over time poets lose their intellectual genius. This poem is an attempt to prove that wrong by combining Milton and Wordsworth with his own achievements to move forward intellectual progress.
Critical Interpretations

“Keats and the Politics of Cockney Style”

Richard Cronin addresses the way critics tried to categorize John Keats as a cockney in politics based on two passages, but his repetition of Cockney evidences actually make it less likely that he was heavily involved in politics. At the time of Keats's literary career, the critical reviews based their analysis on politics by making everything a political message. Because Keats's poetry was published by Hunt, people assumed that his work must be influenced by Hunt's politics. Therefore, Keats was guilty by association with Hunt. Many magazines hated Hunt and stated that he was “so decidedly a party-man” (Cronin 786). In reality, their dislike of Hunt more likely stems from his poetry than his politics. Hunt's poem “The story of Rimini” has almost no political reference.

One magazine may praise Shelley while criticizing Keats. The differences of their political opinions were more easily accommodated than differences of class. Early on in Keats's career, he tried to move away from Hunt's style in his poetry in order to make a better name for himself. His poem “Hyperion” was so far from Hunt's style that it helped show his individuality. Keats still remained a Cockney poet throughout his career. Keats felt the weight of social class in his poetic career. His poem “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer” both celebrates his enfranchisement and confesses his lack of title to that enfranchisement. In his poetry, he battled the cultural disabilities that disqualified him from having his name inscribed in the book of literature.
Critical Interpretations

“Aesthetic Debate in Keats's Odes”

The Odes center in the human psyche, which has power to receive and express, but the tension between the different arts leads to stress and ecstasy. Gillian Beer writes that Keats's poems follow a process of resolving a dilemma. The dilemma in his odes are a variety of contrary ideas, such as a contrast between permanence and evanescence, truth and beauty, life and art. The struggle seen in the Odes is often times the discontinuity between man's life and his art, which both depend on the senses. Keats has a perception that art has its own mode of expression and its own area of expressiveness. Some of his poems deal with the creative mood by “emerging from a state of passivity, which leads on to ecstasy” (Beer 743).

Keats explores the limits of imagination by comparing it to music and visual art. He tries to escape his inward nature to a world of actions of his imagination. Keats creates through his experience a calm which will not have the permanence of artifact, but the recurrence of a song. The urn is permanent in space, while music exists only while it's happening and may occur at different times. Poetry becomes a song that differs from the urn in its ability to have rhythm and represent experience by sounds. The way Keats listened to the bird in fragments and then returned to the house is a metaphor to the feeling a reader gets from both songs and poems. In the “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the urn is represented visually so in this poem the music is not heard but experienced through images. Keats discovered that music is similar to sight in that it works through images.
Principal Critics

Sir Sidney Colvin

Sir Sidney Colvin was an English literary and art critic who wrote a biography entitled *Keats* in 1902. He collected the many letters and other materials that surfaced years after Keats's death and combined Houghton's biographical account to create this comprehensive story of Keats's life. Colvin not only gives a biography of Keats, but also comments on his greatest works by giving both a literary critique and a background of the inspiration for them. He writes of Keats: “Science may one day ascertain the laws of distribution and descent which govern the births of genius; but in the meantime a birth like that of Keats presents to the ordinary mind a striking instance of nature's inscrutability” (Colvin).

Andrew Motion

Andrew Motion, who was recently named Poet Laureate, wrote the book *Keats: a biography*. He had a lifelong interest in Keats ever since Shelley's “Adonais” made him out to be driven to an early death by his bad reviews. He explains, “All important writers need to be re-evaluated at least once every generation; just as history evolves, so different things about people become interesting and problematical” (Hodges). Motion went on a tour through Europe retracing the steps Keats took before he died. He felt connected to Keats when he felt the isolation he must have felt in Italy.
**Creative Response**

*John Keats Scrapbook*

First portrait (1816)

Miniature by Joseph Severn (1819)

By Charles Brown
(July 1819)

John Keats's drawing
of the Sosibios Vase

By Joseph Severn

Miniature portrait of Fanny Brawne

Tom

& Letter to Fanny Brawne
Works Cited


This is the article used in Critical Impression 4.


This is the biography used in the chronology.


This is the biography used in biographical impressions.


This is the article used in Critical Impression 3.


This are the 8 images used in the scrapbook and chronology.


This is the image used for the illustration page.


This is the information I got about Andrew Motion in Critics.

This is the article used in Critical Impression 1.


This is the image used for the title page.


This is the article used in Critical Impression 2.