

# John Keats

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**Born:** October 31, 1795 in London, United Kingdom

**Died:** February 23, 1821 in Rome, Italy

**Nationality:** British

**Occupation:** Poet

The English poet John Keats (1795-1821) stressed that man's quest for happiness and fulfillment is thwarted by the sorrow and corruption inherent in human nature. His works are marked by rich imagery and melodic beauty.

John Keats was born on October 31, 1795, the first child of a London lower-middle-class family. In 1803 he was sent to school at Enfield, where he gained a favorable reputation for high spirits and boyish pugnaciousness. His father died in an accident in 1804, and his mother in 1810, presumably of tuberculosis. Meanwhile, Keats's interest had shifted from fighting to reading.

When he left school in 1811, Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary-surgeon in Edmonton. Then it was that Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* awakened him to the charm and power of poetry. The imaginative beauty of Spenser's world of fantasy fulfilled some romantic yearning in his adolescent mind, and he was even more impressed by the poet's mastery of language as evidenced in the aptness and the sensory intensity of his imagery. It was probably during his last months at Edmonton that Keats first tried his hand at writing: four stanzas entitled "Imitation of Spenser."

On October 2, 1815, Keats was registered at Guy's Hospital, where he was to pursue his medical studies. He was a conscientious student, but poetry gained increasing hold on his imagination. Some growing sense of alienation may be perceived in his first published poem, the sonnet "O solitude! If I must with thee dwell," which Leigh Hunt printed in the *Examiner* on May 5, 1816.

Autumn 1816 brought decisive weeks in the maturation of Keats's art and personality. In late September he read George Chapman's translation of Homer, and this impressed upon him a new aspect of both Elizabethan and Greek poetry: no longer the mellow sensuousness, the exquisite fantasy that he had found in Spenser, but a virility in theme and style that was to encourage him in his turn to "speak out loud and bold." In October he made the acquaintance of Hunt and of some of the young men who were to become his devoted friends and to whom he addressed so many admirable letters over the next 4 years. During November and December he wrote most of the poems for his first volume, which was published in March 1817.

Although it contains many felicitous, and at times arresting, phrases, the book testifies to the young poet's inexperience and immaturity. The derivative mannerisms of some of the sonnets, the easy sybaritic nature description in "I stood tiptoe," the romantic diffuseness and facile escapism of "Sleep and Poetry" do much to account for the criticism--though not the venomous malice--it received at the hands of *Blackwood's Magazine* in October. In retrospect, this first volume has a character of anticipation rather than achievement.

## Publication of *Endymion*

The same cannot be said of *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, to the writing of which Keats devoted most of his time from April to December 1817 and which appeared in May 1818. This mythical story of the Latmian shepherd's love for the moon goddess provided him with a narrative framework through which he hoped to discipline his exuberant imagination; within a firm structure that takes the hero through the bowels of the earth, under the sea, and through the sky, he could nevertheless give free rein to his fancy in a great variety of incidents. Keats turned the story of Endymion into an allegory of the romantic longing to overcome the boundaries of ordinary human experience. The similarity with Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Alastor*, which had been published in 1816, is obvious; but whereas the quest led Shelley's hero to despair and death, Endymion significantly realizes that ultimate identification with transcendence is not to be achieved through the unmediated vision he had sought, but through humble acceptance of human limitations and of the misery built into man's condition.

Keats's letters reveal that at this time several of his friends were ill or suffering from some sort of vexation. His brother was very unwell, and he himself, after a bad cold, prophetically feared in October 1817 that "I shall never be again secure in Robustness." Like other romantic writers, Keats had a central need somehow to adjust the evidence that, as he put it, "The world is full of troubles" with an exalted intuition of cosmic harmony; this preoccupation runs as a major trend through his letters.

Another basic problem with which Keats's letters deal is how to reconcile the rival claims of romantic subjectivity, which makes for sincerity, concreteness, intensity, and originality, and of esthetic objectivity, which alone raises poetry to universal meaningfulness. Such reconciliation, he thought, had been achieved by Shakespeare through a quality which Keats, in December 1817, had called "Negative Capability."

It may have been in a deliberate attempt to secure greater impersonality that in March-April 1818, after the allegory of *Endymion*, he turned to straightforward narrative in *Isabella*, which is based on a story by Boccaccio. Although the poem is distinctly inferior, its theme was connected with Keats's more philosophical preoccupations, as it centers on the beauty and greatness of tragic love.

On the whole, 1818 brought a lull in Keats's creative output. His letters, however, show that it was also a period of rapid inner growth. By May he had become articulately conscious of several pregnant verities: that experience, rather than unbridled fancy, is the key to true poetry; that sorrow and suffering are not to be eschewed but should be expected--in 1819 he was to say "greeted"--as a necessary step in the making of the soul; that no great poetry can be achieved if "high Sensations" are not completed by "extensive knowledge"; and that he himself, in his exploration of life's "dark passages," had not yet reached further than the "Chamber of Maiden-Thought."

## Later Works

It was presumably in order to give poetic utterance to this enriched view of life and art that Keats started work on *Hyperion* in September 1818. This new poem linked up with *Endymion*, as an essential part of its purpose was to describe the growth of Apollo into a true poet through ever deeper acceptance and understanding of change and sorrow. But Keats was unable to get ahead with it for a number of reasons: a trip to Scotland had impaired his health; *Blackwood's* had published a vitriolic attack on *Endymion*; his brother, Tom, had died after several weeks' painful illness. Keats's friends

were trying to entertain him, and he was reluctantly swept up in the absorbing trivialities of social life. Moreover, at this time he fell in love with Fanny Brawne.

In spring 1819 Keats sought creative relief from his failure to give satisfactory shape to his idea in new ventures which were apparently less ambitious, yet proved to be the crowning work of his *annus mirabilis*. Turning once more to verse narrative, he first produced the opulent *Eve of St. Agnes*, in deliberate revulsion against what he now saw as the "mawkish" sentimentality of *Isabella*. The rape of Madeline in this poem was soon to find its dialectical counterpart in the ghostlike idealism of *La Belle dame sans merci*, a ballad that tells of the mysterious seduction of a medieval knight by another of Keats's elusive, enigmatic, half-divine ladies. Each poem embodies an important trend in Keats's poetry: his sybaritic sense of exquisite sensuality verging at times on eroticism, and a longing mixed with fear and diffidence for some experience beyond human mortality.

These were followed in the spring and summer of 1819 by the first great odes: "Ode to Psyche," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "Ode to a Nightingale." These, together with the later "Ode on Indolence" and "Ode on Melancholy," are among the most acute imaginative explorations of the intricate relation between the contrasting experiences and aspirations whose interplay had always controlled Keats's inspiration: sorrow and bliss, art and reality, life and dream, truth and romance, death and immortality.

The triumphant balance and integration achieved in the odes was inevitably precarious. They coincided with the positive conception of the world as a "Vale of Soulmaking," which the poet had framed in April. But incipient financial trouble, together with his tortured love for Fanny, were beginning to press upon Keats. The three schemes that kept him busy during the latter half of 1819 illustrate his confusion and perplexity. In cooperation with one of his friends, he wrote his only drama, *Otho the Great*, in the futile hope of acquiring both money and public recognition. He also made his last attempt to define the function of the poet in *The Fall of Hyperion*; but this, like the former *Hyperion*, was never completed and remains a tantalizing fragment of cryptic, inconclusive beauty. Significantly, the last long poem that he managed to bring to completion was *Lamia*, a brilliantly ambiguous piece which leads to the disenchanting conclusion that both the artist and the lover live on deceptive illusions.

Keats's health had been declining for some time. In February 1820 a severe hemorrhage in the lungs revealed the seriousness of the disease. His third and last volume, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*, was printed in July. In September, Keats left for Italy on an invitation from Shelley. He died in Rome on February 23, 1821.

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## Further Readings

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- The best complete introduction to Keats, biographical and critical, is Douglas Bush, *John Keats* (1966). The standard biography is Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (1963). Another biography is Andrew Motion, *Keats* (1998). John Evangelist Walsh, *Darling I Listen: The Last Days and Death of John Keats* (1999), documents Keats' final days. For bibliography and general information on Keats see James Robertson MacGillivray, *Keats: A Bibliography and Reference Guide with an Essay on Keats' Reputation* (1949).
- Clarence Dewitt Thorpe, *The Mind of John Keats* (1926; repr. 1964), combines critical insight into the poetry with illumination of Keats's personality. Extensive critical treatment of Keats's poetry is in Maurice Roy Ridley, *Keats' Craftsmanship* (1933); Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry* (1936); Walter Jackson Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (1945); Richard Harter Fogle, *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley* (1949); John Middleton Murry, *Keats* (1955); E. C. Pettet,

*On the Poetry of Keats* (1957); Kenneth Muir, ed., *John Keats: A Reassessment* (1958); W. J. Bate, ed., *Keats* (1964); and Douglas Hill, *John Keats* (1969). For detailed analyses of individual poems see Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone* (1955); Harvey T. Lyon, *Keats' Well-read Urn* (1958); Jack Stillinger, ed., *Keats's Odes* (1968); and Albert S. Gérard, *English Romantic Poetry* (1968).

- For general background the reader may consult Ian Jack, *English Literature, 1815-1832* (1963), which has very convenient bibliographies.

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