

Introduction to Keats

John Keats (1795-1821) was an extremely accomplished poet who sadly died too soon - aged 25, from tuberculosis. His life was riddled with hardship and tragedy, which comes across clearly in his literature through the exploration of extreme emotions. He is considered a Romantic poet, and he often explores Romantic themes and motifs in his literature - in particular, the unfathomable beauty of nature, the sense of spirituality which permeates the physical world, the intensity and complexity of emotions present within the soul. Keats often focuses on the tension between love and suffering, which makes his works very dramatic and often tragic. He also developed an interesting dichotomy in his poetry: over time he has become known for his odes - short, lyrical, celebratory poems - and his narrative ballads - long, mostly tragic folk narrative poems.

Keats' Background

Unlike most poets of the time, Keats wasn't from a high born background - he grew up in a middle class family, and he never went to university. His father was an ostler, a manager of horse stables, in North London, and Keats received an interesting and unusual education by attending an experimental boarding school in Enfield, run by a priest named John Clarke. Keats was exposed there to a liberal education that encouraged him to question the world around him and exposed him to a broad range of subjects, including Classics, History and Renaissance literature - all of which feature heavily in his poetry. After school, he was torn between seeking a career as a physician (a medical doctor), and becoming a full time writer. The former would have provided him with financial stability; the latter fuelled his heart and soul. He attended medical college in 1815, and his interest in medicine also filters through his poems; however, he was forced to drop out in 1818, before receiving his qualification, to care for his sick brother Tom, who had contracted tuberculosis. It is thought that through caring for Tom he exposed himself to the disease which would eventually end his life. His parents had already passed away at this point in his life, and their inheritance money was a matter of dispute that Keats never managed to resolve, even up to his death. So, financial struggles plagued Keats and his brothers, and they lived in a state of poverty, having to borrow money to keep living and amassing increasing amounts of debt. In his last few

months, he relocated to Rome in the hope that it would improve his health, but sadly declined further and he died there in February 1821.

Keats' Romantic Relationships

Keats' romantic relationships also had a significant impact on his poetry: he met a lady called Isabella Jones in 1817 while on holiday in Hastings. She was a beautiful, intelligent, wealthy and well read woman, and it is thought that she and Keats had a secret romance for a time; remaining close friends afterwards. She invited him to her house in Fitzrovia, near the British Museum, and he was impressed by her collection of art, birds, books and her aeolian harp. There was perhaps always a sense that Isabella, older and wealthier than Keats, was an alluring yet unattainable goal for him, so his initial romantic passion for her seems to cool over time, though it quells into a dear, friendly affection for her rather than indifference. When Keats died, Isabella was one of the first to be contacted.

In September 1818 Keats met the true love of his life, Fanny Brawne. They were of a similar status in life, and had both lost loved ones to tuberculosis, and upon meeting her he found her "beautiful, elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange". Their love blossomed, and by April 1819 they were seeing each other every day, reading poetry together - Keats, for instance, lent her a copy of Dante's Inferno. He dedicated his sonnet "Bright Star" to her, and had hopes of marrying her. They became secretly engaged in October 1819, but Keats also discovered at this time that he had tuberculosis, and Fanny's mother disapproved of him having dropped out of medical school to pursue a seemingly unluccrative poetic career. Fanny had other potential suitors, which caused Keats a lot of stress and anxiety, though she remained faithful to him and underwent a six year period of mourning after his death.

Keats wrote in October 1819 to Fanny: *"My love has made me selfish. I cannot exist without you – I am forgetful of every thing but seeing you again – my Life seems to stop there – I see no further. You have absorb'd me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving – I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of soon seeing you ... I have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion – I have shudder'd at it – I shudder no more – I could be martyr'd for my Religion – Love is my religion – I could die for that – I could die for you."*

The origins of the sonnet "Bright Star" have long been debated, with some critics feeling that it was originally written for Isabella and then revised for Fanny. Its final form was certainly intended for Fanny:

Bright Star

Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art—

Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,

And watching, with eternal lids apart,

Like Nature's patient sleepless Eremite,

The moving waters at their priestlike task

Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—

No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,

Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,

To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,

And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Keats found favour with some contemporaries in the literary circle, such as his friend and supporter William Hazlitt. On his death, Percy Shelley, another famous Romantic poet, wrote an elegy for him entitled *Adonais* which explores his tragic life and lasting

impact on poetry. However, most critics at the time derided Keats' work as "Cockney Poetry", suggesting that they found it lower class and vulgar because of its experimental forms and sometimes overly erotic themes - *The Eve of St Agnes*, for example, was deemed "unfit for ladies". He never expected his poems to live on, writing to Fanny Brawne in February 1820 he stated: "I have left no immortal work behind me – nothing to make my friends proud of my memory – but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd."

TASK: Read the first three stanzas of *Adonais*. How does Shelley celebrate Keats in this poem?

I

I weep for Adonais—he is dead!
Oh, weep for Adonais! though our tears
Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!
And thou, sad Hour, selected from all years
To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,
And teach them thine own sorrow, say: "With me
Died Adonais; till the Future dares
Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be
An echo and a light unto eternity!"

II

Where wert thou, mighty Mother, when he lay,
When thy Son lay, pierc'd by the shaft which flies
In darkness? where was lorn Urania
When Adonais died? With veiled eyes,
'Mid listening Echoes, in her Paradise
She sate, while one, with soft enamour'd breath,
Rekindled all the fading melodies,
With which, like flowers that mock the corse beneath,
He had adorn'd and hid the coming bulk of Death.

III

Oh, weep for Adonais—he is dead!

Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!
Yet wherefore? Quench within their burning bed
Thy fiery tears, and let thy loud heart keep
Like his, a mute and uncomplaining sleep;
For he is gone, where all things wise and fair
Descend—oh, dream not that the amorous Deep
Will yet restore him to the vital air;
Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair.