Definition: **Keats, John** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

English poet, one of the major figures of romanticism. His first volume, *Poems* (1817), included 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'. Keats was savagely criticized for the four-volume romance *Endymion* (1818). *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems* (1820) included the ballad 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' and the magnificent lyrics 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode to a Nightingale', and 'Ode to Autumn'. Keats died of tuberculosis in Rome, leaving unfinished the epic *Hyperion*. Percy Shelley mourned his passing in his elegy *Adonais* (1821).

**Summary Article: Keats, John**

from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1795–1821, English poet, b. London. He is considered one of the greatest of English poets.

The son of a livery stable keeper, Keats attended school at Enfield, where he became the friend of Charles Cowden Clarke, the headmaster's son, who encouraged his early learning. Apprenticed to a surgeon (1811), Keats came to know Leigh Hunt and his literary circle, and in 1816 he gave up surgery to write poetry. His first volume of poems appeared in 1817. It included "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," "Sleep and Poetry," and the famous sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer."

*Endymion*, a long poem, was published in 1818. Although faulty in structure, it is nevertheless full of rich imagery and color. Keats returned from a walking tour in the Highlands to find himself attacked in *Blackwood's Magazine*—an article berated him for belonging to Leigh Hunt's "Cockney school" of poetry—and in the *Quarterly Review*. The critical assaults of 1818 mark a turning point in Keats's life; he was forced to examine his work more carefully, and as a result the influence of Hunt was diminished. However, these attacks did not contribute to Keats's decline in health and his early death, as Shelley maintained in his elegy "Adonais."

Keats's passionate love for Fanny Brawne seems to have begun in 1818. Fanny's letters to Keats's sister show that her critics' contention that she was a cruel flirt was not true. Only Keats's failing health prevented their marriage. He had contracted tuberculosis, probably from nursing his brother Tom, who died in 1818. With his friend, the artist Joseph Severn, Keats sailed for Italy shortly after the publication of *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820), which contains most of his important work and is probably the greatest single volume of poetry published in England in the 19th cent. He died in Rome in Feb., 1821, at the age of 25.

In spite of his tragically brief career, Keats is one of the most important English poets. He is also among the most personally appealing. Noble, generous, and sympathetic, he was capable not only of passionate love but also of warm, steadfast friendship. Keats is ranked, with Shelley and Byron, as one of the three great Romantic poets. Such poems as "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "To Autumn," and "Ode on Melancholy" are unequaled for dignity, melody, and richness of sensuous imagery. All of his poetry is filled with a mysterious and elevating sense of beauty and joy.
Keats's posthumously published pieces include “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” in its way as great an evocation of romantic medievalism as his “The Eve of St. Agnes.” Among his sonnets, familiar ones are “When I have fears that I may cease to be” and “Bright star! would I were as steadfast as thou art.” “Lines on the Mermaid Tavern,” “Fancy,” and “Bards of Passion and of Mirth” are delightful short poems.

Some of Keats's finest work is in the unfinished epic “Hyperion.” In recent years critical attention has focused on Keats's philosophy, which involves not abstract thought but rather absolute receptivity to experience. This attitude is indicated in his celebrated term “negative capability”—“to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thought.”

Bibliography

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