

200 Years Since the Death of Poet John Keats

(31 October 1795 – 23 February 1821)

English Romantic lyric poet John Keats was dedicated to the perfection of poetry marked by vivid imagery that expressed a philosophy through classical legend.



Who Was John Keats?

John Keats devoted his short life to the perfection of poetry marked by vivid imagery, great sensuous appeal and an attempt to express a philosophy through classical legend. In 1818, he went on a walking tour in the Lake District. His exposure and overexertion on that trip brought on the first symptoms of the tuberculosis, which ended his life.

Early Years

A revered English poet whose short life spanned just 25 years, John Keats was born October 31, 1795, in London, England. He was the oldest of Thomas and Frances Keats' four children. Keats lost his parents at an early age. He was eight years old when his father, a livery stable-keeper, was killed after being trampled by a horse.

His father's death had a profound effect on the young boy's life. In a more abstract sense, it shaped Keats' understanding for the human condition, both its suffering and its loss. This tragedy and others helped ground Keats' later poetry—one that found its beauty and grandeur from the human experience.

In a more mundane sense, his father's death greatly disrupted the family's financial security. His mother, Frances, seemed to have launched a series of missteps and mistakes after her husband's death; she quickly remarried and just as quickly lost a good portion of the family's wealth. After her second marriage fell apart, Frances left the family, leaving her children in the care of her mother.

She eventually returned to her children's life, but her life was in tatters. In early 1810, she died of tuberculosis.

During this period, Keats found solace and comfort in art and literature. At Enfield Academy, where he started shortly before his father died, Keats proved to be a voracious reader. He also became close to the school's headmaster, John Clarke, who served as a sort of father figure to the orphaned student and encouraged Keats' interest in literature.

Back home, Keats' maternal grandmother turned over control of the family's finances, which was considerable at the time, to a London merchant named Richard Abbey. Overzealous in protecting the family's money, Abbey showed himself to be reluctant to let the Keats children spend much of it. He refused to be forthcoming about how much money the family actually had and in some cases was downright deceitful.

There is some debate as to whose decision it was to pull Keats out of Enfield, but in the fall of 1810, Keats left the school for studies to become a surgeon. He eventually studied medicine at Guy's Hospital in London and became a licensed apothecary in 1816.

Early Poetry

Keats' career in medicine never truly took off. Even as he studied medicine, Keats' devotion to literature and the arts never ceased. Through his friend, Cowden Clarke, whose father was the headmaster at Enfield, Keats met publisher, Leigh Hunt of *The Examiner*.

Hunt's radicalism and biting pen had landed him in prison in 1813 for libelling the Prince Regent. Hunt though, had an eye for talent, and was an early supporter of Keats' poetry and became his first publisher. Hunt introduced Keats to a world of politics that was new to him and, greatly influenced what he put on the page. In honour of Hunt, Keats wrote the sonnet, "Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison."

In addition to affirming Keats' standing as a poet, Hunt also introduced him to a group of other English poets, including Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Wordsworth.

In 1817, Keats leveraged his new friendships to publish his first volume of poetry, *Poems by John Keats*. The following year, Keats published *Endymion* a mammoth four-thousand line poem based on the Greek myth of the same name.

Keats had written the poem in the summer and autumn of 1817, committing himself to at least 40 lines a day. He completed the work in November of that year, and it was published in April 1818.

Keats' daring and bold style earned him nothing but criticism from two of England's more revered publications, *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*. The attacks were an extension of heavy criticism lobbed at Hunt and his cadre of young poets. The most damning of those pieces had come from Blackwood's, whose piece, "On the Cockney School of Poetry," shook Keats and made him nervous to publish "Endymion."

Keats' hesitation was warranted. Upon publication the lengthy poem received a lashing from the more conventional poetry community. One critic called the work, the "imperturbable drivelling idiocy of *Endymion*." Others found the four-book structure and its general flow hard to follow and confusing.

Recovering Poet

How much of an effect this criticism had on Keats is uncertain, but it is clear that he did take notice of it. Shelley's later accounts of how the criticism destroyed the young poet and led to his declining health have however, been refuted.

Keats in fact, had already moved beyond *Endymion*. By the end of 1817, he was re-examining poetry's role in society. In lengthy letters to friends, Keats outlined his vision of a kind of poetry that drew its beauty from real world human experience rather than some mythical grandeur.

Keats was also formulating the thinking behind his most famous doctrine – 'negative capability', which is the idea that humans are capable of transcending intellectual or social constraints and can far exceed, creatively or intellectually, what human nature is thought to allow.

In effect, Keats was responding to his critics and conventional thinking in general, which sought to squeeze the human experience into a closed system with tidy labels and rational relationships. Keats saw a world more chaotic, more creative than others, he felt, would permit.

The Mature Poet

In the summer of 1818, Keats took a walking tour in Northern England and Scotland. He returned home later that year to care for his brother, Tom, who had fallen deeply ill with tuberculosis.

At around this time Keats fell in love with a woman named Fanny Brawne. He also continued to write. In fact, he had proven prolific for much of the past year. His work included his first Shakespeare inspired sonnet - *When I have fears that I may cease to be*, which was published in January 1818.

Two months later, Keats published *Isabella*, a poem that tells the story of a woman who falls in love with a man beneath her social standing, instead of the man her family has chosen her to marry. The work based on a story from Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio.

His output at this time also included the beautiful *To Autumn*, a sensuous work published in 1820 that describes ripening fruit, sleepy workers, and a maturing sun. The poem, and others, demonstrated a style Keats himself had created.

Keats' writing also revolved around a poem he called *Hyperion*, an ambitious Romantic piece inspired by Greek myth. However, the death of Keats' brother halted his work. He finally returned to the poem in late 1819, giving the piece a new title - *The Fall of Hyperion*. This poem would go unpublished until more than three decades after Keats' own death.

In all, the poet published three volumes of poetry during his life but managed to sell just 200 copies of his work before he died in 1821. His third and final volume of poetry, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, was published in July 1820.

Only with the help of his friends, who pushed hard to secure Keats' legacy, and the work and style of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom during the latter half of the 19th century, did Keats' stock rise considerably.

Final Years and Death

In 1819, Keats himself contracted tuberculosis. His health deteriorated quickly. Soon after his last volume of poetry was published, he ventured off to Italy with his close friend, the painter Joseph Severn, on the advice of his doctor who had told him he needed to be in a warmer climate for the winter.

The trip marked the end of his romance with Brawne - his health issues and his own dreams of becoming a successful writer had stifled their chances of ever getting married.

Keats arrived in Rome in November of that year and for a brief time started to feel better, but within a month he was back in bed, suffering from a high temperature. The last few months of his life proved particularly painful for the poet.

His doctor in Rome placed Keats on a strict diet that consisted of a single anchovy and a piece of bread per day in order to limit the flow of blood to the stomach. He also induced heavy bleeding, resulting in Keats suffering from both a lack of oxygen and a lack of food.

Keats' agony was so severe that at one point he pressed his doctor and asked him, "How long is this posthumous existence of mine to go on?"



Keats died on February 23, 1821. It is believed that his friend Severn (who drew the above image of Keats on his deathbed) was with him at the time of his passing.

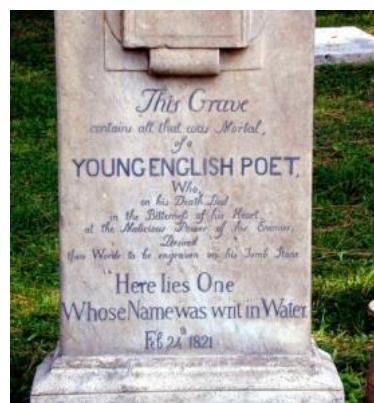


Keats' death mask.

The text for this article has been taken directly from the following web page (with only minor changes):

[John Keats - Poems, Ode to a Nightingale & Facts - Biography](#)

The mystery surrounding Keats grave.



Keats' name does not appear on his gravestone. He is buried at the Cemitero Acattolico—the so-called Protestant Cemetery in Rome. There has been much discussion surrounding the reason why his name was not

included. Was it the poet's dying wish, or did others decide how the inscription should read after he had died?

Find out more here: [The Gravestone of John Keats: Romancing the Stone - Wordsworth Grasmere](#)

For more information about the life and work of John Keats:

[John Keats | Poetry Foundation](#)

To access digital copies of original Keats manuscripts:

[Imitation of Spenser By John Keats \(englishhistory.net\)](#)

[John Keats – author of 'To Autumn' - The British Library \(bl.uk\)](#)

[John Keats and 'negative capability' - The British Library \(bl.uk\)](#)

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[An introduction to 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': time, mortality and beauty - The British Library \(bl.uk\)](#)

[Collection of manuscript poems by John Keats, including the Odes and 'To Autumn' - The British Library \(bl.uk\)](#)

[Letter from John Keats to his brother during his walking tour of Scotland - The British Library \(bl.uk\)](#)

[First edition of Keats's Endymion - The British Library \(bl.uk\)](#)

[Manuscript of John Keats's 'Hyperion' - The British Library \(bl.uk\)](#)

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