

John Keats : The Making of a Poet

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John Keats (1795-1821) has an enduring and endearing presence in English literary imagination. During his brief span of life he was intimately connected with the world of medicine, as his initial ambition was to be a doctor. There was this humanistic drive and impulse in him to help others in their times of pain and trouble. We have the examples of many poets in English and American literary history who had intimate connections with the medical fraternity: Walt Whitman was a wound dresser during the American Civil War; Oliver Goldsmith had the knowledge and once the ambition to become a doctor; William Carlos Williams, the American poet was also a practicing doctor. Keats also had training and expertise to be a doctor, but his love for “**verse, fame and beauty**” won him over to the world of poetry. Thereby he did not abandon the medical world; rather the knowledge and experience he had gained through his reading and training immensely enriched his imagination and humanized his art. In one of his letters to J.H. Reynolds, he had once written, “**I find that I cannot exist without poetry – without eternal poetry**” (Gittings, 7) and by this he surely meant poetry that has an eternally curative and pleasing appeal.

English literary history is enriched with the names of numerous writers and poets who were extraordinary in their thought and approach. Despite being blessed by the divinity these men of letters could not get their honour and status due to them during their life span. Even some of them were lost in the pages of history and some others have got their recognition long after their death. Among such names was the name of John Keats(1795-1821), the physician- poet.

31st October 1795 saw the birth of the physician- poet John Keats, the first child of Frances Jennings and Thomas Keats, and the eldest among the five children, one of whom died in infancy. John Keats was baptized at St. Botolph, Bishopsgate on 18, December 1795. Born a few years after the French Revolution, Keats brought a sort of mental revolution which stirred the imagination of poets, artists and enthusiastic admirers. This voyager in the realm of arts gave some of the best ideas and observations regarding poetry through his poems and letters. During his life Keats suffered much for his poverty and ill-health. The world around him didn't treat him well. In his own words Keats led a “*posthumous life*” throughout his life. Still the worldly things could not suppress his powerful writings. He wrote his first poem when he was nineteen and after that he never looked back. He had an intention to balm the grief-stricken lot but the society took him to be a “*middling*”, “*foolish*”, “*silly*” person.(Gittings,171)

During his brief life span of twenty six years Keats composed lyrics, sonnets, odes, and narrative poems and even a play which showed his passionate and sensuous love for Nature and Beauty. He believed that “*a thing of beauty is a joy for ever*” and that the quest for beauty is the primary concern of a true poet. His long narrative poems which include “**The Eve of St. Agnes**”, “**Endymion**”, “**Hyperion**” and “**The Fall of Hyperion**” etc. show his highly developed poetic genius. Born to period of turmoil and peril, Keats's strong will power helped him to avoid the

poisonous attack of the critics. Whatever it may be the writer of the lengthy letters and the odes, John Keats is now rated among the important figures in the world literary scenario.

His father Thomas Keats was in charge of the stables called “*Swan and Hoop*”, situated in 24 The Pavement, Moorfields, North London, which he was entrusted to manage for his livelihood. The work of these stables was to provide horses for hire to the nearer neighbourhoods. Keats’s family moved to the stables on December 1802. Here at the stables, two of his brothers were also born: George Keats on 28 February 1797 and Tom Keats on 18 November 1799. After their births, the couples moved to Craven Street, about half a mile from the stables to live in a separate house and on 28 April 1801 they were blessed with one more son Edward who died shortly thereafter. On 3 June 1803, the last child and only daughter Frances Mary (Fanny) was born. It was in the same year John Keats entered John Clark’s school at Enfield.

On 15 April 1804, Keats’s father Thomas died in an accident while returning home after visiting John and George at Enfield school, reportedly by slipping from his horse. After the death of his father his mother married William Rawlings, a minor bank clerk, on 27 June 1804, a marriage that did not last long and was a failure; and this compelled Keats’s mother to leave Rawlings and join her children. There onwards her health deteriorated.

Keats’s grandfather John Jennings died on 8 March 1805. After his death there was a lawsuit over his will as he was betrayed by his lawyer. Keats’s grandmother Alice Jennings took all the children with her and lived at Edmonton. From hereafter, the financial crisis in the life of Keats deepened.

In the year 1810, Keats’s mother died of ill-health. In the same year, a tea-merchant named Richard Abbey was appointed as the legal guardian to the Keats family. His grandmother’s will proved to be a great disappointment for all the children, especially for John Keats, as the guardian was a cheat and ill-behaved man.

The place where the Keats family was residing was close to the Enfield School. At Enfield, the Keats brothers were too popular. John was much liked by his school mates for his bravery and generosity to others. In the words of Edward Holmes, a music critic, “**Keats was a boy whom any one might easily have fancied would become great-but rather in some military capacity than in Literature**”. (Epstein, 47)

The financial problems in the life of Keats worsened after his mother’s death in mid-March of 1810 and became acute after his grandmother’s death in December of 1814. Richard Abbey, the legal guardian of the Keats family had looted everything else from them under the false pretension of the will.

In the meanwhile Keats was apprenticed to the Edmonton apothecary-surgeon, Dr. Thomas Hammond, but for certain reason or other, he quarreled with the doctor and left him. He was supposed to continue the apothecary study under Dr. Hammond for five years but he left it after four. In the year 1814 Keats wrote his first poem which reflected his interest in the field of poetry. It was the same year in the month of December, his grandmother passed away.

Richard Abbey, after squandering away almost all the money, desired John Keats to be an apothecary surgeon and the other two brothers to continue their respectable stable business. For this reason Keats entered the Guy's Hospital on 1 October 1815 and enrolled himself as a student to have more formal training. While at Guy's Hospital, he experienced many a new thing. The year of 1816 was a fruitful year in the life of John Keats; on 3 March 1816 he became a dresser and on 25 July a Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries. But the most memorable event was the publication of his first poem in *THE EXAMINER* on 5 May 1816. The same year he came in contact with poets and writers like Leigh Hunt (1784-1859), Benjamin Haydon (1786-1846), and John Reynolds (1794-1852). In the month of October he wrote the sonnet, "*On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*"; in December he was named and quoted by Leigh Hunt in his article '*YOUNG POETS*'.

The same year in 1816 Keats put a full stop to his medical career and gave up medicine for poetry. He became an ardent admirer of Spenser and Shakespeare along with Hunt and devoted himself completely to reading and writing. He also borrowed many books from his friends and put his imagination and thoughts into words. The particular spirit to read and learn which stirred inside him after the death of his parents continued till the end of his life.

The following year 1817 brought some of the joyous moments in Keats's life. On 3 March his first volume *Poems* was published by C. and J. Ollier. He offered a copy of it in a friendly manner to Richard Abbey, but was criticized by him. Subsequently the book sold very badly and so he left for another publisher, Taylor and Hessey. Soon after the Keats brothers moved to Hampstead and settled there. At Hampstead Keats met Benjamin Bailey (1791-1853), Charles Brown (1787-1842), and Charles Wentworth Dilke (1789-1864). During the months of April to August he made a tour through Carisbrooke, Margate, Canterbury, Hastings and I Well walk, Hampstead. He too wrote the first and second Books of "*Endymion*".

During this tour Keats met Joseph Severn (1793-1879), a young painter, who later during Keats's illness nursed him in Rome. In the month of September he stayed with Bailey at Oxford and simultaneously wrote the third Book of "*Endymion*". In the month of October he got ill and started taking mercury. On 28 November, he finished the fourth Book of "*Endymion*" at Burford Bridge.

The year 1817 was really a remarkable one for Keats as it was the very time when Keats had an insight into himself. He started going through his earlier verses and evolved his new philosophy of poetry. In December he got an opportunity to meet the great poet William Wordsworth. He also did the reviews for the theatre. In mid-December, his youngest brother Tom was found ill and his health deteriorated towards the worst. In between January and February 1818, Keats revised and copied "*Endymion*" and attended lectures by the great and eminent critic William Hazlitt. The next two months he spent in nursing Tom and stayed with him at Teignmouth. He wrote the work "*Isabella; or The Pot of Basil*". Late in the month of April, "*Endymion*" was published by Taylor and Hessey. Bailey invited him to Oxford once again as he was impressed to read the revised copies of "*Endymion*" but the condition of Tom prevented Keats from going there.

On 28 May 1818 George got married to Georgiana Wylie. His planning to set out for America made Keats mentally weak. He was the witness at his brother's marriage and even signed the register, still he was not happy. He felt his brother's separation very keenly. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey he wrote: "*I have two Brothers, One is driven by the 'burden of society' to America, the other, with an exquisite love of Life, is in a lingering state. I have a Sister too and may not follow them, either to America or to the Grave.*" (Gittings, 99)

On 23 June 1819 George with his new wife left for America and Keats toured the Lake District with Charles Brown. After moving there for some time, again in between the months of July and August he made a walking tour of Scotland with Brown. In the month of August he returned from his tour and got the news of Tom's worst health condition. On 6 August he consulted a doctor due to a severe cold as a result of the extensive walking tour and it led to an acute throat infection. After getting a little bit well he again started for Hampstead and nursed Tom there. But again his throat continued to be sore as earlier. Under the advice of Tom's doctor, he started taking mercury in heavy doses to cure him. He continued the medicine till the late September of 1818.

Meanwhile his Poems and "Endymion" were severely criticized by John Lockhart and John Wilson under the anonymous name 'Z' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh* magazine. Keats met Mrs. Samuel Brawne (1778?-1829) and her family thereafter. The Brawne family liked Keats much as they had heard of him long before. Eventually and gradually the relationship in between Keats's and Brawne's family increased. He came in contact with Fanny Brawne (1800-1865), the 18 year old daughter of the widow Mrs. Brawne.

The same year Keats began *Hyperion*. By the end of November Tom's health deteriorated badly and he was close to death. On 1 December Tom died. Tom's death made Keats more solitary and worn out. The memories of his dead brother haunted him. He wanted to escape the pathetic situation and moved to Wentworth Place to meet Brown. During this stay he came more closer to Fanny Brawne and observed her outlook. He was not much happy with her.

In January 1819 Keats completed *The Eve of St. Agnes* staying in Sussex and Hampshire. In between 13 to 17 February he wrote "The eve of St. Mark". The following two months were a period of depression for him. He gave up writing "Hyperion" and left it unfinished. The Brawne family too occupied a part of the Wentworth Place. Keats now came more closer to Miss Brawne. His closeness with her resulted in love and romance. Late in the month of April, on 21 he was unofficially engaged to Fanny Brawne. In due course of time he wrote some of his wonderful odes, the sonnet "Bright Star" and the beautiful poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". Apart from these, the most famous works like "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Ode to a Nightingale", and "Ode on Melancholy" were also written at this time.

The months of July and August in 1819 were not good for Keats. He got the symptoms of tuberculosis in him. Mrs. Brawne had by this time got to know all about Keats and her daughter, still she nursed him through his illness. Subsequently "Ode on Indolence" and "Ode to Psyche" were written. Then he moved to Shanklin in the Isle of Wight. There he wrote the first part of "Lamia" and "Otho the Great".

In August he left the Isle of Wight for Winchester. The second part of “Lamia” and “Ode to Autumn” were written at this time. Keats too began writing “The Fall of Hyperion” but due to certain reasons he left it unfinished. In fact, the particular year 1819 was the most productive year in the life of Keats, so far as his poetry was concerned. Keats returned to Hampstead in October and was officially engaged to Fanny Brawne. At this point, he was ill and unhappy as he was hanging in between his passion for poetry and his love for Fanny.

The year 1820 brought a new kind of tragic experience in the life of Keats. In the month of January his brother George returned from England to draw some money from Keats. Keats was in a turbulent situation. Still he came to provide his brother the desired amount and left himself penniless. As if this was not the last, destiny once again laughed at him. On 3 February 1820, he suffered the first lung haemorrhage and was confined to his house only.

In the month of May, Brown let him his house. Then Keats moved to Kentish town nearer to Hunt. On 6 March he had a dangerous and new symptom. His specialist recommended that the particular kind of palpitations of the heart which he felt is nothing but a hysterical illness, through this was not proved to be true.

On 22 June he had a second severe haemorrhage while on the way to visit his sister Fanny. He got premonitory evidence of his death and returned to Hunt as he was staying nearer to him. That night he got another haemorrhage and bled too heavily. In July “Lamia”, “Isabella”, “The Eve of St. Agnes and other Poems” were published and well reviewed.

In August he left Hunt’s house because of an unpleasant situation. The reason was that a letter from Fanny Brawne for Keats was mistakenly opened before being given to him. This deeply hurt Keats and he decided to leave the place immediately and set out for Hampstead. Then he arrived at Wentworth Place. Fanny Brawne welcomed and nursed him in her rented rooms.

Keats decided to make a trip to Italy as the doctor along with his friends and well-wishers had advised him to sail for Italy for a change of climate, which was supposed to help in the betterment of his health. So on 17 September, Keats with his friend Joseph Severn sailed for Italy. Both arrived in Rome on 15 November. While in Italy, Keats came in contact with a kind Scottish doctor James Clark. They stopped at Dr. James Clark’s office in the *Piazza di Spagna*. Clark took the responsibilities of nursing Keats.

On 30 November Keats wrote his last known letter to Charles Brown. The letter was all about his ill-health and bad condition. He was dying slowly and gradually. There was no point of hope of his survival. Everybody, including Clark and Severn, had given up any hope of Keats’s survival. And on 23 February 1821 Keats breathed his last, at 26 *Piazza di Spagna*, *Rome*. An excellent, elevated, enchanting personality bade farewell to the cruel, painful, mean world, leaving everybody in a desperate mood with tears. On 26 February Keats was buried in the *Protestant Cemetery* in Rome with one line upon his tombstone: “*Here lies one whose name was writ in water*”. Whether his name was written in water or not that does not matter but he made a signature in the heart of the millions of his admirers.

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