

WRITERS' GALLERY



JOHN KEATS
(1795–1821)

LIFE

Early years John Keats was

born in London, where his father was the manager of a large livery stable. His early life was marked by a series of personal tragedies: his father was killed in an accident when he was eight years old, his mother died when he was fourteen and one of his younger brothers died in infancy. He received relatively little formal education and at age sixteen he became an apprentice to an apothecary-surgeon. His first attempts at writing poetry date from the years of his apprenticeship and include *Imitation of Spenser*, a homage to the Elizabethan poet he greatly admired.

First poems In 1816 Keats obtained a licence to practise apothecary, but abandoned the profession for poetry. He became friends with Shelley (► pp. E40–51) and in March 1817 his first

book of poems was published. Although it sold poorly, this first volume of work introduced him into important literary circles. He met several of the great literary figures of the day including Wordsworth, who exercised an important influence on his approach to writing poetry. In 1817 Keats left London and travelled around the Lake District, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where he was impressed by the beautiful rugged landscape. When he returned from his travels he nursed his brother Tom through the final stages of tuberculosis. After his brother's death he met and fell in love with Fanny Brawne, but his own health was beginning to fail.

The great year Despite frequent and persistent periods of illness, Keats dedicated himself to writing, and in what is often referred to as the Great Year (1819) he produced some of his finest works, including his five great odes.

Death in Italy Keats's health was now in a critical state and Shelley asked him to join him in Pisa. He did not accept Shelley's invitation but did decide to move to Italy, where he hoped the warmer climate would improve his condition. Before leaving, he managed to publish a third volume of poems, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*. In 1820 he settled in Rome, where he died in February 1821 at the age of twenty-five.

WORKS

In his short literary career John Keats wrote some of the most outstanding and best-loved poems in the English language.

His early poems included the sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* (1816), which describes the poet's delight at first reading Chapman's seventeenth-century translation of the Greek epic poem. *Endymion* (1817) tells the story of a young shepherd whom the moon-goddess Selene puts to sleep eternally so that she can enjoy his beauty. Although the poem is structurally weak and often obscure, it shows flashes of immature genius.

The Eve of St. Agnes is a romantic love story which blends elements of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Chaucer and Boccaccio. The rich sensuousness of the imagery in the poem is an indication of the greatness to come.

The Odes In the five odes of 1819, *Ode to Psyche*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (► Text E17), *Ode to a Nightingale* (► Text E18), *Ode on Melancholy* and *To Autumn*, Keats reached the pinnacle of his

creative powers. They are lyrical meditations on art and real life, experience and aspirations, life and dreams. These odes, which are so rich in exquisite and sensuous detail, represent for the many the crowning achievement of English Romanticism.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci Written at about the same time as the Odes, the ballad *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which was published posthumously, in line with the Romantic taste for Medieval setting and describes the destructive side of an idyllic love.

Letters Apart from poetry, Keats also wrote a series of letters, published posthumously, in which he recorded his thoughts on poetry, love, philosophy and people and events of his day. Many of the letters include valuable commentaries on his work and give a profound insight into his artistic development. The twentieth-century literary critic T.S. Eliot (► Module G) described the letters as 'the most important ever written by an English poet'.

Reputation After a particularly savage attack on one of his early works, Keats wrote to his brother 'I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death'. His prophecy has indeed come true. Keats's reputation continued to grow during the nineteenth century, and since then he has, together with Wordsworth, been the most widely read of the English Romantic poets. His *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to a Nightingale* and *To Autumn* are as well-known and loved as anything by Shakespeare.



T.W. Waterhouse, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1893).

TASK

Explain how the events of John Keats's life help us to understand the major themes of his poetry:

- the passing of time;
- the immortality of art;
- death as an escape from human suffering;
- beauty and art as a means of overcoming despair.

John Keats

LEAD IN

The world of virtual reality is an artificial world which sometimes seems more real and satisfying than our own everyday world. When John Keats looks at the paintings on an ancient Grecian urn, he seems to lose himself in a perfect, unchanging reality of trees that never lose their leaves and love that never ends. What lesson does he learn from his trip into this virtually perfect world?

Ode On A Grecian Urn

I

Thou¹ still unravished² bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child³ of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan⁴ historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme⁵:
 What leaf-fringed⁶ legend haunts⁷ about thy shape 5
 Of deities or mortals, or of both⁸,
 In Tempe⁹ or the dales of Arcady¹⁰?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens¹¹ loth¹²?
 What mad pursuit¹³? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels¹⁴? What wild ecstasy? 10

II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye¹⁵ soft pipes, play on¹⁶,
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone¹⁷:
 Fair youth¹⁸, beneath¹⁹ the trees, thou canst not leave 15
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare²⁰;
 Bold²¹ Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal²² yet, do not grieve²³;
 She cannot fade²⁴, though thou hast²⁵ not thy bliss²⁶,
 Forever wilt²⁷ thou love, and she be fair²⁸! 20

III

15. ye: you
 16. play on: continue playing
 17. Not to the ... no tone: do not play real music for our ears (sensual ear: the real ear that can hear musical notes) but silent music (ditties of no tone) for our

spirit, which we like even more (more endeared)

18. Fair youth: good-looking young man

19. beneath: under

20. bare: without leaves

21. Bold: confident, not shy

22. Though winning ... goal:

even though you are very near the girl

23. grieve: be sad

24. fade: disappear

25. hast: have

26. thy bliss: your happiness

27. wilt: will

28. fair: beautiful

III

Ah, happy, happy boughs²⁹ that cannot shed³⁰
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu³¹;
 And, happy melodist³², unwearied³³,
 Forever piping³⁴ songs forever new;
 More happy love! more happy, happy love! 25
 Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
 Forever panting³⁵, and forever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful³⁶ and cloyed³⁷,
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue³⁸. 30

IV

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Leadest thou⁴⁰ that heifer⁴¹ lowing⁴² at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks⁴³ with garlands dressed?
 What little town by river or sea shore, 35
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious⁴⁴ morn?
 And, little town, thy⁴⁵ streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 Why thou art⁴⁶ desolate, can e'er⁴⁷ return. 40

V

O Attic⁴⁸ shape! Fair attitude⁴⁹! with brede⁵⁰
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought⁵¹,
 With forest branches and the trodden⁵² weed⁵³,
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought⁵⁴
 As doth⁵⁵ eternity: Cold Pastoral⁵⁶! 45
 When old age shall this generation waste⁵⁷,
 Thou shalt⁵⁸ remain, in midst of⁵⁹ other woe⁶⁰
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st⁶¹,
 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' 50

III

29. boughs: branches

30. shed: let fall

31. bid the Spring adieu: say goodbye to the spring

32. melodist: musician

33. unwearied: not tired

34. piping: playing

35. panting: desiring

36. high-sorrowful: very sad

37. cloyed: we are tired of it because we no longer get pleasure from it

38. parching: thirsty

39. More happy ... a parching tongue: the eternal love on the urn is happier than our more passionate love that ends and leaves us sad

IV

40. Leadest thou: are you leading

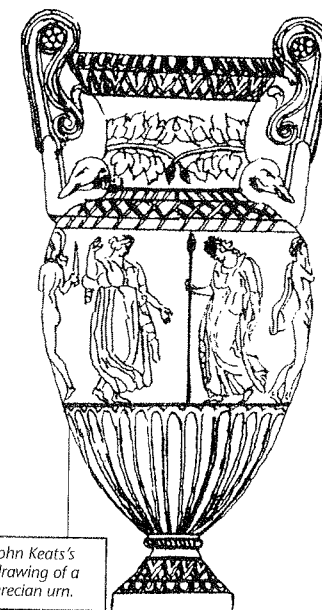
41. heifer: young cow

42. lowing: the deep sound that cattle make, mooing

43. silken flanks: shiny sides

44. pious: holy

45. thy: your



John Keats's drawing of a grecian urn.

46. art: are
 47. e'er: ever

V

48. Attic: from Athens

49. attitude: disposition of figures in a painting

50. brede: intricate design

51. overwrought: elaborately decorated

52. trodden: stepped on

53. weed: wild plants

54. dost tease ...

thought: takes us away (tease out: separate) from our serious thoughts

55. As doth: as does

56. Pastoral: work of art or literature about rural life

57. When ... waste: when this generation shall die

58. shalt: shall

59. in midst of: in the middle of

60. woe: sorrow and sadness

61. thou say'st: you say