

John Keats Biography

Poet (1795–1821)



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

QUOTES

"If Poetry comes not as naturally as Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all."
—John Keats

John Keats's mother, brother, and good friend Richard Woodhouse all died of tuberculosis, which was then termed "consumption." He long suspected that he had the disease himself, and when on February 3, 1820, he had a severe hemorrhage of the lungs, he knew that he could not survive another English winter. Despite moving to Rome, he succumbed to "consumption" in the winter of 1821. The realization that he was likely to die an early death gives poignancy to lyrics like "When I have fears that I may cease to be/ Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain" and "O for ten years, to overwhelm myself in poesy!" It also perhaps explains Keats's astounding productivity, for he did not start writing poetry until just a few years before he died.

The son of a liveryman, he was thoroughly working class, not the sort expected to have poetic aspirations. His mother, Frances (Jennings), remarried two months after his father's death in 1804 but left her husband soon after and died in 1810. After their grandmother's death four years later, the brothers were left alone.

At the Clarke school, John was noted for his pugnacity, especially for his size — he was barely over five feet tall. He was apprenticed in 1811 to an apothecary-surgeon, and passed his examination in 1816. As one biographer puts it, he then went on

vacation and returned a practicing poet. His fatal illness lasted more than a year before his death early in 1821, so his entire career was to last barely three and a half years.

1818 was in many ways the most eventful year of his life: his brother George married and moved to America; in the summer he went on a walking tour of the Lake district and Scotland with his friend Charles Brown; he met Fanny Brawne, the great love of his life, in the fall, while at the same time nursing his brother Tom, who died in December.

During the first few months of 1819, he wrote his masterworks, including the great odes. Jack Stillinger thinks that it is this combined experience of suffering, death, and love all at once, against a background of serious conversation, reading, and thinking, that accounts for Keats's sudden rise to excellence in his poetry. I wonder if anything "accounts" for genius like his.