“Love is my religion—I could die for that”: the bicentenary of the death of English poet John Keats (1795–1821)

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On February 21, 1821, the 25-year-old English poet John Keats died of tuberculosis in Rome. To mark the bicentenary, the British School at Rome streamed a production of Pelé Cox’s 2014 play *Lift Me Up, I Am Dying* about the poet’s last weeks, as he was tended to by the artist Joseph Severn.

The play was first produced at Rome’s Keats-Shelley museum, located in the house near the Spanish Steps where Keats died. When a proposed anniversary performance was cancelled because of the pandemic, Cox redrafted it as a short film. The actors filmed themselves in lockdown, with Cox, Art Director Fabio Barry and Assistant Director/Editor Thomas Painter editing the footage together for streaming at the time of the anniversary.

The play intercuts poetry with quotations from letters and journals by Keats (Christian Roe), Severn (Nicholas Rowe) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (Damien Lewis). It is a moving tribute to the poet, and to Severn’s devotion to him. Italy, says Severn, offered the only possibility of saving Keats’s life, so he must accompany him, “otherwise he must be alone, and one shall never hear anything of him if he dies.”

Cox’s film takes for granted what Severn and Shelley wanted to ensure, Keats’s enduring fame as a lyrical poet of genius. The film’s deft handling of the tragic finale makes it necessary to understand what went before.

Keats was born October 31, 1795 in London, the son of livery stablekeeper Thomas Keats and his wife Frances Jennings. Three younger siblings also survived.

Romanticism—influenced by the French Revolution among other events and processes—emerged in Britain with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Keats, like other leading second wave Romantic poets, developed in an intimate if critical relationship with the older figures.

Keats’s parents could not afford to send John and his brothers to Eton (like Shelley) or Harrow (like Lord Byron), so John was sent to a liberal boarding school with a more progressive curriculum. Here he encountered many of the subjects which informed his poetry, including classical and Renaissance literature. The influence is plain in his earliest surviving poem, “An Imitation of Spenser” (1814).

The siblings were close, but their family life was marked by tragedy. When Keats was eight his father died after falling from his horse. Their mother married again two months later but separated from her new husband shortly afterwards.

When Frances Jennings died of tuberculosis in 1810, her mother took custody of the children. That year John, then 14, began a three-year apprenticeship with a surgeon and apothecary.

After the apprenticeship he enrolled as a student at Guy’s Hospital in 1815. His quick promotion to assisting operating surgeon suggests real ability. He does seem to have been seriously considering a career as a doctor, but he was even more serious about his writing.

Keats was deeply conflicted, trying to balance family financial problems with medicine and his determination to become a writer. Unsurprisingly, he became depressed. His brother George wrote that John “feared that he should never be a poet, and if he was not he would destroy himself.” In 1816, when he was awarded his apothecary’s licence, Keats declared he would be a poet, not a surgeon. Leigh Hunt, a critic, essayist and poet, published one of Keats’s poems for the first time, the sonnet “O Solitude!,” confirming his ambition and promise.

Keats was closely studying literature and writing, particularly sonnets. This period also sees him turn to letter writing. His correspondence is as passionate, intelligent and readable as his verse.

In October 1816, he finally met Hunt, a close friend of Byron and Shelley. Keats’s excitement was plain, writing that this would be “an Era in my existence.” Hunt influenced Keats, whose first collection, *Poems* (1817), was dedicated to him and included the sonnet “Written on the Day that Mr Leigh Hunt Left Prison” (for referring unflatteringly in print to the Prince Regent George, the future George IV).

Poems was more than a precocious statement of promise. It includes one of Keats’s most enduring sonnets, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” It was not, however, a success. His publishers were unenthusiastic, so Keats moved to Taylor and Hessey immediately and began discussing a new volume. Taylor and Hessey also alleviated some money anxieties by paying him an advance.

He spent much of 1817 working on a longer poem, *Endymion* (which begins, “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: / Its loveliness increases; it will never / Pass into nothingness”), revisiting the Greek myth of the shepherd beloved by the moon goddess. He was

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ambivalent about publication, describing the poem as "a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished." That attempt was part of the development of his poetic and artistic thinking, which he formulated at this time as "What imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth."

Keats explained his thinking in a letter to Hessey:

"In *Endymion*, I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice. I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest."

Shelley later wrote to Keats of "the treasures of poetry [*Endymion*] contains, though treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion … I feel persuaded that you are capable of the greatest things."

Keats similarly criticised "Isabella" (1818) as "weak-sided." Although he is sometimes dismissed for not touching directly on political subjects, Keats remained, through association with Hunt and others, part of a generally progressive liberal milieu. His work does contain glimpses of wider social concerns. Stanzas 14-15 of "Isabella," wrote George Bernard Shaw, "contain all the Factory Commission Reports that Marx read, and that Keats did not read because they were not yet written."

Keats wanted to explore "the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the imagination." He summarised his difference with Byron as: "He describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine. Mine is the hardest task." Or, as he wrote to Shelley, "My Imagination is a Monastry and I am its Monk." Byron unsurprisingly did not share Shelley's enthusiasm for Keats's verse, but Hunt was right in seeing them overall as "a new school of poetry."

Hunt's view of the "new school," and the still developing young poet's importance within it, was confirmed by hostilities launched against Keats in 1818.

In 1817, *Blackwood's Magazine* had attacked Hunt and his circle as "the Cockney school." A savage 1818 review of *Endymion* renewed that charge and was widely seen as having delivered Keats a fatal wound. After Keats's death, Shelley denounced the critic in the preface to "Adonais," saying, "Nor shall it be your excuse, that, murderer as you are, you have spoken daggers, but used none."

Byron was simultaneously generous and insensitive:

John Keats, who was kill'd off by one critique,
Just as he really promised something great,
If not intelligible …
'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuff'd out by an article.

Walking in Scotland in 1818 Keats caught a violent cold. This was possibly when he contracted tuberculosis, as he suffered repeatedly from sore throats even after the cold had abated.

Later that year, as he nursed his brother Tom, dying of tuberculosis, he met Fanny Brawne, the love of his life. He gave her one of his most beautiful efforts, "Bright Star" ("Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art—"), as a declaration of love.

He may have begun the poem before they met, when he was still close to Isabella Jones, whom he met in 1817. Jones may also have inspired other major poems, although there is no mention of her after Keats met Brawne, on whom "All his desires were concentrated," in one biographer's words. Jones remained important, being one of the first in Britain to be notified of his death.

Keats's feelings for Brawne were reciprocated, but his personal circumstances were an obstacle. His financial straits precluded marriage, but there seems to have been some informal engagement. The relationship was not consummated, and Keats remained sick and depressed. Through 1819, under these conditions, he produced some of his greatest works, and some of the most beautiful poetry in the English language.

Some poems, like the ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," with its knight in thrall to the beautiful fairy figure, blended the love and death that haunted him.

His six great odes brought his experimentation with verse form to new lyrical heights while crystallising his earlier reflections. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" concludes:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

"Ode to a Nightingale" transcends its melancholy ("I have been half in love with easeful Death") through the beauty of the birdsong:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down.

This towering work, and the passion evident in all his correspondence, is all the more poignant given his rapidly deteriorating health. Early in 1820, when these poems were being published to some acclaim, his fatal illness began. He continued trying to write, but his health situation was now critical.

Keats was told he had to go somewhere warmer for the winter. He and Severn sailed for Rome in September. Keats wrote the last version of "Bright Star" on board the ship.

He declined rapidly. At the end, Severn spent four sleepless nights watching his friend. At about 4 p.m. on February 23, 1821, Keats said, "Severn—I—lift me up—I am dying—I shall die easy—don't be frightened—be firm, and thank God it has come!" He died at 11 p.m.

He was buried three days later in Rome's Cemitero Acattolico. His tombstone bears the legend: "This grave contains all that was mortal, of a young English poet, who, on his death bed, in the bitterness of his heart, at the malicious power of his enemies, desired these words to be engraven on his tomb stone: HERE LIES ONE WHOSE NAME WAS WRIT ON WATER."

The tragedy of Keats's end is bitter enough, but its continued impact today rests on what the extraordinary young poet had achieved in his brief life.

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