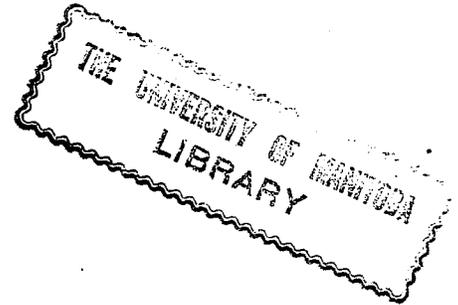


JOHN KEATS
and
HIS RELATION TO SHELLEY
AND OTHER ROMANTIC POETS

by

Marjorie Somerset, B. A. (Manitoba)



A Thesis presented to the Department of English
in the University of Manitoba in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

University of Manitoba.

April 1919.

JOHN KEATS
and HIS RELATION TO SHELLEY
and OTHER ROMANTIC POETS

Introduction

- ~~I~~ ~~1~~ Sketch of Life of Keats
- (a) Early Life
 - (b) Friends - Hunt, Haydon, Shelley
 - (c) Travels and Works
 - (d) ~~Death~~ *Last days of Keats*
- ~~II~~ ~~2~~ The Age of Keats. Its chief characteristics.
- ~~III~~ ~~3~~ Keats's Relation to Romanticism and Romantic writers.
- ~~IV~~ ~~4~~ Study of Special Works of Keats.
- ~~V~~ ~~5~~ Relation of Keats and Shelley.
- ~~VI~~ ~~6~~ Shelley's Opinion concerning Keats's Work.
- ~~VII~~ ~~7~~ Adonais.
- Conclusion.

Introduction

It is only during recent years that the best critics and scholars have paid closer and warmer homage to Keats. Not only among those of our own English tongue has he come to be appreciated, but his fame has spread to the continent, especially to France, where his works have been studied with intelligence and care.

In view of this new wave of appreciation let us hope that Keats is really coming to his own. Perhaps, he will never fill quite the same place in the minds and hearts of people which Alfred Tennyson holds. The very subjects that he treats are not those which are destined to catch the attention of the ordinary reader. They are in the main too abstract, they treat of ideals and seem to have little reference to present day affairs.

Shelley wrote concerning Keats - "In spite of his transcendent genius Keats never was, nor ever will be, a popular poet and the total neglect and obscurity in which the astonishing remnants of his mind still be, was hardly to be dissipated by a writer who, however he may differ from Keats in more important qualities, at least, resembles him in that accidental one, want of popularity".¹

1. Quoted by W. M. Rossetti, in Memoir of Shelley, page 152.

Keats will, however, continue to be read and enjoyed by an ever increasing number. His position and place among the great poets is assured and he will charm all lovers of true poetry with the fine rhythm and music of his verse.

SKETCH OF LIFE OF KEATSEarly Life:

On either the 29th or 31st of October, 1795, the poet, Keats, was born. It is hard to imagine circumstances or parentage more inappropriate to the birth and upbringing of a poet than were those of John Keats, for his father was the manager of the livery stable of the poet's grandfather, Mr. John Jennings. Careful examination into the history of the families of his parents reveals no great scholar or genius and we can "draw no argument as to the influence of heredity or environment on the birth or growth of genius".¹

His father is reported as a man of remarkably fine common sense and native respectability, and his mother as a clever, lively, and passionately fond of amusement. If these be correct estimates of the character of his parents, they may help to explain the deep duality of his nature, the over-sensitive and passionate side inherited, probably, from his mother and his manly good sense and clear vision and judgement from his father.

We learn very little concerning his relatives from either Keats or his brothers. The great ambition

1. "John Keats", by Sidney Colvin, page 2.

of the three seems to have been to try and raise the family, to leave the past behind them and make a brilliant career in the future. These ambitions were fostered by their father, who, though unable to afford the expense of sending his sons to Harrow, sent them to a school kept by a Mr. John Clarke at Enfield. It was while attending this school that John Keats met Charles Cowden Clarke, who afterwards was to become so great a friend and adviser of Keats, and to whom we are indebted for so much of our information concerning his early character. It is from him that we learn that "he was a favourite with all. Not the less beloved was he for having a highly pugnacious spirit, which, when roused, was one of the most picturesque exhibitions off the stage, I ever saw. It was all, however, a wisp-of-straw conflagration".¹ Until the last year of his school life Keats showed no particular signs of an intellectual bent. However, during the last few terms "he showed an indefatigable energy. He was at work before the first school hour began, and that was at seven o'clock; almost all the intervening times of recreation were so devoted".² (Cowden Clarke)

In February 1810, Keats's mother died, and the next term, on the advice of his guardian, he was withdrawn from school and bound apprentice to a Mr. Hammond, a surgeon and apothecary at Edmonton. Of these apprentice days Keats has left us no

1. "John Keats" by Sidney Colvin, page 13.
2. "John Keats" by Sidney Colvin, page 13.

reference; but we learn from his friends that he had no real love for his work, and that only the fact that Edmonton was some two miles from Enfield, where Cowden Clarke still lived, made life at all endurable. It became his custom to walk to Enfield once or twice a week, there to discuss with his friend the authors whom he had learned to love. It was at this time that Clarke introduced him to Spenser, that poet who was to exert such a great power over the young man.

Secretly, Keats was ambitious to become a great writer, but not until 1815 did he venture to show his sonnet entitled "Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison" to his friend.

In 1815, Keats left the service of Mr. Hammond and went to live in London as a student at Guy's Hospital. Though he remained there long enough to obtain his license to practice from the court of Apothecaries, his growing distaste for the profession led him to abandon it in 1817, very much against the advice of his guardian. It was about this time that Cowden Clarke introduced Keats to Leigh Hunt, and the foundation of that memorable friendship, which was to have so great an influence on Keats' life was laid.

Friends: Hunt, Haydon, Shelley.

Leigh Hunt was a man some eleven years Keats' senior and with his brother, John, edited a newspaper known as "The Examiner". This paper was one of those which helped

to fight the losing battle of Liberalism. For some years they managed to continue to print their articles without incurring the wrath of the authorities, but at last, late in 1812, after denouncing the Prince Regent "as a violator of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers and demireps, a man who had just closed half a century without one single claim on the gratitude of his country or the respect of posterity", ¹ the Hunt brothers were summoned and condemned to two years' imprisonment and a fine of £500 each. On his release from prison Keats wrote the sonnet, his first effort, which he showed to Cowden Clarke. He felt himself very much honoured when Clarke offered to introduce him to Hunt whom he had admired for so long.

Leigh Hunt was not a great writer. Charles Lamb says of him, "Matchless as a fireside companion, it was his misfortune to carry too much of a fire side or parlour tone and sometimes, it must be owned, a very second rate parlour tone into literature". He had, however, the power of appreciating the works of others and of judging where their faults lay. It was this trait which made him such a power and influence in the life of John Keats.

With his very nervous, sensitive temperament, his tendency to fits of despondency, Keats was very much dependent upon his friends for their help and encouragement, and in Hunt he found a man well fitted to aid him. The friendship which quickly ripened was, however, not without its disadvantages, for Hunt was now always under the eye of the government and Keats, as

1. "John Keats" by Sidney Colvin, page 42.

his friend and associate, shared largely the blame and criticism which was heaped upon him.

It was at the home of Hunt that Keats met the artist, Haydon. These two found much in common, for Keats had a fine natural sense for the excellencies of painting and sculpture. He was also ready to shower praises on Haydon, which pleased that artist's insatiable vanity. A little later he wrote of Keats: "He is a man after my own heart. He sympathises with me and comprehends me. We saw through each other and I hope are friends forever".¹

Another acquaintance which Keats made at the home of the Hunts was that of Shelley, a young poet some three years Keats's senior. Keats was not very much attracted by this young man, and in order to understand this it is necessary to know something of the life and character of Shelley.

Shelley, from a very young child, had lived in a world of his own peopled with beings from his imagination. This experience is common among children, but there is a striking difference between the ordinary imaginative child and Shelley. The former is content with realistic make-believe, but Shelley wanted to do things he had never done before and to realize the sensations these new experiments created.

At the age of about twelve Shelley went to Eton, where he was known as "Mad Shelley" or the Atheist, the latter title given him not so much because he did not believe in

1. Quoted by Sidney Colvin in "John Keats", page 67.

God as because he was a rebel, always striking against old existing customs and rules. From Eton, Shelley went to Oxford in 1810, where he met Hogg to whom we are indebted for a detailed account of his life and character. Though Hogg's writings are often tiresome, they give us many details which are invaluable in forming an estimate of Shelley's character.

The period spent at Oxford was a very happy one for him. At that institution he was free to follow his own course as much as he pleased, for it was the same then as in the days of Gibbon; a student could learn if he wished to do so but there were none to force him against his will. The greater part of Shelley's time was spent in the study of chemistry and philosophy. He was continually seeking for ideal existence and the supreme test was joy, as it would, no doubt, be in heaven.

On his return to Oxford after the Christmas holidays Shelley, thinking to strike a blow in aid of liberty, wrote his famous pamphlet on the "Necessity of Atheism". He believed not so much in the fact that there was no God as that the present form of Christianity, with all its imperfections, was unfit to bring about a betterment of this world. He had the pamphlet printed anonymously, and scattered the copies through the college. It soon came to the notice of the Dons who laid the blame on Shelley, his rather radical ideas having attracted their notice. When

questioned concerning the authorship of the paper he refused to give an answer. This was taken as an acknowledgement and he was promptly expelled. When his friend, Hogg, tried to intercede on his behalf the college authorities believed that he was implicated in the affair and passed the sentence of expulsion on him also.

The two friends left the college and went straight up to London where they found lodging so much to Shelley's liking that he exclaimed "We must stay here, stay forever".¹ While in London Shelley made the acquaintance of Harriet Westbrooke and her sister, Eliza. From the very first Eliza seems to have decided that Shelley and her sister must marry. She soon learned that the poet would do anything for anyone he thought to be oppressed. She pictured Harriet as a prey to the whims of an arrogant and overbearing father who was making her life unhappy. In order to relieve these conditions, Shelley proposed to marry Harriet, and thus free her from parental tyranny. This he did in 1811.

All these years Shelley had been writing pamphlets and poems in which he had set forth his ideas. But it was not till 1813 that he published "Queen Mab", the first of his works "which shows any promise of his future greatness".² In this poem he sets forth the ideas which dominated his whole life - "his fierce impatience of our

1. "Shelley, the Man and the Poet", by A. Clutton Brock, page 32.

2. "Shelley, the Man and the Poet", by A. Clutton Brock, page 74

present imperfections and a vast desire and hope for a perfection to be".¹ He thought of life as a constant struggle of the good that is in men with the evil that is outside them. The subject of the poem "Queen Mab" is the same as that of his great poem "Prometheus Unbound" - the past and present misery and their future regeneration.

In 1814 occurred that incident which has caused so much controversy, namely, Shelley's estrangement from Harriet and his flight with Mary Godwin. As to the real grounds of the estrangement we can only conjecture. Peacock, a friend and biographer of Shelley, says, "I have often thought that if the sister had not lived with them the link of their married life would not have been so readily broken".² Hogg tells us that Harriet lost her intellectual interests and became very fond of dress.³ Whatever foundation there may be for these statements, we do know that Shelley provided for Harriet and her children and continued to write to her after he left with Mary.

Matters continued in this way until in 1816, shortly after the return of the Shelleys from the continent, news came saying that Harriet had committed suicide by drowning herself. Public opinion now became so strongly opposed to Shelley that early in 1818 he and his wife, Mary, left

1. Ibid, page 75

2. Quoted by A. Clutton Brock in Shelley, the Man and the Poet page 83.

3. "Shelley, the Man and the Poet", by A. Clutton Brock.

England, never to return. They travelled through Switzerland and Italy, finally settling on the Bay of Spezzia. It was while attempting to cross this bay in a great storm that Shelley was drowned, 1822, at the early age of thirty.

Such is a brief outline of the man whom Keats met at the home of Leigh Hunt. Although the two poets had no strong dislike for each other they never became the firm friends that Shelley and Byron, or that Keats and Severn were. Added to the differences in ideas and character were two prejudices of Keats which he was never able to wholly overcome. The first of these was the idea that Shelley, who was of good birth, despised his humble origin. The second was the fact that so many of the friends of Shelley were seeking financial aid from him and Keats' independent spirit revolted at the idea of being classed as one of the band of parasites surrounding Shelley. Even though Keats "must have known that he could learn much from the elder poet's trained scholarship and fine literary sense, he refused his cordial invitation to stay with him at Great Marlowe, in order that he might have his own unfettered scope".¹

Travels and Works

In August 1817, Keats went to visit Bailey at Oxford. Here under the sympathetic influence and the congenial

1. "John Keats", by Sidney Colvin, page 73.

friendship he wrote a great deal of his first long poem, "Endymion," which he finally finished in 1818. The quiet and peaceful atmosphere of the place was well suited for study and many of the most beautiful passages of the poem were written while there.

During June, July and August 1818, Keats went with Brown on a walking tour through the Lake District of England and through Scotland.

This was the first time that the young poet had come in contact with such beauties of nature and some of his impressions are carefully preserved for us by his companion, Brown.

When they came in view of Lake Windermere, one fine, mild day, Brown says of Keats "that his bright eyes darted on a mountain peak beneath, which was gently floating on a silver cloud, thence to a very small island adorned with the foliage of trees that lay beneath us, and surrounded by water of a glorious hue, when he exclaimed, - 'How can I believe in that? - Surely it cannot be', catching the further extremity of the lake he thought it more and more wonderfully beautiful".¹ He has embodied his impressions of the scene from the top of Mount Skiddaw in the lines from "Hyperion" -

"-dismal cirque
Of Druid stones upon a forlorn moor",
When the chill rain begins at shut of eve
In dull November and their chancel vault
The heaven itself is blinded throughout night"¹

There was, however, growing in his mind the thought

1. Quoted by Sidney Colvin in "John Keats", page 273.

2. Quoted by Sidney Colvin in "John Keats", page 276.

that his fellow creatures are of more interest than natural scenes. This tendency is noticed even while on the walking tour. He writes of a visit to an inn at Ambleside which interested him very greatly.

"We were greatly amused by a country dancing school held at the Lun; it was indeed 'no new cotillon fresh from France'. No, they kickit and jumpit with mettle extraordinary and whiskit and friskit and toed it and go'd it and twirl'd it and whirl'd and stamped it and sweated it, tattoeing the floor like mad. -- I never felt so near the glory of Patriotism, the glory of making by any means a country happier. This is what I like better than scenery".¹

Death

The Scotch tour proved too hard for Keats's constitution and by the time they reached Inverness he had contracted such a sore throat that the doctors forbade him to continue his journey. He returned to England where he found his brother, Tom, to be very ill. It was while nursing this brother that Keats worked on his poem "Hyperion". The work, however, did not progress very rapidly as the nursing and anxiety drew very heavily from his slender store of health and strength. In 1818 Tom died, and Keats became an inmate of the house of his friend, Brown.

1. Quoted by Sidney Colvin in "John Keats" (1917), page 278.

It was at this period that the famous reviews so bitterly criticized his small volume of work. His friends were very indignant at the injustice of these reviews, for they saw that it was his friendship with Hunt that had, in a large measure, drawn the unjust criticisms upon him. Some of them even went so far as to say that the reviews had a great deal to do with undermining Keats's health and causing his early death. This, however, is not the case, for under it all Keats was perfectly calm and really tried to benefit by the criticisms, none of which were so severe and just as his own. To quote his own words regarding the article in Blackwoods:

"Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic in his own works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict,- and also when I feel I am right no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary re-perception and ratification of what is fine. J. S. is perfectly right in regard to the slipshod Endymion. That it is so is no fault of mine. Not though it may sound a little paradoxical, it as good as I had power to make it by myself.- I will write independently - I have written independently without judgement. I may

write independently, and with judgement hereafter. The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man".¹

This year was one in which some of the best of his writings were done. The five odes, Ode to Psyche, On Indolence, On a Grecian Urn, To a Nightingale and To Melancholy, besides Le Bell Dame sans Merci, The Eve of St. Agnes and Lamia were written. From this list it is very clear that the Scotch reviews did not discourage Keats and cause him to abandon poetry for some other profession, for which he might be better fitted.

During all this time his health had been becoming steadily worse, until in August 1820, it was decided that he must not attempt to stand the rigours of a northern winter but must spend the time in the south. Finding that Brown was away in Scotland on a second walking tour, Severn offered to accompany the poet to Italy. After a long and tedious voyage they settled in Rome, so that they might be near the eminent physician, Dr. Clarke.

For some weeks after his arrival Keats seemed to rally, and his friends were filled with great hopes for his ultimate recovery. The improvement was, however, only temporary, and in February 1821, attended by his faithful friend, Severn, he died. Before his death he chose as his epitaph -

1. Quoted in "Alabama Student", by William Osler, page 45.

"16"

'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'.

So firmly did he believe that none of his works would live and be read by men in the future.

THE AGE OF KEATS

ITS CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

To fully estimate the character of the writings of Keats, we must glance briefly at the age in which he lived. The new literary school, which reached its culmination in 1798, in the publication of the "Lyrical Ballads" of Wordsworth and Coleridge, was known as the Romantic School.

Very many writers have tried to formulate a definition for this new movement, which showed itself in almost every country. H. A. Beers quotes some critics as saying that it was wholly subjective.¹ The writers poured forth their own feelings and were governed in a great measure by their emotions, and, wrote to please themselves without reference to the tastes of their readers. If this be true the works of Scott must be excluded. The novels and poems of this great writer are almost wholly objective, and yet it would be impossible to include them, filled with the spirit of romance as they were, with the writings of the previous age. Another writer, according to Mr. Beers, has said that Romanticism is a revival of the past. This is only in a measure true, for can we say that all the works of Shelley are inspired by the past? The most satisfactory method of defining the movement is by comparing it with the previous

1. "English Romanticism, xviii Century", by H. A. Beers.

age and pointing out wherein lie the chief differences.

The eighteenth century laid down many hard and fast rules, and any writer who refused to conform to these was debarred from entering the ranks of the so-called great. In the first place, they said that every individual should conform to a type, and that poetry must be confined to common experience and within the understanding of this average man. The Romanticists abandoned this rule. They laid stress on individualism, and the free self expression of that individual. We group the Romantic writers together because they lived during the same period and were subject to the same influence, not because there is a great similarity in their works, in fact the writings of many of them have very little in common.

The second rule laid down by the writers of the eighteenth century is that enthusiasm and imagination must be subservient to reason and common sense. The writers of the succeeding age, in their eagerness to show their disapproval of this rule, seem to have abandoned common sense and reason entirely.

A third rule of the Classicists was that all poetry should be cast in one form, the heroic couplet. A glance through the works of Keats will be enough to show how completely this rule was overthrown by the later school. The writers were experimenters in the matter of form and

style. The Romanticists further rebelled against the clear, hard and crystalline poetry by seeking the best in humanity, and not seeking that best among the society of the day, but out at the very edge of civilization where man lived and developed unhampered by the conventional. By this search for the good, the ideal, a sense of wonder at the mysteries of life was awakened. H. A. Beer quotes Dr. Hedge as saying: "the essence of Romance is mystery. The woody dell, the leafy glen, the forest path which leads one knows not whither are romantic, the public highway is not".¹

They call upon imagination, external nature, and the past to help them to solve the mysteries of life. Professor Herford says: "Primarily, it was an extraordinary development of the imaginative sensibility. At countless points the universe of sense and thought acquired a new potency of response and appeal to man, a new capacity of ministering to and mingling with his richest and intensest life".²

Thus the three leading features of the age were aspiration after perfection and the ideal, the sense of mystery, and the appealing to the emotions by the method of suggestion. These were in direct opposition to the ideas of the previous writers. For them nothing was left to the imagination, they conceived that they had settled all questions of the mysteries of life and death. In a word, the Age of Classicism might be described as an age of completeness; while Romanticism is an age of

1. "A History of English Romanticism in 18th century", by H. A. Beers, pages 11 and 12.

2. "The Age of Wordsworth", by Prof. C.H. HERFORD, page 14.

incompleteness, the whole invaded by the modern spirit of mysticism.

One of the chief sources of the new Romantic thought was the revolutionary naturalism of Rousseau. This French writer taught the revealing power of love, the right of the individual to have liberty of thought and action, and the power of natural scenery to respond to the needs of man. The later writers took up the latter theme and developed it until both man and nature were reconciled as elements in a single ideal. When the French people rose and threw off the yoke of oppression, under which they had been labouring for so long, it was merely an expression of the ideal of individual liberty preached by Rousseau.

During the first stages of that great struggle for liberty the chief writers and thinkers of England eagerly welcomed the movement as the dawn of a new day, and threw all the weight of their influence on the side of the down-trodden people. Later, however, many of them became disgusted at the excesses and the despotic acts which were committed in the name of freedom. But notwithstanding the fact that a reaction seemed to spread over the countries of Europe and with the rule of Napoleon, liberty and freedom were apparently crushed and the good started by the Revolution stamped out, still the spirit of freedom remained the same, the spirit that made "Romanticism stand for liberty, progress, originality and the spirit of the future;

as opposed to Classicism which stood for conservation,
authority, imitation, the spirit of the past".¹

1. "A History of English Romanticism in 18th Century"
by H. A. Beers, page 11.

KEATS'S RELATION TO ROMANTICISM

AND ROMANTIC WRITERS

There is very little in the writings of Keats to indicate that he was keenly interested in the political changes of his day. We know that he was a liberal, but this seems to have been more from chance of circumstances than a real and careful study of the situation. His friends were liberals; he was thrown among liberals and, for these reason, he espoused the liberal cause.

Two passages, however, occur in his poetical writings which show that the natural bent of his mind was opposed to oppression and tyranny. In his sonnet written on the day Leigh Hunt was liberated, he speaks of the Regent as the "minion of grandeur" and his ministers as a "wicked crew". The second passage is found in his first long poem, "Endymion". Here he burst forth in indignation against crowned heads, oppressors of poor humanity -

"There are who lord it o'er their fellow men
With most prevailing tinsel, who unpen
Their baaing vanities, to browse away
The comfortable green and juicy hay
From human pastures; or, O torturing fact!
Who through an idiot blink, will see unpack'd
Fire branded foxes to sear up and singe
Our sanctuary splendour, not a sight
Able to face an owl's, they still are dight
By the blear-eyed nations in empurpled vests