

John Keats

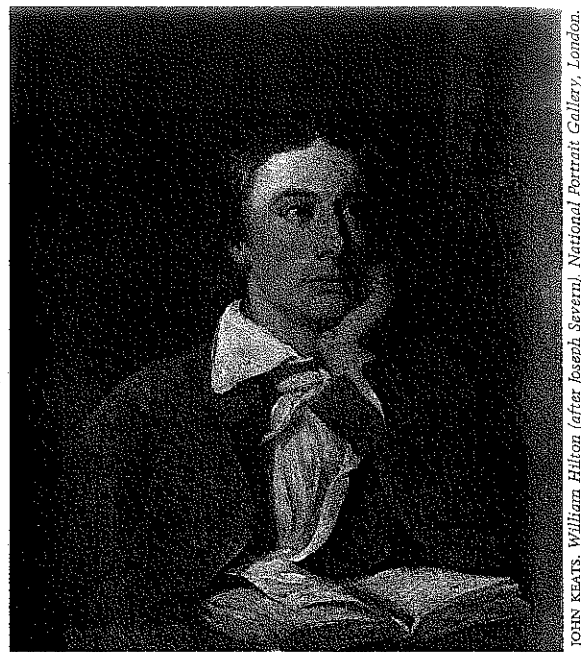
1795–1821

A beloved figure in literature, Keats wrote some of the most beautiful poems in the English language in the few years before his death at the age of twenty-five. "I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things," he said. There is virtually nothing abstract or intellectual about his poems, which appeal directly to the senses. Keats's friends believed that his writing possesses the same harmonious intensity as Shakespeare's works, an opinion echoed by many critics since.

Keats came from humble origins. His father, who had worked in a livery stable before marrying the boss's daughter, eventually took over the business, which was prosperous enough for the boy to attend Reverend John Clarke's private academy at Enfield. Although small in stature, young Keats was pugnacious, distinguishing himself in fist-fights. One of his teachers, seeing that Keats was intellectually gifted, encouraged his reading and introduced him to music and the theatre.

Keats's father died in a riding accident when the boy was eight; his mother died of tuberculosis when he was fourteen. At fifteen his guardian apprenticed Keats to a surgeon, and he began to study medicine. Keats abandoned this career in favor of literature, however, largely due to the encouragement he received from Shelley, Lamb, and Hazlitt, important writers who were part of the circle surrounding Leigh Hunt, an influential man of letters.

Keats's first book, *Poems*, came out in 1817. *Endymion*, an ambitious allegory, followed the next year and was met with reviews that, according to a sentimental but false legend, contributed to the author's early death. *Blackwood's Magazine*, for example, suggested that the surgeon's apprentice stick to his "plasters, pills, and ointment boxes." These reviews were at least in part politically motivated, for Leigh Hunt was an outspoken radical, and Keats was attacked because of his association with Hunt's group. It is unlikely in any case that Keats worried too much over his reviews; he was maturing so fast as an artist that he had his own reservations about his earlier work, and his personal problems were pressing: his brother



JOHN KEATS. William Hilton (after Joseph Severn). National Portrait Gallery, London.

George had gone bankrupt in Kentucky, and his younger brother Tom needed his attendance as he wasted away from tuberculosis. On top of all that, Keats fell in love with a pretty, lively girl of eighteen, Fanny Brawne, but their engagement was made impossible by Keats's poverty and by his increasing awareness that he, too, had contracted the disease that had proved fatal to his mother and brother.

In the midst of his emotional distress, Keats in the first ten months of 1819 produced a series of poetic masterworks: his great odes, "The Eve of St. Agnes," "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and numerous sonnets. Graceful, sensuous, musical, these works epitomize English poetry for many readers and are all the more remarkable because they were produced by a poet not yet twenty-four years old.

When Keats began to experience symptoms of tuberculosis, he sought the milder climate of Italy, but the worsening ravages of the disease made his last months what he called "a posthumous existence." In this last as in his earlier adversities, Keats remained gallant, writing letters that grace English literature as his poems had done. He died in Rome on February 23, 1821, and was buried beneath the epitaph he composed: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

Ode on a Grecian Urn

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape 5
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe¹ or the dales of Arcady?²
What men or gods are these? What maidens loath?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels?³ What wild ecstasy? 10

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave 15
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair! 20

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu,
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
Forever piping songs forever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love! 25
Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
Forever panting, and forever young,
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue. 30

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?

-
1. **Tempe**: a beautiful valley in Greece.
 2. **Arcady**: a simple, rustic region in Greece.
 3. **timbrels**: ancient tambourines.

nd his
e as he
ll that,
girl of
nt was
by his
racted
ier and

eats in
ries of
e of St.
numer-
these
eaders
y were
s old.
oms of
f Italy,
de his
exist-
, Keats
nglish
Rome
th the
: name

What little town by river or seashore, 35
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. 40

O Attic⁴ shape! Fair attitude! with brede⁵
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!⁶ 45
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." 50

4. **Attic**: a Grecian shape of elegant simplicity and grace.

5. **brede**: embroidery.

6. **Cold Pastoral**: poem in marble.

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. In the first stanza why is the urn a "sylvan historian"? What is the "flowery tale" it tells?
2. To what "unheard melodies" does the second stanza refer? Why are they "sweeter" than heard ones?
3. Similarly, the third stanza refers to warmth and passion of two kinds, or on two levels. What are they? What advantages do the lovers on the urn enjoy? What are the limitations of art as represented by the urn?
4. The urn has caught the warmth and motion of a moment held forever in suspension, and in the fourth stanza the reader is drawn even further into that "eternal present." What part of the scene is not even pictured on the urn and must be imagined? In the last line of the fourth stanza, who or what is "desolate"?
5. What essential contradiction or paradox is indicated by "Cold Pastoral"? What comparison is implied in this phrase? Briefly explain the comparison.

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Ode**. The ode, an elaborate kind of lyric poem, deals with a serious theme in language that is dignified as well as enthusiastic and exalted. In what ways does this poem exemplify the characteristics of an ode?
2. **Diction**. Poets can make use of ambiguity, choosing words with various possible meanings. Consider *still* in line 1. In what two senses might this word be understood? How might each be appropriate to the poem's meaning?
3. **Imagery and Structure**. Which stanza contains images suggesting heat? How does the stanza that follows "cool" the temperature? Where does the poem emphasize (unheard) sounds, and where does it emphasize silence? Where is the focus on the depicted scene, and where on the urn itself? Based on the imagery in the poem, can you detect any general pattern, any rising and falling structure?

George Gordon, Lord Byron

1788–1824

"I am such a strange *mélange* of good and evil, that it would be difficult to describe me," Lord Byron once said. Because he is the most glamorous figure in British literature, it is difficult to consider Byron's artistic merit apart from the legend of the man. Handsome, adventurous, restless, melancholy, hedonistic, and self-destructive, Byron himself seems quintessentially modern, yet his poetic style was firmly rooted in the eighteenth century. Although his poetry seldom equals that of contemporaries such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley, it is Byron, not these more innovative writers, who symbolizes the Romantic spirit.

Byron's father, Captain Mad Jack Byron, was a profligate rascal who married Byron's mother for her money, squandered it in a matter of months, then abandoned her and his son. Byron had been born with a clubfoot, and although years of agonizing and often inept treatment left him with but a slight limp, he remained pathologically aware of his disability. This sensitivity contributed both to his shyness among strangers and to his passionate devotion to athletics, including swimming, boxing, riding, and fencing.

When he was ten, Byron became the sixth Lord Byron, entitling him to the ancestral estate of Newstead and to enrollment at fashionable Harrow School and then Cambridge University. He was not rich, however, at least not rich for a Lord, and he squandered much of his inheritance. Byron intended to enter the House of Lords for a political career, but first he tried writing poetry. In 1807 he published an unremarkable, slim volume entitled *Hours of Idleness*. The prestigious *Edinburgh Review* savagely denounced the book, prompting Byron to reply with the satirical *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* in 1809. Instantly popular, the talk of London, it confirmed Byron in his commitment to a career as a poet.

For the next two years, Byron toured Portugal, Spain, Malta, Greece, and Asia Minor. On this adventurous excursion he gathered material for *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–1818), a long, lively poem about the adventures of a brilliant but



GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON (etching). Painted by G. Sanders, 1807. Engraved by Edward Finden, 1834. The Mansell Collection.

unhappy young Lord. Back in London in 1812, Byron entered the House of Lords, made a few speeches, and then suddenly found himself famous; *Childe Harold* had become an instant and enormous success.

The sale of Newstead gave Byron a modicum of financial security, and he traveled through Europe. He added cantos to *Childe Harold* and in 1818 began his masterful *Don Juan*, a picaresque verse satire that drew on Byron's own experiences and was widely attacked for its supposed immorality.

In Italy Byron befriended Shelley, who admired *Don Juan*, and Byron and Shelley became part of the flamboyantly colorful "Pisan Circle" (so named because its members lived in Pisa) of political adventurers. In 1822 Shelley was drowned. The next year, Byron, seeking an opportunity for heroism that would redeem his sullied reputation in the eyes of his countrymen, decided to help the Greeks fight the Turks. Byron was not to see this action, however, for he succumbed to a fever after being caught in a downpour on his daily ride, and he died on April 19, 1824, in Missolonghi, Greece. The Greeks consider him one of their national heroes.

She Walks in Beauty

This poem was inspired by Lady Wilmot Horton, Byron's cousin by marriage, who arrived at a party wearing a black dress with spangles.

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect¹ and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

1. **aspect:** appearance.

Getting at Meaning RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. In the first stanza to what exactly is the lady's beauty compared? Is it darkness? brightness? What is "that tender light"?

2. In line 8 how would you express the verb *had . . . impaired* in everyday English?

3. How does the second stanza describe the lady's "nameless grace" in terms of both darkness and light?

4. In line 17 what is meant by "all below"?

5 Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Meter and Rhyme Scheme.** What metrical pattern is used in this poem? What is the rhyme scheme? Considering both the form and the content of this poem, what connections do you see between Byron's poem and the Cavalier tradition? the Neoclassic tradition? What characteristics are clearly Romantic?

2. **Sound Devices and Mood.** How do consonance, assonance, and alliteration add to the musical quality of this poem? How do they contribute to the prevailing mood? Cite specific examples from the poem.

3. **Theme.** What does the woman's physical appearance reveal about her? What does this poem suggest about the relation between body and soul? What similar relation is implied in this poem? Does the poem support the Romantic concept of the unity of all creation? Explain.

Developing Vocabulary

Using a Dictionary. Examine more closely three of the words in this poem.

a. While the usual meaning of *aspect* (line 4) is "appearance," the word has another related meaning, old but rare. Find this meaning in a dictionary. Might Byron have meant this when writing the poem?

b. The poem refers to "gaudy day" in line 6. What is the noun form of *gaudy* and its derivation? Does your dictionary differentiate among the synonyms of *gaudy*? In the poem what adjective functions as the antonym of *gaudy*?

c. The word *clime* can mean "climate," but what else does it mean? What usage label (such as "slang" or "obsolete") does your dictionary give the word?

On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year

'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,
Since others it hath ceased to move:
Yet, though I cannot be beloved,
Still let me love!

My days are in the yellow leaf; 5
The flowers and fruits of love are gone;
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!

The fire that on my bosom preys 10
Is lone as some volcanic isle;
No torch is kindled at its blaze—
A funeral pile.

The hope, the fear, the jealous care,
The exalted portion of the pain 15
And power of love, I cannot share,
But wear the chain.

But 'tis not *thus*—and 'tis not *here*—
Such thoughts should shake my soul,
nor *now*,
Where glory decks the hero's bier,
Or binds his brow. 20

The sword, the banner, and the field,
Glory and Greece, around me see!
The Spartan, borne upon his shield,
Was not more free.

Awake! (not Greece—she *is* awake!) 25
Awake, my spirit! Think through *whom*
Thy lifeblood tracks its parent lake,
And then strike home!

Tread those reviving passions down,
Unworthy manhood!—unto thee 30
Indifferent should the smile or frown
Of Beauty be.

If thou regret'st thy youth, *why live?*
The land of honorable death
Is here:—up to the field, and give
Away thy breath!

35

Seek out—less often sought than found—
A soldier's grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy ground,
And take thy rest.

40

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. How would you summarize the speaker's complaint in the first four stanzas? Why are "Such thoughts" (line 18) inappropriate?
2. If the speaker is Byron, what biographical facts relate to the content of this poem? Does the poem serve as a fitting epitaph, or tribute, to Byron? Explain.
3. What are "those reviving passions" (line 29)? What is the speaker's attitude toward them?
4. What does the speaker mean when he says, "If thou regret'st thy youth, *why live?*" How does he free himself of the mood expressed in the first 16 lines?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Meter.** Scan the meter of this poem. How does a consistent variation in the overall pattern enhance the dramatic effectiveness of each stanza? Contrast the effect with that of the Alexandrine in "Apostrophe to the Ocean."
2. **Figurative Language.** Analyze the fire imagery in the third stanza. What does *volcanic* suggest? What does the metaphor in lines 11 and 12 imply about the speaker's passions?
3. **Internal Rhyme and Theme.** Find the internal rhyme, rhyme within lines of poetry, in the final stanza. What idea does this rhyme underscore? What major theme?
4. **Tone.** How does the tone of the last six stanzas differ from that of the first four? Point out some of the

ways the tone is achieved in each group of stanzas. Note particularly the connotations of key words and the way that the poet achieves emphasis and rhythmic variations through punctuation and phrasing. Note also the sounds of the language, created through assonance, consonance, and alliteration.

5. **Speaker.** In both this poem and the excerpt from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the speakers are identified closely with Byron and with the Byronic hero, a passionate, melancholy, solitary, and typically Romantic character. What qualities of the Byronic hero are implied in these two selections? In the other two poems by Byron?

Developing Writing Skills

See **Handbook: How To Write About Literature**, page 938, Lesson 10. <<

Narration: Establishing Tone. The tone and mood of this poem change as the speaker resolves his problem and alters his attitude. In several paragraphs narrate an event, either real or imagined, during which a character undergoes a change of heart, suffers a disappointment, overcomes depression, or reacts to a surprise. At some point in the narrative, the tone should shift dramatically to reflect the change in the character's feelings. Use either first-person or third-person narration, whichever is more appropriate to your subject.