

*John Keats*. (19<sup>th</sup> century). Marble.

An important work among the Athenaeum's collection of busts depicting exemplary men, this marble portrait of the English Romantic poet, John Keats [1795-1821], is as remarkable for its execution as it is for its subject – whose poetry portrayed emotion through sensual imagery.

Sculpted in white marble, Keats is shown in a swathe of fabric, suggesting a classical toga and therefore elevating his status to that of a Greco-Roman figure. Given Keats' fascination with Classical culture, the artist's choice here is a fitting tribute. In contrast to this reference to the ancient world, he is portrayed with a youthful and handsome face, surrounded by a voluptuous mop of self-consciously unruly hair. Indeed, his youthful face stands out against the busts that flank him -- George Washington and Socrates -- but finds a kindred spirit in the similarly youthful bust of Lord Byron, after John Evan Thomas. Indeed, the Romantic character of both poets' work is visually reflected in their clothing and hairstyles.

Keats was born in London in 1795, the oldest of four children.[1] He lost his parents at an early age; his father was trampled by a horse when he was eight, and six years later his mother died from tuberculosis.[2] Unfortunately, this same disease would also strike Keats and his brother.[3] In 1816 Keats became a licensed apothecary, but found his passions lay in arts and literature, and so he chose to pursue poetry instead.[4] While caring for his brother, the first of this generation to succumb to tuberculosis, Keats fell in love with Fanny Brawne, a woman he would never be able to marry.[5]

Keats's work was inspired by mythical and ancient themes. His 1819 poem *Hyperion* concerns the ancient Greek creation myth, whereas his 1819 *Ode on a Grecian Urn* – one of the best known poems of the nineteenth century – further cemented his links to the Classical past.[6] Keats contracted tuberculosis in 1819 and was never able to finish *Hyperion* due to his failing health, however the poem is considered one of his best works.[7] Keats died in Rome at the youthful age of twenty-five, leaving behind a legacy of poetry known for its rich imagery and sensuality.

One of Keats most sensuous poems is called *To Autumn*, written in 1819, it is filled with images of ripening fruit and rosy hues of the sun.[8] An excerpt from *To Autumn* demonstrates Keats' masterful use of evocative imagery.[9]

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;

Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run

Keats worked contemporaneously with famed Romantic poet Lord Byron; during a period of depression Keats suffered in 1814, he found solace and inspiration in Byron's works.[10] Byron also wrote poetry rooted in Neoclassicism, his "Isles of Greece" written in 1819 illustrates his Philhellenism and passion for all things Greek.[11]

Although neither the artist nor the donor of this bust is known, it fits in rather seamlessly with the fifteen other busts in the library's main hall. Keats joins such British poets and writers as William Shakespeare, John Milton, Sir Walter Scott, and of course his direct contemporary, Byron. Like Byron, he serves as a symbol of youthful virtuosity and inspiration for the Athenaeum members, communicating the message that – regardless of age – greatness is possible when wedded to great talent and hard work. MDP

Notes:

[1] "John Keats", *Poets.org*, poets.org.

[2] *Id.*

[3] *Id.*

[4] "John Keats Biography", *Bio.*, biography.com.

[5] "John Keats", poets.org.

[6] *Id.*

[7] *Id.*

[8] "John Keats Biography", biography.com.

[9] Aileen Ward, *John Keats The Making of a Poet*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), p. 321.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[11] Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron's Poetry A Critical Introduction*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), p. 125.