John Keats (1795-1821)

Along with his contemporaries Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats is considered to be perhaps the most remarkable and influential poet of the second generation of the English Romantic movement. While Keats is now arguably the most closely studied and widely read of the English Romantic poets, he was virtually unknown as a poet during his lifetime. His poetry only achieved critical and popular recognition well after his death, during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Keats proved himself to be a brilliant student and thinker at a young age. He excelled in the study of history and the classics, scholastic interests that would prove to have a tremendous influence upon his later poetry. After his family life fell apart (Keats’s parents both died within six years of each other), the teenage Keats became an apprentice to a surgeon and apothecary. While his medical career consumed a great deal of his time, after finishing his apprenticeship, Keats managed to produce what would later be considered some of the finest poetry of the Romantic age. Keats’s life and poetry were greatly impacted by his love affairs with Frances (Fanny) Brawne and Isabella Jones, relationships that would serve to influence his poetry and darken his emotional well-being. Sickly throughout much of his life, Keats contracted tuberculosis while caring for his brother, who was dying from the disease. Keats himself died of tuberculosis at the age of 24. He was elegized by his friend Percy Shelley in the great poem “Adonis.”

Though Keats worked tirelessly on his poetry during his relatively short life, his reputation as a poet rests on a rather small collection of poems, particularly his odes, which are generally regarded as the finest and most passionate and insightful lyrical odes in the English language. Odes such as “To Autumn,” “Ode to Psyche,” and “Ode on a Nightingale” demonstrate Keats’s keen and highly particular poetic ability to present rich, lyrical, and highly emotional scenes and ideas in crisp and powerful language. Keats is commonly regarded as not only the finest poet of the English Romantic movement but as the finest English lyrical poet in the language. Critics and readers of today are struck by Keats’s poetic originality, which is made particularly evident in the manner in which he readily mixes the sort of common-language style of early English Romantic poets with the high-intellectual and self-conscious styles of the second generation of English Romantic poets.