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CRITICAL HISTORY

'SNUFF'D OUT BY AN ARTICLE'

An 1848 review in the *New Monthly Magazine* concisely summarises the critical responses of Keats's contemporaries to his work:

It was the misfortune of Keats as a poet, to be either extravagantly praised or unmercifully condemned. The former had its origin in the generous partialities of friendship, somewhat obtrusively displayed; the latter in some degree, to resentment of that friendship, connected as it was with party politics, and peculiar views of society as well as of poetry (qtd in Matthews, p. 1).

While favourable reviews of Keats's work were written, often by his friends, these were far outnumbered by dismissive and frequently vicious attacks. These attacks were motivated by political as much as by aesthetic considerations. They were at least partly the result of Keats's friendship with the radical poet Leigh Hunt, who promoted the work of both Keats and Shelley in his weekly paper *The Examiner*.

CONTEXT

Hunt, who had once been jailed for libelling the Prince Regent, was considered the leader of the so-called 'Cockney School' of poetry, a term used in a derogatory manner to suggest affectation and vulgarity in both the persons and the style of its practitioners.

The most damaging attacks on Keats's poetry came in John Wilson Croker's review of *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review* and John Gibson Lockhart's 1818 review of *Endymion* and *Poems* (1817) in *Blackwood's Magazine*, both published anonymously as was then the custom. Lockhart's review was exceptionally malicious. Ridiculing Keats for his youth, social background, and supposed political sympathies, and dismissing *Endymion* as 'drivelling idiocy', he recommended that 'Johnny Keats', that overambitious apothecary's apprentice, would be well advised to return to his pills and plasters.

The reactions of Keats's friends and associates to the attacks of the reviewers were to have a marked influence upon later assessments of his work. They defended him by insisting upon his isolation from the political world. A poet whose poems were published and received in a highly charged political context, Keats soon became strikingly

depoliticised and dehistoricised. He was considered to have little to do with the world and its concerns, and to be most at home in poetry, in the world of sense and imagery. This view of Keats was reinforced by Shelley who, on hearing of Keats's death, composed his elegy, *Adonais*. In his preface, Shelley offered a counterattack on the reviewers: 'The genius of the lamented person to whose memory I have dedicated these unworthy verses,' he wrote,

was not less delicate and fragile than it was beautiful; and where cankerworms abound, what wonder if its young flower was blighted in the bud? The savage criticism on his *Endymion*, which appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind; the agitation thus originated ended in the rupture of a blood-vessel in the lungs; a rapid consumption ensued.

Rather ironically it was this **elegy** rather than any of his own works that kept the name of Keats alive for the next twenty-five years, and it was this elegy that played a key role in establishing the myth of 'poor Keats' as a sensitive and unworldly genius, a helpless victim who was destroyed by the critics – or as Byron more flippantly avers in *Don Juan* – 'snuff'd out by an article' (Canto 11, stanza 60).

REREADING KEATS: A CHANGING VIEW

Keats had a profound influence on many writers of the nineteenth century. This influence is already evident, for example, in the early Tennyson. The Pre-Raphaelites of mid-century read him avidly and, seeing him as a poet of sensuous richness and vivid pictorial effects, frequently produced paintings which illustrated his works. Walter Pater claimed him as a forerunner of the **art for art's sake** movement, and by the end of the nineteenth century Keats's reputation as a major poet had been firmly established.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the view of Keats began to change, and rather than being seen only as a poet of the senses, he began to be valued for his powerful intellect, his willingness to confront the larger philosophical questions of human existence. For most of the twentieth century, nevertheless, the myth of Keats's unworldliness retained a firm hold on many critics. Even the **Post-**



For an informal chatroom discussion on Keats, go to <http://federallistnavy.com/poetry/JOHNKEATS1795-1821hall/wwwboard.html>.

| Events in Europe | Author's life | Literary events |
|--|---|--|
| 1789-95 French Revolution | | 1792 William Blake, <i>Song of Liberty</i> ; Mary Wollstonecraft, <i>Vindication of the Rights of Women</i> |
| 1793 France declares war on Britain; Reign of Terror | 1795 John Keats born at The Swan and Hoop | 1794 Blake, <i>Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience</i> ; Samuel Coleridge, <i>Monody on the Death of Chatterton</i> |
| 1796 Spain declares war on Britain | | 1798-1800 Wordsworth and Coleridge, <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> |
| 1798 Suppression of Irish Rebellion | | |
| 1800 Population of Great Britain and Ireland 9.5 million | 1802 Death of brother Edward; begins school in Enfield | 1802 <i>Edinburgh Review</i> founded |
| 1803 Renewed war with France | | 1803 Erasmus Darwin, <i>The Temple of Nature</i> |
| 1804 Napoleon crowned Emperor | 1804 Father thrown from horse and dies; mother remarries; children go to live with grandparents | |
| | 1805 Grandfather dies | 1805 Walter Scott, <i>The Lay of the Last Minstrel</i> |
| 1805 Battle of Trafalgar | | 1807 Wordsworth, <i>Poems in Two volumes</i> |
| 1807 Abolition of slave trade in British possession | | 1810 Birth of Tennyson |
| | 1810 Mother dies of TB | 1811 Jane Austen, <i>Sense and Sensibility</i> |
| 1811 Prince of Wales becomes Regent; Luddite riots | 1811 John leaves school; apprenticed to surgeon | 1812 Byron, <i>Childe Harold's Pilgrimage</i> ; birth of Robert Browning |
| 1812 Luddite riots spread; Elgin marbles arrive in London | | 1813 Percy Bysshe Shelley, <i>Queen Mab</i> |
| 1813-17 Luddites hanged; Leigh Hunt imprisoned for attacking Prince Regent | | |
| 1814 Allies invade France | 1814 Begins writing poetry; grandmother dies | 1814 Wordsworth, <i>The Excursion</i> ; Scott, <i>Waverley</i> |

| Events in Europe | Author's life | Literary events |
|--|--|--|
| 1815 Napoleon becomes Emperor again and is defeated; Corn Laws passed | 1815 Student at Guy's Hospital | |
| 1816 Riots after bad harvest and heavy taxation | 1816 Qualifies as apothecary; 'O Solitude' published | 1816 Coleridge, <i>Christabel, Kubla Khan</i> |
| | 1817 <i>Poems</i> | 1817 Coleridge, <i>Biographia Literaria</i> |
| 1817 Civil unrest continues | 1818 'Isabella'; 'Hyperion: a Fragment'; brother George emigrates to America; brother Tom dies of TB; walking tour of N. England and Scotland; meets Fanny Brawne; <i>Endymion</i> published; <i>Blackwood's Magazine</i> attacks Keats and 'Cockney School' | 1818 Mary Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i> |
| | 1819 Living in Hampstead; engaged to Fanny; TB active in autumn; writes 'Eve of St Agnes', 'Bright Star', 'Ode to Psyche', 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode on Melancholy', 'Fall of Hyperion', 'Lamia' | 1819 Byron, <i>Don Juan</i> |
| 1819 Peterloo Massacre in Manchester; repressive measures passed to prevent sedition; employment of children under nine in cotton mills forbidden; | | |
| | 1820 Feb.: severe haemorrhaging; Sept.: leaves for Italy; <i>Lamia, Isabella, Eve of St Agnes & Other Poems</i> published | 1820 John Clare, <i>Poems, Descriptive of Rural Life</i> |
| 1820 Death of George III and accession of George IV; plot to murder Cabinet fails | | |
| | 1821 February: dies in Rome | 1821 Shelley, <i>Adonais</i> (in memory of Keats) |
| 1821 Greece revolts against Turks | | |