

Medical History

John Keats : The Doctor and the Poet

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John Keats, one of the foremost romantic poets of English literature, was originally trained as a surgeon. In those days, the path to the medical profession was quite different from the present university education. Keats was apprenticed to their family doctor when he was just 14 years old. In 1810, he moved in with the doctor and became a helper and observer in his clinic. He continued there for 5 years and in 1815, he was admitted to Guy's Hospital as a student. There, he had extensive experience in different surgeries, the dissection of corpses and wound dressing. He also passed the final examination and obtained his license in 1816.

However, Keats decided to pursue a career in poetry and never really practiced as a surgeon. It was common practice for young newbie British physicians at that time to travel to the new colony of India to start a medical practice. Keats, for a short time, considered this career too. He wrote in a letter,

"I have the choice as it were of two Poisons (yet I ought not to call this a Poison) the one is voyaging to and from India for a few years; the other is leading a feverish life alone with Poetry—This latter will suit me best —" Thus, the young doctor finally decided to devote his life to poetry.

But his medical training definitely influenced his literary creations. Unfortunately, his career was short-lived. As was quite common at that time, doctors who attended patients with no personal protective equipment, often got infected with various germs. Keats contracted tuberculosis from his days at medical school (and also from nursing his brother at home) and passed away in 1821. But in spite of being a doctor, Keats' final days were spent in intense agony. Medical science was in its womb in those days and Keats, a patient of tuberculosis, was treated with blood letting, a very low calorie diet and he was denied any opiates to ease the pain. The all-pervading anguish present in Keats' poems are not only the result of depression but also this lack of any palliative treatment from his doctor. But as a doctor, Keats knew when his disease was taking a turn for the worse. For example, when, in his final days, he had a bout of hemoptysis, he exclaimed, *"I know the colour of that blood! It is arterial*



Fig 1 — The sculpture of John Keats at his alma mater, Guy's Hospital

blood. I cannot be deceived in that colour. That drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die."

Later art historians have discovered that Keats' poetry in general, and his choice of words or imagery in particular, were widely influenced by his profession as a surgeon. But it was this profession which drew a lot of flak from contemporary literary critics. The **"Blackwoods' Edinburgh Review"** was one magazine which was highly critical of Keats and often used his profession to denigrate his poems.

Keats' memories of his surgery residency days in hospital often came back as imagery in his poems. For example, in his "Ode to a Nightingale" he writes: -

*"Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;"*

In one of his last untitled unfinished poems, Keats wrote, "a poet is a sage, / A humanist, a physician to all men." Thus, this talented physician decided to leave the crude world of nineteenth century medicine and pursue his dreams of a better world beyond all human suffering.

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