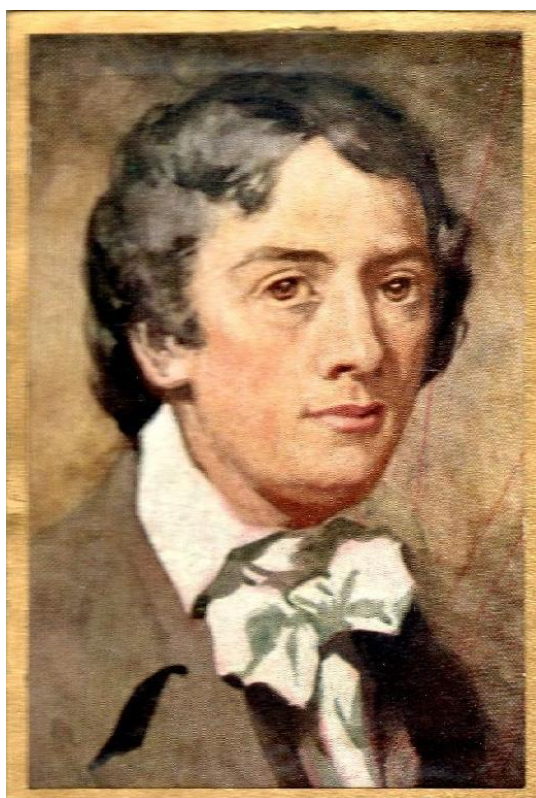


The Poet as a Healer: The Story of Dr. John Keats

Jagneswar Badhei, M.A., M.Phil., P.G.D.T.S.



Courtesy: <http://keats-poems.com/about-john-keats/pictures-of-john-keats/>

Abstract

At the age of fifteen Keats's medical training commenced and Nature, thus, prepared him to be a physician. Keats was given excellent training by Dr. Hammond. He perhaps wanted to pursue the medical career because of the series of deaths of his family relatives. He was devoted in nursing his dying mother, at the same time he was also reading novels and other literary works. It was the death of his mother which ignited the intellectual fire inside him and made him a passionate reader, which in turn resulted in choosing the career of medicine. However, he was not free from the tragic visions of death till the end of his life.

Key words: John Keats as medical student, tragic view of life

Medical Life of John Keats

The medical life of John Keats ranges from 1810 to 1816. After the return and death of his mother, Keats's legal guardian Richard Abbey, an ill-behaved tea-merchant, paved him the way to the world of medicines. At the age of fifteen Keats's medical training commenced and Nature, thus, prepared him to be a physician. The actual motifs of Keats behind pursuing the medical career, as Joseph Epstein says, are not known with any certainty. During the last years at Enfield School he was drawn towards science and also won two books as prize on scientific subject.

Apprenticeship

In the year 1810 Keats apprenticed under the Edmonton apothecary-surgeon Dr. Thomas Hammond. Keats was supposed to continue his study for five years. As a student of Dr. Hammond, Keats made himself, to some extent, an expert in the basic skills such as vaccination for smallpox, bleeding patients with a lancet or with leeches, dressing wounds, setting bones, pulling teeth, identifying the symptoms of illness, making up pills, ointments, poultices, laudanum and other medicines. (Roe, 163)

Keats was given excellent training by Dr. Hammond. He perhaps wanted to pursue the medical career because of the series of deaths of his family relatives. He was devoted in nursing his dying mother, at the same time he was also reading novels and other literary works. It was the death of his mother which ignited the intellectual fire inside him and made him a passionate reader, which in turn resulted in choosing the career of medicine. However, he was not free from the tragic visions of death till the end of his life. While under Dr. Hammond as well as Guys, he saw deaths on a daily basis. (Epstein, 48)

Keats continued his apprenticeship under Dr. Hammond for four years although he was assigned to do it for five. For certain reasons Keats quarreled with the surgeon and left with him in the year 1813. The supposed reason for it was that Dr. Hammond was a serious, successful and highly competent medical practitioner, and under his supervisions, the training of an

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:8 August 2016

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apprentice was heavily weighted in favour of the practical. Keats may have gone through some sort of unpleasant situations for which he left the surgeon.

A Student at Guy's Hospital

Towards the later part, on 1 October 1815 he enrolled his name as a student at Guy's Hospital. In July 1815 the Apothecary Act was passed. The parliament made a passage to necessitate the practice of medicine for anyone who wished it, in England or Wales, and go through an examination before a newly Organized Court of Examiners of the Society Apothecaries and to sit for the examination required a completion of five-year apprenticeship, at least six month's study and work in a teaching hospital. Six months were required to produce a licentiate and a full years' study was meant for the membership in the Royal College of Surgeons. The chief subjects of this study were Anatomy, Chemistry, Dissection, Physiology, Botany as well as various duties around the hospital. Keats signed on for a whole year's study's at Guy's Hospital which was connected with the-then more famous and nearby St. Thomas Hospital. Signing on for a year to study shows clearly Keats's interest to be a medical practitioner.

At Guy's, Keats came in contact with two most eminent surgeons: one is Astley Cooper and the other is Henry Cline. At St. Thomas Hospital Keats attended two lectures by Astley cooper and Herry Cline on 'Anatomy and the Operations of Surgery'. It was a two terms' course .Cooper alone gave a lecture on 'Principle and Practice of Surgery '. Keats, at Guy's , also attended a course on ' The Practice of Medicine' taught by William Babington and James Curry, two chemistry courses by Dr. Babington , Dr. Alexander Marcet, and William Allen and 'Theory of Medicine and Materia Medica ' taught by Dr. Curry and Dr.Henry Cholmeley. (Roe. 170)

New Facilities

When Keats entered the Hospital, new kinds of facilities had been introduced. The practice of medicine was giving priority to the practicality rather than the theoretical aspects. Keats was working as a dresser under the surgeon Billy Lucas. Keats performed many tasks

which were given to him by the surgeon. Sometimes he himself did the minor operations. His apprenticeship with Dr. Hammond had prepared him for a medical practice.

Keats enjoyed his life at Guy's and made a group of friends thereafter. He very often went to cock fights, bearbaitings, and boxing matches. He even played billiards. It clearly shows that he was a complete man enjoying the charms of life. In the words of Clark, Keats's friend, the time he spent in Guy's Hospital along with his training was 'the most placid time in Keats's painful life'.

A Humanist

Apart from his medical life, Keats was more a humanist than anything else. He had an ever-flowing aspiration to help the mankind at large. His attitude towards the public was praiseworthy and notable. This is quite evident from the letters he wrote to his friends and fellow-feelings. Perhaps this kind of helpful attitude towards the developed in him from the Enfield School, where along with other subjects, Philosophy was also being taught. Not only in words but also in action he was doing his utmost for the benefit of the public. Once he wrote to J.H. Reynolds in a letter:

"I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the Public- I woud be subdued before my friends, and thank them for subduing me- but among the Multitudes of Men- I have no feel of stooping, I hate the idea of humility to them- I never wrote one single Line of Poetry with the least shadow of Public thought. - *I would jump down Aetna for any great public good-but I hate a mawkish popularity.*" (Gittings, 85. Emphasis mine)

Feelings for the Public Welfare

His feelings for the public welfare grew mature when he continued to write poetry. His strong determination took him to a stage where nothing but humanity was there. The time when his works faced a bitter criticism in 'Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine', no doubt he was depressed but was not against the public opinion or even reacted to it. He only tried to make up his mind to get success in due course of time. It is the perfect testimonial of strong mental power and self-confidence he possessed. The letter to J.H. Reynolds on 24 August 1819 shows his

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courage and self-confidence. He wrote: *“I feel it in my power to become a popular writer- I feel it in my strength to refuse the poisonous suffrage of a Public”*. (Gittings, 281. Emphasis mine)

Keats was always in search of a chance of doing the world some good. He had an admiration for human Nature, but he didn't like men. He was completely suffocated with the world around him. As per his perceptions the world was chaotic, disjointed and full of suffering. It was a gloomy one where there is no mental or physical peace. In a letter to Fanny Brawne on 25 July 1819, he mentioned about his contempt towards the world, for it battered too much on the wings of his self-will. Again in August 1820 he wrote to Fanny Brawne:

“I should like to die. I am sickened at the brute world which you are smiling with. I hate men and women more. I see nothing but thorns for the future-.” (Gittings, 386)

Keats became more and more hopeless about human nature towards the last part of his life. He lost his faith completely upon human beings around him. He in his letters to his friends and relatives, deliberately termed the world as a ‘brutal’ one along with his willingness to die. In the same letter of August 1820 he wrote to Fanny Brawne:

“I wish you could infuse a little confidence in human nature into my heart. I cannot muster any-the world is too brutal for me- I am glad there is such a thing as the grave- I am sure I shall never have any rest till I get there.” (Gittings, 386)

Keats's Efficiency as a Medical Practitioner

Opinions differ as regards Keats's efficiency as a medical practitioner. The time he spent under Dr. Hammond as well as at Guy's can never be side lined. He used to stay in the surgery ward till late at night doing his duty as a dresser. His great zeal and tireless efforts are quite evident from nursing his mother and brother Tom. He was always having a temperament of doing a service to others. Above all his self-diagnosis during his first tubercular haemorrhage is the most remarkable one. After spitting blood he told his friend Charles Brown: “I know the colour of that blood;-it is arterial blood;- I cannot be deceived in that colour;- that drop of blood is my death warrant;- I must die.” (Roe, 167) This was not a mere statement, rather a heart-

breaking truth which was foretold by him only due to his knowledge on medicine. And Keats became a victim to that fatal disease of which he had made a premonition.

On Knowledge

Keats believed that knowledge is something which includes each every aspect of life. It ranges from Science to Arts, and overtakes the narrow limits of the rationalistic philosophy. This concept was prevalent in him till the end. He made a categorization of life terming it as a great mansion where there are two chambers. The first chamber is the Thoughtless Chamber and the second one is the chamber of Maiden Thought. As far as he was concerned the first one or the thoughtless chamber more acceptable and more soothing than the second one because in the second stage human beings experience nothing but misery, heart-breaks, pain, sickness and oppression. They even don't know the balance of good and evil. In a letter to J.H. Reynolds on 3 May 1818 he wrote: " This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open-but all dark-all leading to dark passages-We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist- We are now in that state- We feel the 'burden of the Mystery'..." (Gittings,95) This kind of a perception may only come to a man who has seen and observed life keenly from close quarters and of course John Keats was one.

Maturity

The poetry of the later stage of Keats's life expressed the matured thoughts. He wrote sonnets, lyrics and experimented with the epic form and became a man of discussion among the multitudes. On 1 December 1816 the famous writer and reformer Leigh Hunt quoted Keats's name in his article 'Young Poets' as 'Junkets'. Keats was one among the three or four rising poets of the time. This recognition brought a radical change in Keats's life. All of a sudden he made up his mind to leave the practice of medicine for the sake of poetry.

Keats for More Close Analytical Study of Human Beings

Keats left the career of medicine perhaps because of his dissatisfaction in it. He wanted a more close, analytical study of human beings, as during his medical career he was interested more in brain and nervous systems, putting an insight into the mental wounds of man. Through the practice of medicine he was not able to reach all the human beings where as his concern was

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to deal with each and every single individual. Perhaps he had felt that the mental wounds or injury cause much harm than that of the physical one. But whatever it may be, the full stop in the medical career in 1816 prepared Keats for a new set of achievements taking him into a new world away from the hard realities of life.

Keats's extraordinarily developed imaginative sensibility took him to a sphere where beauty was the ultimate truth. For this he was criticized a lot. Critics like Susan Wolfson commented that Keats was basically a feminine poet and his poetry was marketed for female audiences. Stopford A. Brooke remarked that Keats had no vital interest in the present, none in man as a whole, not in the political movement of human thought, not in the future of mankind, except but in beauty. Some of the critics were even of the view that Keats had nothing to contribute to the society. But in reality Keats's works of art are not only sensational and thought provoking but also serious in their theme.

See the Fairy-Land in the Operation Table?

Keats is often criticized as an imaginative fellow who used to see the fairy-land in the operation table. This statement is also not accurate. No doubt his study of medicine and writing of poetry were going together but he was completely giving himself to the present work before him with a great interest and which he termed as the art of 'Negative Capability' or taking part in the existence of others in one of his letters. After having felt that the very life of him was meant only for poetry, he left his career of medicine and devoted himself completely to writing.

Reality

Keats had observed that reality is the science of life but imagination is the life of science. Until and unless we imagine something we cannot go for the real one. Keats had an idea that too much questioning kills the imagination. And in an imaginary world there is no place for logic, reason, questioning etc. . In this context it is quite clear that Keats possessed a superior mentality than any common individual. In a letter to P.B. Shelley on 16 August 1820 he wrote: "My Imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk-..." (Gittings, 390) In real sense he was a monk, meditating all the time on life and its complex mysterious unfolding.

Keats's ideas regarding imagination and reality are discussed in Denise Gigante's article 'The Monster in the Rainbow: Keats and the Science of Life'. In this article Keats rejects the idea of Newton by emphasizing the naturality of things. As far as Keats was concerned, the seven colours the rainbow holds are not due to the prismatic effects or anything else, rather they are the very symbols of harmony, unity as well as calmness which produce a soothing effect on human mind.

Keats's knowledge of Latin and Greek is also important to discuss as this shows how efficient Keats was in his writings. The particular knowledge of different languages Keats possessed is the testimonial of his qualifications as well as his deep love for art and literature. No doubt he was using sensuous imagery through Greek and Latin words to communicate his ideas, still his works produce a single unified meaning. And perhaps his enormous knowledge has placed him in such a position long after his death. In the letter to Fanny Brawne on February 1820 he wrote: "If I should die, I have left no immortal work behind me- nothing to make my friends proud of my memory- but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered." (Gittings, 361) Now he is remembered for his excellent letters, beautiful odes and sonnets which are not only immortal but also having their permanence and perfection.

To Conclude

I contend that during his brief span of life, it is the poet who had won over the physician. We can say that his fervent desire to cure others remained in the vestigial consciousness of the poet, and that way he remained both a poet and a healer, a poet who made his poetry the medium to heal people, and a physician who turned to the realm of poetry to find there the curative and purgative effect of medicine.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **16:8 August 2016**

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