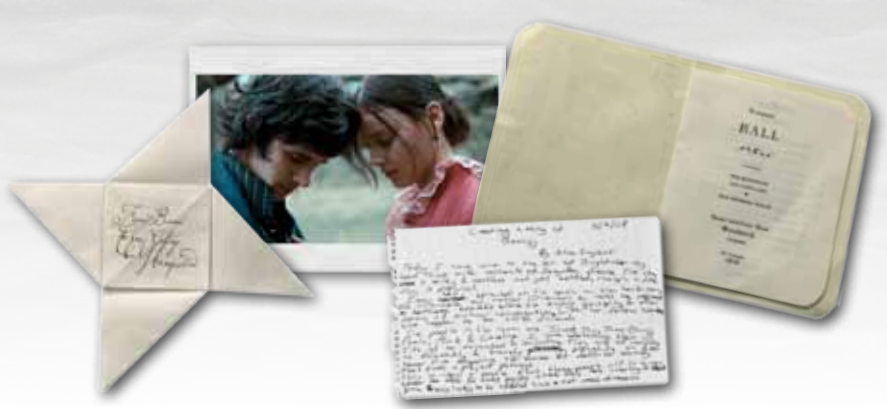


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Student Task Sheet:

A POET'S REPUTATION

Byron, Shelley and Keats

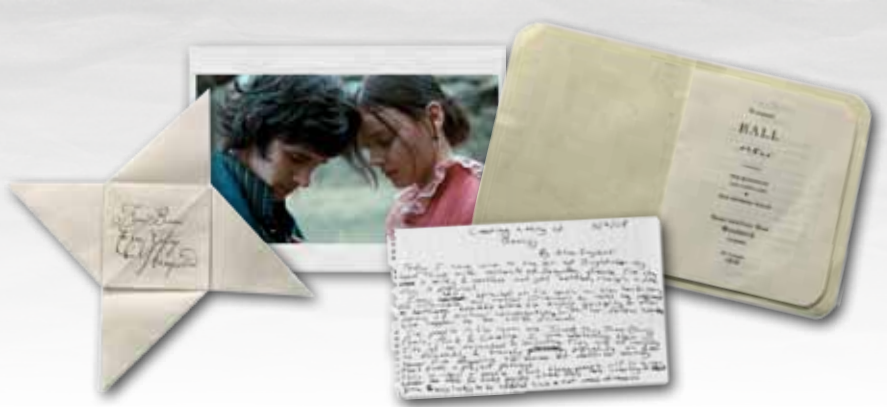
In modern criticism, Keats is often placed in the 'second generation' of English Romantic poets along with his contemporaries Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. However, Keats's place in this poetic triumvirate was not always secure. William Hazlitt, an important writer of the time, devoted a chapter to both Byron and Shelley in his 1825 work, *The Spirit of the Age: Or, Contemporary Portraits* whilst Keats received but passing mention: 'he was a true poet, with all the errors and beauties of youthful genius to answer for'.

On a personal level, Keats met Shelley a number of times with Shelley remarking of Keats, in a letter of 1820 'I consider his a most valuable life, & I am deeply interested in his safety'. Although initially Shelley suggested Keats should leave his poetry unpublished he later recognised Keats as a gifted young man, and wrote his poem *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats* in tribute. In contrast Keats and Lord Byron never met and expressed little regard each for the other. Byron and Shelley were both members of the aristocracy, and in their privileged position were able to pursue poetry and worldly pleasures without much care for their reputations. Keats on the other hand was of indeterminate class and had very little income; he was disparagingly referred to as a 'cockney poet' by some reviewers. Shelley died young, just the year after Keats: he was thirty years old when he drowned in Italy in 1822. Byron lasted slightly longer – he died of a fever in 1824 at the age of 36. All three are now recognised as important writers of their times.

On the next page you will see two poetic interpretations of Keats, one taken from Shelley's elegy *Adonais* and the other from Byron's *Don Juan*. Byron was not an admirer of Keats but his verse is less a slight on him than it is poking fun at Shelley's *Adonais*. Compare these two poems and answer the following questions:

1. What impression of Keats as an individual, and as a poet, do you get from each of these extracts?
2. Which do you find the more sincere? Explain your reasons.
3. Which poetic extract do you consider more effective? Justify your answer with reference to language and imagery, rhythm, metre and form.

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Shelley's Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats

I

- 1 I weep for Adonais--he is dead!
- 2 Oh, weep for Adonais! though our tears
- 3 Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!
- 4 And thou, sad Hour, selected from all years
- 5 To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,
- 6 And teach them thine own sorrow, say: "With me
- 7 Died Adonais; till the Future dares
- 8 Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be
- 9 An echo and a light unto eternity!"

Adonais was published in 1821, shortly after Keats' death

Byron's 'Don Juan', stanza 60 of Canto XI –

John Keats, who was killed off by one critique,
Just as he really promised something great,
If not intelligible, - without Greek

Contrived to talk about the Gods of late,
Much as they might have been supposed to speak.

Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate: -
'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article.

Don Juan was written between 1818 and 1824