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English (Hons.)  
DI / Paper II (Poetry)

Topic: John Keats' "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"

1. Life. - John Keats was born in 1795 in Moorfields, London. His father was the head-keeper of a livery stable at Finsbury Stable. In 1803 he was sent to Clarke School, Enfield, where began his friendship with Charles Cowden Clarke. His father died in 1804 of a fall from his horse, and his mother married again, but she separated from her husband soon, and died in 1810 of tuberculosis, which her son acquired. Removed from school in 1811, Keats was apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, an apothecary surgeon at Edmonton. For four years he studied in Gray's and St. Thomas's Hospital. In 1815 he became acquainted with Hunt, and through Hunt met Haydon, Shelley, Haylitt and Wordsworth, whose "Excursion" he thought one of the wonders of the age. Meanwhile he had been reading poetry and other things. Spenser led him to write poetry and he found much food for his imagination in Lempriere's "Classical Dictionary." In 1817, he published "Poems by John Keats," which contained "Sonnet to Chapman's Homer", and showed a bias towards Elizabethan manner and diction. He passed the winter at Hampstead, devoted to the writing of poetry and the result



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was the publication in 1818 of "Endymion: A Poetic Romance". He then went out on a walking trip with Charles Brown in Northern England, Scotland and Ireland. Upon his return to London he found himself singled out by J. G. Lockhart (son-in-law of Walter Scott) as a member of the Cockney School of poetry in an article in "Blackwood's Magazine: the Quarterly" also took up the attack and displayed much want of taste. Keats took these attacks in admirable spirit, treating the brutality with indifference and profiting by any sagacious suggestion that he found in them. In the same year he met and fell in love with Fanny Browne, a West Indian lady, and at Christmas the two were betrothed. At this time Keats led a rather unhappy life. The legend that he suffered morbidly under criticism is not correct. But there were financial difficulties, the migration of a brother to America, and the death of another brother — to both of whom he was deeply attached. He derived much comfort in the society of Mrs. ~~Jones~~ Jones to whom he addressed the famous "Bright Star" sonnet. Early in 1820, he had his first attack of consumption. But his poetic life was as happy as ever: the agony of his soul was distilled



into verse as ~~exquisite~~ as exquisitely refined as it was gloriously passion-fraught. "Lamia", "Isabella", "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Other Poems" appeared in 1820. A poet whose self improvement under the most ill-natured criticism could be so severely effective had no end of possibilities. Discerning critics admired the beauty of these verses: Lamb praised "Isabella"; Shelley was enthusiastic over fragments of "Hyperion". But Keats' health rapidly deteriorated. The thought that marriage with Fanny Browne was impossible broke the elements of reserve in his nature. But he bore his sufferings with fortitude. In August 1820, he was nursed by Fanny and her mother; and in September, he sailed for Italy with his devoted friend Joseph Severn, a young painter who attributed his success in his art to his association with Keats.

Shelley, hearing of his illness, invited him to be his guest at Pisa, but Keats declined the invitation. In December, the same year, he had a serious relapse which proved fatal as he died in Rome on February 23, 1821. On his grave at the burial site in the Protestant Cemetery are inscribed the words dictated by himself — "Here lies one whose name was writ in water"

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