

The High School.

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Liberator a defectione solum, qui non militur.

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THE PLACE OF KEATS IN MODERN POETRY.

Read at Junior Exhibition, Cornell College, by A. C. Wakeley, of Omaha.

On the 25th of February, 1876, an assembly of Americans and Englishmen were gathered in the Protestant cemetery at Rome, to perform an act of tardy justice. Then was unveiled a medallion effigy of John Keats. If ever genius deserved recognition, surely the qualities of this poet commanded all the respect shown by this little knot of admirers. John Keats was born in London, on the 29th of Oct., 1795, and died in Rome on the 23d of Feb., 1821. To go at any length into the personal history of Keats, would be uninteresting, as his short life was marked by no unusual outward circumstances. It is rather the history of his inner life we wish, the life breathed forth in his poetry—a life filled with noble aspirations and a yearning after an ideal fixed in his own mind.

To comprehend better the situation of this poet, and the reception his early productions met with, let us take a passing glance at the poetical horizon at the commencement of the present century when Keats was to make his appearance. It was a turning point in the history of poetry. Old foundations upon which poetic faith was built began to crumble. People were beginning to suspect that there was something more in poetry than a certain number of syllables to the line, and a regular, hobby-horse movement. Their poetic sensibilities were more keenly aroused, and all literary productions more closely scanned. What was the reason of this new-born distrust? A few venturesome spirits, following their natural impulses, had dared to strike off the fetters of formalism and conventionality, which hitherto, had bound the Muse. Byron, Wordsworth and Shelley appeared almost simultaneously, champions of originality, earnestness and spontaneity in poetry. Against these were arrayed the conservative party, especially the successors of Pope advocating the formalistic and arbitrary. The same dissatisfaction had taken root in France and elsewhere in Europe. The cry was, let us have earnestness, nature, true feeling in poetry, and away with the artificial and all that tends to keep poetry from the hearts of men.

It was in this period of change when Keats, in his twenty-second year, published his first volume of poems—a youth of humble birth, apprenticed to an apothecary, and with nothing but an ordinary education of the middle classes, but imbued with a poetic instinct which was to lift him from the condition to which external circumstances had apparently consigned him. Timid and self-distrustful, he was almost afraid to submit his productions to the public eye; not that he feared criticism, but the least apprehension that he might be wanting in true poetic capability threw him into despair. He was willing to work and improve, if any encouragement was given him.

His temperament was such that he could bear present failure and disappointment, if he had any prospect of ultimate success. Filled with these aspirations, and believing that the road to success lay only through study, application and thought, as he expressed it, Keats published *Endymion*, a poetic Romance founded upon Grecian mythology.

Criticism does not without a struggle renounce its former standards of perfection, and place new idols upon its shrine. *Endymion* was no exception to this rule. Those arbiters of literary

fate, Blackwood and *The Quarterly*, were only too eager to pounce upon their prey. For a youth apprenticed to an apothecary and the son of a livery-stable proprietor, to enter the sacred halls of Poesy was too presumptuous. In the very nature of things there must have been something wrong. The imperfections of *Endymion* were mercilessly laid bare. Unusual expressions, awkward rhymes, and in short all the defects of youth and inexperience were thrust upon the public, as in every way fatal to success, and he was told that a starved apothecary was better than a starved poet, and all this in spite of a preface deprecating his own feeble efforts. The eye of criticism had been blind to the merits of *Edymion*, but in the rich imagery, the beautiful word painting, and sublime flights of imagination which it contained, the friends of Keats perceived the elements of poetic genius. The abuse which had been heaped upon him must have affected his very sensitive nature, although he treated it as too coarse to be noticed. He determined to avenge himself by writing better poetry. But his lot was hard: his birth, in the eyes of many, was enough to condemn him, but more than that he had inherited a taint of consumption, and even now when making his first efforts to place his name on the poet's scroll, he had premonitions of his early end. Under the lash of criticism and with the belief that he had not long to live, he yielded not to misfortune. On the contrary he felt that what was to be done, must be done quickly. With this conviction we find him in the spring of 1820 engaged upon *Hyperion*, *Eve of St. Agnes*, *Lamia*, *An Ode to a Grecian Faun*, *To a Nightingale*, and other odes and sonnets, and he had partially completed a humorous poem entitled "The Cap and Bells."

Keats had now given to the world all that he was destined to give. He felt it only too keenly. But now even critics were forced to see the beauty of his style. They were compelled to recognize his wonderful portrayal of the picturesque.

Few objects in Nature escaped his sympathetic eye. In *St. Agnes' Eve* he describes the action of the moonlight:

"Full on this casement shone the wintry moon
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon.
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint,
She seemed a splendid angel newly drest
Save wings, for heaven."

Most poets have been content to confine their descriptive powers to objects of sight, but not so Keats. His senses were abnormally sensitive to all impressions. He not only saw but touched, tasted, felt and heard more acutely than other men; and this sensibility we may say constituted his poetic nature; for the poet's feelings and passions are aroused when other men's lie dormant.

When he describes the action of sweet sounds, we are in the fairy-land of song, when he dwells upon the objects of Taste, we sit at an epicurean banquet.

But these are his lighter, airier pictures. His muse often takes a loftier flight. In *Hyperion*, *Saturn* and the Titanian deities are expelled from the domains of Jupiter and the younger gods.

Like Byron and Shelley, he was trying to infuse Nature into poetry. All three felt that genuine poetry had become a thing of the past.

Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth were not without great influence, but



View of the Omaha High School Building.

Keats more than any of his contemporaries, changed the poetic form in which verse was moulded. He possessed more than any other poet of his time, a truly sympathetic nature, and it is his deep sympathy with nature that attracts us. The power of singling out the word which would convey his precise meaning, and in many cases present to our imagination a complete picture, Keats possessed to a wonderful degree.

In the youthful inexperience of Keats critics can find much to condemn. They can complain of the vagueness in his earlier productions, the dependence of the matter upon the rhyme, and a too evident straining after originality, but the unprejudiced reader will find in what he has bequeathed us, striking passages of beauty, of sublimity, and will see evidenced in all work the hand of a master. When we consider his birth, his education, the early age at which his poems were written, we can only wonder that such a youth should surpass in wealth of diction and appropriateness of imagery those who had made our language and its adaptations a life study.

Previous to his death his genius had not been universally acknowledged, and when he thinks that all is to go for naught, he asks Severn to inscribe upon his tombstone,—“Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” To him it seemed as if his name was written in water. But time has changed the epitaph. As the years roll on his circle of admirers has ever widened, and to-day his name is written upon the hearts of his countrymen.

“Till the Future dares
Forget the past, his fate and fame shall be
An echo and light unto eternity.”

VALEDICTORY AND ODE.

Read by Miss Constance Williams at Commencement of Class '77, Council Bluffs High School.

The last lesson has been recited, the last examination passed, the last essay read, the last oration delivered, and we are about to leave the school-room to enter actively upon the duties of life. We know not the fancies that fill the minds of each other, nor the course of action each may pursue, for there are many fields of labor open to all. To one of our number, and sad to say to only one, the glorious possibility is beckoning of becoming president of the United States. Our school days are now ended, and soon we will be scattered far and wide. But before we separate, we all unite in returning thanks to the kind friends who have

taken an interest in our welfare, and have shown their concern, by their visits and words of encouragement. Words fail to express our gratitude towards those, whose generous public sentiment in behalf of education, has erected fine buildings and supplied us with earnest teachers, in order that all might store up riches that never flee from the pursuer. And if we have failed to accomplish as great results as our many friends have desired, may they be lenient in their criticism, remembering the frailty of youth. To the directors, whose judicious management and deep interest in the cause of education, have been the means of preparing us for our different stations in life, we extend our most heartfelt thanks. To you, our faithful teachers, who have directed our daily course of study, and pointed out the true path to success, we will be ever grateful. In our new sphere of action may we often meet you as friends, and receive the advice which your knowledge and experience enable you to give. And schoolmates, we grieve to say the last farewell to you, since we have passed so many happy hours together. Tho' we must part, you have our warmest sympathies in the work that will fit you to fill honorably your place in life, and may your efforts be crowned with far greater success than that of your predecessors. Classmates, the long looked for time, when we have completed our school life, has come, and we must sever the ties that united us in a common work. In a few hours these ties will be broken forever. Some may seek their homes in the far west, others may find their way to foreign lands and the dark waters of the ocean roll between them and their former classmates. Still we will always cherish a fond remembrance of our once happy school days. Classmates, farewell, for

There is no joy that cheers our way,
But has a kindred sorrow;
There is no happy heart to-day,
But may be sad to-morrow.
Full off beyond the darkening cloud
A glorious sun is sailing,
When shadows, with a sable shroud,
The plain beneath are trailing.

If yesterday our hearts were glad,
That loved ones gathered 'round us—
Should not, to-day, our thoughts be sad,
When break we ties that bound us?
To you, whose love has gild long—
Our teachers—faithful ever,
To you, our mates, one parting word,
We speak—and then we sever.

And when this changeable life is past,
When earthly scenes are ended,
United may we stand at last,
Where happy voices, blended,
May sing of joys that shall not fade—
Of bonds that ne'er are broken—
No tears there fall, no griefs invade,
No farewell words are spoken.

SUNSHINE AND SADNESS.

Essay read by Miss Ida Goodman, at annual re-union of the High School Alumni.

“I slept and dreamed that life was beauty;
I woke and found that life was duty.”

There are some people who are always dreaming; they never wake; there is another class that never sleep, but are always on the watch for duty: Were I to have my choice between the two classes, I scarcely know which I would choose: they who never wake do not know the real pleasure of dreaming, for if we live in the sunlight all the time, we could not appreciate the blessing that was being bestowed on us.

We must live in darkness a while to know how to value light. We never enjoy looking at the cloudless sky as after two or three days of rain; it never looks quite so clear as then; why is it? Simply because we know what it is to be in the cloud.

A year of all spring and sunshine would doubtless be very pleasant and agreeable to most people, but it would never ripen the fruit, or bring the grain to a head. We think the trees clothed in green are beautiful, but it takes the frost to bring out their whole beauty. Duty is to life, what frost is to the forest, it brings us out of ourselves and makes us true and noble men and women. The beauty of life is duty, and a life without duty is like a flower without fragrance; it may be very beautiful, and pleasant to see while it lasts, but it soon fades and is gone, leaving no fragrance or beauty by which it can be remembered. They whose life is beauty, live for themselves; they think only of what they enjoy or wish; they intend to enjoy life while it lasts, and if they succeed and are happy, what care they for those around them, and those that come after. The memory of their deeds and little kindnesses are ever fresh. What is a flower without fragrance? What is life without duty?

As a flower sends out fragrance to all within its reach, and even after it is dead, so lives a life of duty. They that sleep and dream life is beauty, and have never known anything but pleasure, or seen anything but sunshine, have not discovered the real beauty of life. They may deem themselves happy, but at the same time they are not, and they often feel it, and long for something they have not.

Oh! if I were only rich, I know I would be happy! What a common wish it is; and yet if we could only look into the heart of the rich, we might find to our surprise, that we, with all of our troubles, and many duties, are the happier of the two. We may fight against what seems our lot; we may think that had we had the advantages and means that such a one has had (and wasted), we might have been high up the ladder of fame. But would we have been so much more careful than others? would we have avoided all the snares that others have fallen into? We may think so, but we would have done no better, and probably not as well. He who made us, and saw the end from the beginning, knew what was best, and we would be wise if we thought so.

A life that is nothing but beauty, may be likened to a beautiful day, in which there is not a cloud; or a splendid sunset, where the beauty is so grand, and yet so delicate and changeable that no artist could do it justice. It can only be appreciated by those who are there, by those that see it at the time, it lasts but a few moments and then disappears as a dream.

Lives that are duty, may be said to be like those grand master paintings, which are painted in strong and

enduring colors, and have been gazed at and admired for ages, and are likely to be for ages more.

To which class do you think the wisest and best people belong? Those who think life beauty or those who think life duty? Are our greatest men those who have always lived in luxuries and ease, or those who have had hard work to get along?

A life of beauty is as a name written in the sand.
A life of duty is as something delved in a rock.

One goes with the tide; the other is always there; one is like a rock, firm; the other is washed by every wave.

It is very fittingly remarked that they sleep who dream life is beauty. He knows not life who knows not duty.

And so let my past stand just as it stands, and let me now, as I may, grow old, I am what I am, and my life for me was the best, or it had not been, I hold.

YESTERDAY.

Yesterday. The sound of the word brings to our minds the phantom of the past, and as it stands before us brings to our remembrance scenes of joy mingled with those of deep remorse. We, at one time, see ourselves enjoying all the pleasures of life to our utmost capacity, at another, drinking the cup of sorrow filled to the brim; at one time, sitting by the bank of some smooth gliding stream, enjoying the company of “one,” not a sister, in those days gone by, at another, prostrated at the dying bed to receive the last accents of some departing friend. All our deeds, good and bad, rise before us, and we, to-day, are almost afraid to speak with honest hearts, and tell what price we have set upon yesterday. Was it only characteristic idleness, or was it a track in the sands of time, to be swept away by the returning tide? Was it a word that melted away before it accomplished its mission? Was it a mere dream you let slip before your eyes whilst you were reposing in easy idleness? Alas! with too many it was so. Yesterday, monarchs fell and the ruins of their destroyed grandeur teach man a lesson in the future. When yesterday's sun set in his golden sockets, he left behind him the pulseless corpses of of thousands who died with him, and was the birth-place of as many more. Yesterday's beautiful morn saw the powerful man in all his glory, and its cloudy eve left him the complete wreck of his hopes. Think not too little of yesterday, for in that space all the capable functions of the world have acted. The world has revolved again and rolled up to the judgment seat a mountain of your deeds (good and bad), where they have been recorded, to hold in waiting for your coming. It has also left influences that will extend to future ages. “What is man but the growth of yesterday? Stamped with the marks of weal and woe?” To yesterday he owes his existence. Then, when his childhood days were upon him he obtained his education, and learned his trade, letting the “past bury its dead,” and trusting the future to the future.

A correspondent writes to know why newly married men are called Benedict. The reason, we believe, is that in entering on their new state of life, they are supposed to give up all the bad bachelor habits to which they have benedicted.

The new system of transmitting sound by electric telegraph enables a man to telephony story to his friends a long distance away.—*Harper's Weekly*.

