

John Keats and Fanny Brawne Pages of an enduring love

Source images: <http://englishhistory.net/keats/fannybrawne.html>



*“When shall
we pass a day
alone? I have*



Read this short account of John Keats’s and Fanny Brawne’s thwarted love story.

Keats and Fanny, who were newly neighbours, first met in a troubled time for the poet: his mother had died of tuberculosis, soon to be followed by his youngest brother Tom. The teenaged Fanny was not considered beautiful, but she was spirited and kind and Keats was struck by her coquettish sense of fun. Her family’s financial difficulties influenced her with a strong sense of practicality. However, she did fall for young Keats, who was neither well off nor making money through his writing. Her mother against better economical judgement could not prevent a love match, though not without the opposition of Keats’s friends, the two got engaged. Yet, further obstacles were to come. Keats knew his only hope of marrying Fanny was to succeed in writing, since he was often asked by his brother George for money loans. In February 1820, however, the couple’s future was threatened by illness: Keats had been troubled by what looked like a cold, but later turned out to be a sign of tuberculosis. He was well aware of his worsening condition so at some point he wrote to Fanny that she was free to break their engagement, but she passionately refused to Keats’s relief: “How hurt I should have been had you ever acceded to what is, notwithstanding, very reasonable!” In an attempt not to upset the poet with too strong emotions, his friend Charles Brown nursed him diligently and kept Fanny at a distance. Keats recovered for a brief of time, only to fall ill again later on. Along with the worries brought about by his illness, there were the ones linked to literary success and jealousy provoked by Fanny’s coquettish behaviour. The poet was torn between work and love. When Keats’s health conditions grew worse, Fanny nursed him in her house upon her mother’s permission. Her affection was strengthened by the task of looking after him; the couple fell even more deeply in love and it was hard for them to separate when Keats was brought to Rome hoping that a milder climate would help him recover. Keats never made it back home because he died in 1821. After his death Fanny wrote to Keats’s sister: “I have not got over it and never shall”. She wore mourning for several years and spent many long nights reading Keats’s love letters. However, a few years after Keats’s death she asked her sister to never mention her in connection with Keats. It was only in 1833 that she got married to Louis Lindon. Fanny had children and told them of her romance with Keats, but she made them promise to never tell their father. On his death they were finally able to profit from their mother’s story: Keats’s letters were sold and published, thus giving us the opportunity to read them.

Glossary:**spirited:** having energy and determination**coquettish:** trying to attract the attention of men**fall for:** to start to love**well off:** rich, affluent**engagement:** an agreement between two people to marry, or the period of time they are engaged**notwithstanding:** in spite of**brought about:** (to bring about) caused**torn:** (to tear) if you are torn, you are unable to decide what to do because you have different feelings or different things that you want (diviso)**wore mourning:** (to wear) black clothes worn to show that you are very sad that someone has died (essere a lutto)**1. Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F):**

1. Fanny's mother prevented her daughter from seeing Keats.
2. Keats could not make a living out of his writing only.
3. Keats fell in love with Fanny's beauty.
4. Keats died in Fanny's house.
5. Fanny mourned for several years and treasured her love.

2. Read the letter and answer the questions that follow:

March 1820

Sweetest Fanny,

You fear, sometimes, I do not love you so much as you wish? My dear Girl I love you ever and ever and without reserve. The more I have known you the more have I lov'd. In every way - even my jealousies have been agonies of Love, in the hottest fit I ever had I would have died for you. I have vex'd you too much. But for Love! Can I help it? You are always new. The last of your kisses was ever the sweetest; the last smile the brightest; the last movement the gracefullest. When you pass'd my window home yesterday, I was fill'd with as much admiration as if I had then seen you for the first time. You uttered a half complaint once that I only lov'd your Beauty. Have I nothing else then to love in you but that? Do not I see a heart naturally furnish'd with wings imprison itself with me? No ill prospect has been able to turn your thoughts a moment from me. [...] Even if you did not love me I could not help an entire devotion to you: how much more deeply then must I feel for you knowing you love me. My Mind has been the most discontented and restless one that ever was put into a body too small for it. I never felt my Mind repose upon anything with complete and undistracted enjoyment - upon no person but you. When you are in the room my thoughts never fly out of window: you always concentrate my whole senses. The anxiety shown about our Loves in your last note is an immense pleasure to me: however you must not suffer such speculations to molest you any more: nor will I any more believe you can have the least pique against me. [...]

Your affectionate,

J. Keats.

Source: <http://englishhistory.net/keats/letters/brawnemarch1820.html>**Glossary:****fit:** a time when you feel an emotion very strongly**vex'd:** (vexed) tormented**uttered:** said**furnish'd:** (furnished) (here) equipped with**ill prospect:** expectation of something negative that is likely to happen in the future**restless:** lacking mental peace**suffer:** (here) tolerate**pique:** annoyance, resentment, indignation

a. Having read the account of Keats and Fanny's relationship, which relevant aspects of their romance can you spot in the above letter?

b. Comment on the sentence "You uttered a half complaint once that I only loved your Beauty" in the light of what you read in the account.

c. Why do you think most people take pleasure in reading the personal letters of a famous writer? Tick as appropriate and explain your choice in writing or discuss in class.

- To gain new insight into the writer's life;
- To search for new elements to cast light onto the writer's work;
- To discover the man behind the writer;
- To investigate what it takes to make a genius;
- To satisfy one's natural tendency to be nosy;
- To enjoy the beauty of a further piece of writing by a given author;
- Other. Specify.

d. Which lines from the letter would you quote in a love letter of your own? Why? Write in your copybook or discuss with a partner.

The scene we are going to see in class is taken from the film about Keats and Fanny Brawne's romance: **Bright Star (2009)**

Director: Jane Campion

Cast: Ben Whishaw (Keats), Abbie Cornish (Fanny Brawne), Kerry Fox (Mrs Brawne), Paul Schneider (Charles Armitage Brown).

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