

# Fanny Brawne: Keats's 'Sweet Home' of Pleasure and Pain

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## **Abstract**

Fanny Brawne, Keats's beloved, to whom he was betrothed, was a source of both pleasure and pain for him. Fanny filled Keats's mind with love and affection when he was going through physical, mental and economic crisis. However, Keats's agonies were multiplied by some misunderstandings about Fanny's dubious behavior and rumours that Fanny was a 'flirt'. Keats's agonies and frustration found vents in his poems and in letters that he wrote to different people including Fanny Brawne. This paper examines some of his poems and letters in an attempt to find out the extent of his feelings and passion for Fanny Brawne. It also includes comments of Keats's friends and critics on his love affair with Fanny Brawne.

John Keats, one of the great English romantic poets, has a remarkable place in English literature. Within a short period of six years (1814-1820), he produced a good number of literary pieces that made him one of the major poets of English literature.

For a number of reasons, his personal life has become a matter of great interest to critics and readers of English literature. His relationship with Fanny Brawne, to whom he was betrothed, has become significant for a few reasons. Fanny entered Keats's life with love and affection to heal the mental wounds that had resulted from the death of his parents and his brother Tom. Fanny's beauty as well as her company provided him great pleasure. On the other hand, Keats's deteriorating physical condition, non-cooperation from his friends and

relatives on his love-affair, Fanny's ambiguous attitude, and society's conservative attitude to the couple made the poet hateful to himself and also to Fanny. Thus, Fanny Brawne appeared in Keats's life as a source of pain as well as pleasure.

In the winter of 1818-19, Keats became very lonely after the death of his affectionate brother Tom whom he had nursed for a long time. Shocked and depressed, he went to live with his friend Charles Brown at Wentworth Place. There, he met Fanny Brawne who gave him invigorating sympathy. Keeping his mind away from the past and from introspection, she encouraged his love of life by her vivacity. Remarkably, Keats's own gaiety returned soon after. Mrs. Frances Brawne, Fanny's mother, had rented half of Brown's house. Keats met Fanny at the Dilkes at Wentworth Place in November, 1818, and mentioned Fanny for the first time in his journal letter to George, his brother, on 16 December, 1818:

Mrs. Brawne who took Brown's house for the summer, still resides in Hampstead—she is a very nice woman—and her daughter senior is I think—beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange—we have a little tiff now and then—and she behaves a little better, or I must have sheered off. (Gardner, 1965, p. 134)

Fanny gave her first impression of Keats twenty years later in her letter to Fanny Keats, Keats's younger sister: "His (Keats's) conversation was in the highest degree interesting, and his spirits good, excepting at moments when anxiety regarding his brother's death dejected him." (Richardson, 1952, p. 39)

Keats's minute description of Fanny Brawne is found in his letter to George (written on 18 December, 1818) where he not only revealed his inner mind but also presented a critical analysis of her nature:

Shall I give you Miss Brawne? She is about my height—it was a fact of significance—with a fine style of countenance of the lengthened sort—she wants sentiments in every feature—she manages to look her hair well—her nostrils are fine—though a little painful—her mouth is bad and good—her profile is better than her full face which indeed is not full but pale and thin without showing any bone—her shape is very graceful and so are her movements—her arms are good her hands are brandish—her feet tolerable—she is not seventeen—but she is ignorant—monstrous in her behavior—flying out in all directions. (Gardner, 1965, p. 134)

On Friday, December 25<sup>th</sup> of 1818, Keats proposed to Fanny Brawne. "It was", Fanny wrote, "the happiest day I had ever then spent." (Richardson, 1952, p. 15) She accepted him whole–heartedly.

Fanny became a life-force for Keats within a short period of time, and he admitted as much to her in a letter written on 15 July (Thursday), 1819: "...you must write to me—as I will every week—for your letters keep me alive. My sweet girl—I cannot speak my love for you." (Gardner, 1965, p.178)

Keats transfigured Fanny in his imagination and passion. Her beauty, for him, became the truth; and so, she had come to be the Indian maid and goddess in *Endymion* where the very subject of beauty is the reconciliation between real life and Keats's poetic quest that finds a real outlet in a letter written to Fanny on 8 July, 1819:

Why may I not speak of your Beauty, since without that I could never have loved you. I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty. There may be a sort of love for which without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect and can admit in others: but it has not the richness, the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love after my own heart. (Gardner, 1965, p.175)

Keats celebrated his love in a short poem, "St. Agnes' Eve", which was written in January, 1819, when the possibility of his reunion with Fanny had considerably increased. The theme of the poem is love. It is based on the medieval superstition connected with the Eve of St. Agnes which falls on 20th of January. The legend is that a young maiden who has properly fasted and prayed would have visions of her absent lover at midnight. Accordingly, Madeline goes on a fast, prays and goes to bed. Her lover, being prevented from meeting her in daylight by the hostility of their parents, stealthily enters into her bedroom, and she elopes with him. Hereditary disease, together with malicious rumours directed against both himself and Brawne, frustrated Keats and might have led him to think about elopement.

One morning in May, under a mulberry tree, Keats set down his ode "To Nightingale", and in the same month, he wrote the poem, "On a Grecian Urn". The odes make no direct allusion to Fanny, but they suggest the "ecstasy of passion", the transience of earthly beauty, and the perfection of unchanging joy "for ever warm and still to be enjoyed". They are very significant because they were written within a few weeks of Fanny's coming to Wentworth Place. The poem, "Ode to a Nightingale" was written in April, 1819, when Keats was

staying with his friend Charles Brown at Wentworth Place, Hampstead. A nightingale had built its nest near the house. Keats felt a tranquil and continued joy in its song. One morning, he took his chair to the grass-plot under a mulberry tree where he sat for two or three hours. When he returned, he had the ode ready in his hand. Thus, the ode is a spontaneous expression of the poet's joy in the song of the nightingale. It also is a superb expression of Keats's love for Fanny Brawne. The line in the last stanza of the poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" - "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" gives Keats's view about beauty. To him, 'beauty' and 'truth' are not separate ideas; rather, they represent the same idea seen from two different aspects. What is beautiful must be true, and what is true must be beautiful. For Keats, Fanny Brawne symbolizes such beauty. Keats developed a philosophy regarding love, beauty, truth and religion. Love was his religion and Fanny Brawne was his love. His total submission to Fanny is remarkable: "I could have martyred for my religion—love is my religion—I could die for that. I could die for you. My creed is love and you are its only tenet. You have ravished me away by a power I cannot resist." (Gardner, 1965, p.197)

In a letter written on 27 October, 1818, to Richard Woodhouse, one of his publishers, Keats declared: "With a great poet, the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration." (Gardner, 1965, p.178) In another letter to Fanny Brawne written on 13 October, 1819, Keats expressed a note of selfishness about his love and devotion to her: "My love had made me selfish. I cannot exist without you. I am forgetful of everything but seeing you again—my life seems to stop there—I see no further. You have absorbed me." (Gardner, 1965, p.197) Again, in the same letter, he termed his love as selfish as well as inevitable for his existence: "My love is selfish. I cannot breathe without you."

Within a week of meeting Fanny, Keats realized that he had lost all hope of independence. This has been reflected in his poem (in fact, a fragment from an opera) "Asleep! O Sleep! A Little White, White Pearl":

Vows of my slavery, my giving up,  
 My sudden adoration, my great love (L 6-7)

In his letter to Fanny written on 1 July, 1819, Keats revealed his great love for her:

... make it [the reply of the letter] rich as a draught of poppies to intoxicate me—write the softest words and kiss them that I may at least touch my lips where yours have been. For myself I know not how to express my devotion to so fair a form: I want a brighter, a fairer word than fair. (Gardner, 1965, p.174)

In the same letter, he also wrote: "...I do not think I could restrain myself from seeing you again tomorrow, from the delight of one embrace."

In another letter written to Fanny on 8 July, 1819, he said: "Even when I am not thinking of you I receive your influence and a tenderer nature stealing upon me. ... I never knew before what such a love as you made me feel was: I did not believe in it; my fancy was afraid of it, lest it should burn me up." (Gardner, 1965, p.175)

Keats's letter to Fanny Brawne written on 25 July, 1819, uncovers his mental preoccupation and her place in his mind: "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your loveliness and the hour of my death." (Gardner, 1965, p.179) He was obsessed with the thought of Fanny Brawne, and even in the direst situations of his life, he thought of her. His letter to Fanny written on 10 February, 1820, supports this fact:

On the night I was taken ill when so violent a rush of blood came to my lungs that I felt nearly suffocated—I assure you I felt it possible I might not survive, and at that moment thought of nothing but you. (Gardner, 1965, p.201)

To Keats, real love possesses a great power which he stated in his letter to Fanny in late May, 1820: "I think a real love is enough to occupy the wildest heart." (Gardner, 1965, p. 212)

Keats is genuinely frank and open in announcing his love and devotion to Fanny. The following line taken from a letter written in June, 1820, marks Keats as a devoted lover: "Upon my soul I have loved you to the extreme." (Gardner, 1965, p. 214)

In a letter written on 5 July, 1820, Keats made a poetic presentation of his love to Fanny:

You are to me an object intensely desirable—the air I breathe in a room empty of you is unhealthy. I am not the same to you—no—you can wait—you have a thousand activities—you can be happy without me. (Gardner, 1965, p.178)

The engagement between Keats and Fanny Brawne took place towards the end of 1818. However, Keats's friends as well as his near and dear ones did not accept his relationship with Fanny well. Most of them thought Fanny to be a flirt and believed that she was not right for a talented and independent-minded person like

Keats who could sacrifice the study of medicine for his love of poetry. They were shocked by as well as alarmed at Keats's love and fascination for Fanny.

Among Dilke's papers, his grandson found a note: "It is quite a settled thing between Keats and Miss—. God help them. It's a bad thing for them. The mother says she cannot prevent it and that her only hope that it will go off." (Bate, 1963, p. 42)

"Keats' work", Charles Brown recalled, "was constantly interrupted by a circumstance which is needless to mention". (Bate, 1963, p.132)

Keats was disturbed by the comments made against his love by the members of society, including his relatives and friends. He disclosed his opinion on this matter to Fanny in a letter written in June, 1820:

These laughers (some of my friends), who do not like you, who envy you for your beauty, who would have God-blessed me—from you for ever, who were plying me with discouragements with respect to you eternally. People are revengeful—do not mind them—do nothing but love me if I knew that for certain life and health will in such event be a heaven, and death itself will be less painful. I long to believe in immortality. I shall never be able to bid you an entire farewell. (Gardner, 1965, p.178)

Even when Keats's friends and well-wishers went against his love for Fanny, he sought relief for his mental torment in her love and affection. In the same letter, we find evidence in its support: "If I have no other merit than the great love for you that was sufficient to keep me sacred and unmentioned in such society."

Keats's increased wrath against society found its outlet in a letter to Fanny that he wrote in early August of 1820: "I am sickened at the brute world which you are smiling with. I hate men and women more." (Gardner, 1965, p.222)

Keats was often taken over by disappointment, frustration and loneliness due to his deteriorating health, financial crisis and the malice directed against Fanny and himself by some people. Keats and Fanny would not, apparently, make a fit couple for Hampstead society for a number of reasons. First, he had left a certain career in medicine and had devoted himself to poetry. Moreover, he was not succeeding in poetry either. So acquaintances were writing him as a 'spoiled talent'. Second, critics' rejection of his poem *Endymion* had intensified his dejection. Third, he was frequently unwell and was suspected of suffering from consumption. Fourth, Keats failed to manage his brothers' estate, and so he

was unable to live on his own income. Fifth, from the very beginning of his affair with Fanny Brawne, he was not happy with the behavior of his friends and other members of society. Even Mrs. Brawne, Fanny's mother, was not satisfied with the relationship because of the reasons stated above.

Due to his illness, he thought that Fanny might leave him; so, in the poem, "Ode to Fanny" he prayed to her to stay with him:

But, pr'ythee, do not turn  
The current of your heart from me so soon. (Stanza III, L 5-6)

Young men of Hampstead society had admired Fanny for her beauty and intellect, and thus made Keats extremely jealous as well as helpless. Personally, Fanny was a cheerful and sportive girl who used to pass time with gentlemen and sometimes went to the theatre with some army officers. Keats became hateful of Fanny when he saw that she had been living a normal life while he was going through mental and physical agony. He thus asked her to relieve him of all sorts of tortures:

Love, love, alone, his pains severe and many:  
Then, loveliest! keep me free  
From torturing jealousy. ("Ode to Fanny", Stanza VI, L 7-8)

After encountering some rumours about Fanny Brawne and after hearing of her intimacy with Charles Browne, Keats became worried as well as jealous. In a letter written to Fanny in early August, 1820, he stated: "Brown will be living near you with his indecencies—I see no prospect of any rest. I wish you could infuse a little confidence in human nature into my heart." (Gardner, 1965, p.222)

Some speculations against Fanny together with his own poor physical condition might have made Keats suspicious of Fanny. At moments, Keats thought that Fanny was not serious in her love for him; rather, she was playing with him. He expressed this idea in a letter written to Fanny on 5 July, 1820: "Be serious! Love is not a plaything—and again do not write unless you can do it with a crystal conscience. I would sooner die for want of you than..." (Gardner, 1965, p.218)

In a letter written to Fanny in early August, 1820, Keats compared his mental torment with that of Hamlet. He thought that they resembled each other in the point of helplessness: "Shakespeare always sums up matters in the most sovereign manner. Hamlet's heart was full of such misery as mine is when he said to Ophelia, 'Go to a Nunnery, go, go!'" (Gardner, 1965, p.221)

Keats tried to re-establish his love for and faith in Brawne and this is reflected in the same letter: "I wish I was either in your arms full of faith or that a thunderbolt would strike me." In a letter to Fanny Brawne written sometime in February, 1820, Keats blamed his deteriorating physical condition as the obstacle to their love:

How illness stands as a barrier betwixt me and you! ... I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make my friends proud of my memory—but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered. (Gardner, 1965, p. 202)

As his physical as well as mental strength deteriorated, Keats stated his frustration to Fanny in another letter written sometime in March, 1820: "Illness is a long lane, but I see you at the end of it, and shall mend my pace as well as possible." (Gardner, 1965, p.209)

Keats's frustration about his unsatisfied love towards Fanny reached its climax in the ode, "On a Grecian Urn" in which the lover can never kiss his beloved. The following lines of the ode symbolize the tension and great pain caused by his unfulfilled love:

Bold lover, never, never, canst thou kiss  
Though winning near the goal—yet do not grieve. (Stanza II, lines 7-8)

More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
Forever warm and still to be enjoyed. (Stanza III, lines 5-6)

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" also deals with frustrated love. Critics have found autobiographical elements in the poem. The poem was written three or four months after the death of his brother Tom in December, 1818, whom he had loved devotedly and nursed to the end of his life. In the meantime, Keats had fallen in love with Fanny. The signs of his fatal disease—consumption—had also become obvious to him by the time he wrote the poem. The merciless lady referred to in the poem is Fanny Brawne. The mood of disappointment and gloom is caused probably by Keats' frustration in love, the death of his brother Tom, and awareness of his own disease. The exact date of the composition of the poem is not known, but it is certain that it was written in 1819. In the poem, the medieval knight, the main character, looks pale, wild, and sad. He had been captivated by the bewitching charms of a beautiful lady. The poem seems to have originated at a time when he himself was in the grip of love and death.



I met a lady in the meads,  
Full beautiful—a faery's child;  
Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
And her eyes were wild. (Stanza IV, L 1-4)

Keats wrote to J.H. Reynolds, one of his publishers, on 21 September, 1819: "I equally dislike the flavor of the public with the love of a woman—they are both a cloying trickle to the wings of independence." (Gardner, 1965, p.91)

The poem, "Ode to Fanny" expresses Keats's cynical idea about women. He imagines Fanny to be the prettiest creature in the world, but he warns her not to allow anybody to touch her. To him, a woman is like a feather on the sea, swayed to and fro by wind and tide. The poet knows that women are unfaithful, but he loves Fanny very deeply. He, however, requests Fanny to keep him free from painful jealousy. Finally, he appeals to her to remain pure, and untouched like a fresh budding flower; if she cannot do so, he would better die.

Ah! dearest love, sweet home of all my fears  
And hopes, and joys, and panting miseries. ("Ode to Fanny": stanza III,  
L 1-2)

Here is a paragraph where we see how Fanny's biographer defends her against the allegations that she was a 'flirt' and she was not serious in her love:

Fanny was human enough to feel that his love need not exclude all other admiration; she was eighteen and enjoyed the pleasures of her age. She was, however, blessed with remarkable understanding, and despite his moods of hurtful suspicion which later bordered on insult, she loved him constantly. She answered his letter almost by return. She was afraid that he loved her too much for her physical attraction and too little for her deeper, permanent self, and she asked him to speak less of her beauty, and having corrected him, she feared that he would doubt the entirety of her love. (Richardson, 1952, p. 39)

Many critics have explored the relationship between Keats and Fanny Brawne as well as their individual characteristics. Joanna Richardson, Fanny's biographer, has treated her affectionately, focusing light on her innocence and sportiveness. In her book, *Fanny Brawne: Fair Love of Keats*, she has considered Fanny's age and the environment she was living in:

Through the Dilkes and her mother's wide circle of friends she received many invitations. She could not be expected to remain always at home refusing to go to the opera and rejecting quadrilles; and at times in that early spring of 1819, when Keats reflected on her constant gaiety and

his own hindering persistent illness his anxiety could no longer be restrained. (Richardson, 1952, p. 64)

Amy Lowell, one of Keats's biographers, wrote: "I think that nothing which one could do would give Keats greater pleasure than to prove to the world that Fanny Brawne was a really very nice girl." (Lowell, 1969, p. 164) Gerald Griffin, another critic, has this to say about Fanny: "She was most animated, lively and even witty in conversation. She quite dazzled me." (Richardson, 1952, p. 35)

In his book, *Life of John Keats*, the biographer Walter Jackson Bates, has specified the legends about the relationship between Keats and Fanny Brawne that reigned through centuries:

There was a Victorian legend about a dying poet consumed with unsatisfied love for a heartless flirt. This opinion got a very strong ground and still it reigns over criticism on them despite the frequent efforts made to correct it. The following circumstances have contributed to the rise of this legend:

1. Monckton Milnes, while collecting information for the first biography of Keats (1848), considered it indelicate to inquire into the past affairs of a woman now married. He scrupulously avoided any mention of her name that ultimately created a vacuum where anything could be moved.
2. He was quite human of Keats's friends to look askance after his death, at a woman they had known only slightly and who had consequently treated them in a casual and independent spirit. George, the Dilkes, and even Brown joined the general shaking of heads over the attachment.
3. To minds already prepared to bend in this direction; the publication in 1878 of Keats's letter to her seemed to provide a further indictment of Fanny Brawne.

Extremes, of course, beget their opposites and an anti-Victorian reaction in favoring Fanny Brawne gathered force in the 1920s and 1930s. A strange Boston collector F. Holland Day had years before secured from the family of Keats's sister in Spain, 31 letters that Fanny Brawne had written her between September 1820 when Keats left for Italy, and June 1824. (Bate, 1963, p. 421)

After Keats's death, Fanny started the life of an 'unwedded widow' and continued it for twelve years. During this period, she thought only of John Keats and continued writing letters to Fanny Keats, Keats's younger sister. The letters

were full of retrospections about Keats. Fanny Brawne's reaction to Keats's death has been recorded in the following manner:

The Brawnes went into mourning, and now, for the first time, Fanny's betrothal was made evident. Alone, her hair cut short, and wearing the ring which Keats had given her, the cap and black dress of a widow, she wandered across the Heath, day after day; often retracing their walks, she stayed there far into the night, until some watchman, bearing his lantern, at last discovered her. (Richardson, 1952, p. 87)

For her beauty, love and affection, Fanny Brawne had become the life-force for Keats, who was a worshipper of all these attributes. In his final years, Keats had endeavored to sustain his bond with Fanny though it was not socially accepted due to his giving up the study of medicine. He had tried to write poetry, but had failed to become successful. Then he became afflicted with consumption, the disease that his mother and his younger brother had suffered from. Moreover, rumours and malicious comments about Fanny being a 'flirt' had added to his misery. In a letter written on 5 July, 1820, he had uttered: "I cannot live without you and not only you but chaste you virtuous you." (Gardner, 1965, p. 218)

Due to his deteriorating physical condition, Keats was ultimately forced to yield to Fate. He suffered much, but through all sorts of mental and physical torments, he remained overwhelmed with the beauty and love of Fanny Brawne. Finally, when he realized that he would die, and his dream of a sweet home would remain unrealized, he bid good-bye to his beloved in a letter written to her on February 27, 1820:

"Good bye, my love, my dear love, my beauty." (Gardner, 1965, p.178)

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