

"On the Grasshopper and Cricket"

Author: John Keats

Date of birth: October 31, 1795

Place of birth: London, England

Date of death: February 23, 1821

Place of death: Rome, Italy

Country: England

Culture: British

Type of poem: Sonnet

Appears in: *The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats*, 1829; *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, 1840; *The Poems of John Keats* edited by Jack Stillinger, 1978

Now considered one of the greatest English Romantic poets, John Keats was not widely recognized for his talent during his short life. It was not until after his death from tuberculosis in 1821 that critics began to acknowledge the poet's astonishing achievement in his young life. Having initially studied medicine, Keats was drawn to poetry and worked successfully in various forms, with particular achievement with several of his odes. In his work, he embraced the ideals of Romanticism, which was an artistic movement that began in Europe in the late eighteenth century and developed in part as a reaction against the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and the Industrial Revolution's rapid development of cities. When the English poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) famously declared, in 1798, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poetry by Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), that excellent poetry consisted of "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," a new standard was advanced that emphasized the artist's individual emotions and nature, among other topics, as worthy of artistic expression.

Keats's poem "On the Grasshopper and Cricket," originally published as Sonnet XV in 1817, follows this standard and uses poetry as a vehicle to meditate on the eternal power of nature as well as the possibility of achieving immortality through artistic production. The sonnet was one of Keats's preferred forms early on. Specifically, this poem is a Petrarchan sonnet, a form that was originally developed by the fourteenth-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch. The sonnet consists of fourteen lines and is divided into two stanzas: The first is the octave, which consists of eight lines with a rhyme scheme of *abbaabba*. The second part

is the sestet, comprising the final six lines, and the rhyme scheme here can follow various patterns. In this case, Keats chose the pattern *cdecde*.

Keats used the traditional sonnet form to develop new romantic themes, specifically nature and its endless power. Keats imagines this power in terms of poetry itself, as indicated by the first line: "The poetry of earth is never dead" (line 1). The speaker goes on to explain this declaration in the rest of the octave, describing how even though the heat of summer silences the birds as they take refuge in "cooling trees" (3), the grasshopper's voice still celebrates "the new-mown mead" (4) as he "rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed" (8).

Echoing the first line of the octave, the sestet begins with "The poetry of earth is ceasing never" (9), which reinforces the primary theme and provides structural unity to the poem. In this second half, however, the speaker imagines another silence, this time brought on by the cold of winter. Despite the "lone winter evening" (10), however, the poetry of nature prevails, as

from the stove there shrills

The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,

And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,

The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills. (12–14)

This conclusion asserts the ceaseless voice of nature as experienced through the chirping of the grasshopper and cricket, and it links the two insects, as "one in drowsiness half lost" imagines the cricket to be a grasshopper in summer. Even in the dead of winter, nature's insistent voice prevails in a never-ending cycle of life that includes the observer, half lost in sleep. The observer's "half-lost" condition also suggests nature's power to inspire hope and rejuvenation, by recalling the grasshopper's lively chirping and the warm season in which it lives.

However, the central power of nature's voice is poetry itself, which takes on a dual meaning and deepens the poem's significance beyond a one-dimensional appreciation of nature's power. The "poetry of earth" literally refers to the sounds of nature, represented by the speaker's experience of the grasshopper and cricket. But it also refers to the poem itself, which, after all, exemplifies another form of earthly music. In this case, the poem's celebration of nature also endures, on the written page and in readers' imaginations, and thus defies death just as the "poetry" of the insects seems to do.

Underscoring this link between the theme and its medium of expression was more than a facile game. Romanticism marked an increasing focus on the artist's individuality and the power to create life and immortality through art. This notion is reflected in famous works of the period, such as Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, which tells of a doctor whose ambition to create another human being results in a dreadful monster who spends his life in wretched isolation. This romantic fascination with defying death helps to explain this poem's meditation on immortality in terms of both nature and its own art. Interest in the endurance of his own art and his legacy proved to be especially important for Keats, who only a few years later became ill with tuberculosis, which cut short his life in 1821, when he was only twenty-five years old.

Further Reading

Cox, Jeffrey N. *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt, and their Circle*. Cambridge UP, 1998.

Plumly, Stanley. *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography*. W. W. Norton, 2008.

Turley, Richard Marggraf. *Keats's Boyish Imagination*. Routledge, 2004.

Bibliography

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"John Keats." *Poetry Foundation*, 2017, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/john-keats. Accessed 4 Jan. 2017.

Keats, John. *The Poetry of John Keats*. Edited by Jack Stillinger, Belknap Press, 1978.

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