Poetryclass Fresh Ideas for Learning from the Poetry Society

A thing of beauty

Rachel Piercey explores the life and work of John Keats through some of the paintings and objects in the collection of Keats House, London

Links to exam criteria

- Comprehension of implicit and explicit ideas
- Critical reading and evaluation
- Personal interpretation
- Analysis of language, form and structure for meaning and effect
- Making links between texts and biographical and historical contexts
- Creative writing

Some tasks included in this resource are suited for independent extension work, or offer teachers flexibility to increase the depth and breadth of material covered in class.

Introduction

Created in 2021, exactly two hundred years after John Keats’ death, this resource can be used in two ways. Teachers and students who are planning an in-person visit to Keats House in Hampstead, London, can use it to think about some of the paintings and objects they’ll see on display in the House, and how they might connect to Keats’ life and work. It also contains analysis, reading and writing activities which work even without seeing the objects and paintings in situ. Aimed at students aged 14 and above, it is designed to both enhance classroom practice and provide suggestions for independent writing and creativity.

We have chosen six objects from the Museum’s collection which tell the story of Keats’ life. Each object suggests a poem to read, and inspires some reading and writing tasks. Teachers and students might want to work through some or all of the suggestions at their own pace, depending on their
chosen focus and level of knowledge about Keats’ life. Exercises 1-3 are simpler, and 4-6 more complex.

We include links to the relevant poems to print out, or you can read the poems in a Selected or Collected edition of Keats. All writing exercises can be completed with notebook and pen except for #6, which needs arts and crafts supplies.

John Keats, 1795–1821

John Keats, now regarded as one of the greatest of the Romantic poets, was born in London in October 1795. He was the eldest of four children, and a devoted brother to George, Thomas and Frances throughout his short life. His letters to them, as well as to his circle of literary and artistic friends, and his great love Fanny Brawne, provide an intimate insight into the philosophy of life, art and beauty which he explores in his poems. Keats trained as a surgeon-apothecary but did not practise upon qualifying; he preferred to dedicate his life to poetry. His work was harshly criticised in his lifetime and he died believing “I have left no immortal work behind me”, but Keats’ reputation grew steadily after his death.

Keats died of tuberculosis in Rome, on 23 February 1821, aged just 25. He had asked for his tombstone to bear no name, only the line “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.”
Look closely
Keats’ iconic sonnet ‘Bright Star’ was not published in his lifetime. Keats inscribed the lines inside a copy of The Poetical Works of William Shakespeare, opposite a poem called ‘A Lover’s Complaint’, in which a young woman tells the story of her sweetheart’s infidelity. Scholars are divided on when Keats wrote ‘Bright Star’, but it was ultimately addressed to his beloved Fanny Brawne, and Fanny copied it out into one of her own books: a volume of Dante, a gift from Keats.

Look at the handwritten poem and consider its placement inside the book of Shakespeare.

- Do you like the idea of writing poems into books?
- Does seeing Keats’ handwriting bring him closer?
- Do you think it’s significant that Keats wrote up this poem opposite ‘A Lover’s Complaint’?
- The poem is not inscribed with a title – what would you call it?

Read a poem
Read ‘Bright Star’. It’s in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet: the rhythm is iambic pentameter, and the rhyme scheme follows the pattern ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

- What do you understand by the word “steadfast”?
- Do you think of a star as steadfast? Why do you think Keats has chosen this association?
- The speaker imagines two scenes which the star might gaze upon: the tides of the earth, and snow falling on moors and mountains. How do you think these grand images connect and/or contrast with the image of the lover’s “ripening breast”?
- Shakespearean sonnets have a ‘volta’ (a change in the direction of thought or feeling) in line nine. Pick out the ‘volta’ here – is it obvious? How does Keats use repetition of language and imagery to connect the first eight lines and last six lines of the poem?

Write a poem
Write your own sonnet exploring the subject of steadfastness. Make it fourteen lines long, with a volta in line nine; the meter and rhyme scheme are optional. If you are not sure where to start, you could consider how the lover in the poem might respond, or the star itself, or even the woman in ‘A Lover’s Complaint’, existing forever next to Keats’ poem. Alternatively, you could choose your own image and write a contemporary version of ‘Bright Star’.

As an extra challenge, you could make your poem one long sentence, as Keats does.
Look closely
Below is a posthumous portrait of Keats, by his close friend Joseph Severn. Severn accompanied Keats to Rome and nursed him every day; when Keats died, it was in Severn’s arms. Of this portrait, the artist recalls:

“This was the time he first fell ill & had written the Ode to the Nightingale on the morning of my visit to Hampstead. I found him sitting with the two chairs as I have painted him & was struck with the first real symptoms of sadness in Keats so finely expressed in that poem.”

• Is it significant that there’s a portrait of Shakespeare above Keats’ head?
• How has Severn used light in this portrait?

Read a poem
Read ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, a poem where the narrator contemplates and comments on the pictures decorating an ornate Greek vase. This is an example of ‘ekphrasis’, a detailed literary description of a work of art.

• What scenes does the speaker describe?
• How does he go beyond mere surface description?
• These words are often quoted: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter”. What do you think the speaker means by “unheard melodies”? Do you agree that something is “sweeter” if it is harder to grasp, or can only be imagined?
• The figures on the vase are frozen in time – in the world of the poem, is this positive or negative, do you think?

Write a poem
Using your notes, write your own ekphrastic poem exploring Severn’s portrait of Keats. Include detailed descriptions of the painting, but go beyond this to explore the thoughts and feelings that the portrait inspires in you, in the same way Keats writes about what the Urn looks like but also about the thoughts it provokes. Does the painting make you think about time, or reading, or friendship, or nature… or something else altogether? Feel free to range around your knowledge of Keats’ life – his love of nature, his financial worries, his friendships and engagement, his medical knowledge and his own illness.

• More advice about writing ekphrastic poems is here: bit.ly/ekphrasticchallenge
Look closely
Look at the ring and think about its history of presence and absence, of romance, grief and loyalty, as well as noting or imagining its physical features. Jot down words and phrases about how the ring looks, how it might feel to touch, what it symbolises, and what it makes you feel.

Read a poem
Read ‘In drear nighted December’, which explores the experience of absence, and the memory of “passed joy” – a joy the speaker once experienced, but has since lost.

- The speaker describes (using the examples of a tree and a brook) the different sensations of summer and winter. Pick out the words and phrases which highlight this contrast between the seasons.
- The poem compares the cycle of nature with human psychology: trees and brooks do not look back yearningly at past pleasures, and the speaker appears to be sad that humans can’t be similarly contented. Do you think this comparison between nature and human psychology entirely works? Is it meant to – do you think that humans can or should behave like trees and brooks? Why might Keats have included this comparison?
- Do you think the poem is talking about love?
- What do you make of that phrase, “The feel of not to feel it”?
- What do you think the speaker is saying about poetry’s place in dealing with “passed joy”? Is absence a theme poetry is better equipped to explore than other art forms?

Write a poem
Jot down some of your favourite words from the poem, and a few of your own reactions to it. Add these to your words and phrases about the engagement ring and use the notes to write a poem called ‘The Garnet Ring’.

Will you write about Keats’ and Fanny’s relationship or use it as the jumping-off point for another story; will you explore “passed joy” or something more cheerful? To reflect the shape of the ring, you could choose a single word or phrase to begin and end your poem, creating a circular effect.
Look closely
This painting, another by Joseph Severn, dates from 1845, many years after Keats’ death. It depicts Keats listening to a nightingale sing in the relative wilderness of Hampstead Heath, which was just minutes from his home – though by another friend’s account, when Keats wrote his famous ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, he had been listening to the bird in the garden.

• Why do you think Severn chose this subject?
• Why do you think he places Keats on the Heath, rather than in the garden?
• How does Severn use contrast in this piece? Look at the colours, the sense of light and shade, and the use of distance, height and scale.
• How would you describe the mood of the painting?

Read a poem
Read ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, which Keats composed, remarkably, in a single day.

• Read the poem aloud to yourself, to experience its music. Look at the rhythm, rhyme scheme and use of enjambement – do you think they help to capture the music of the nightingale’s song?
• What are your favourite lines?
• Do we see the nightingale in the poem?
• Keats builds up a rich imaginative world – pick out some of the most sensory examples of sight, taste, touch, scent and sound.
• Jot down a few examples of the range of references and imagery used in the poem (e.g. biblical, classical).

Write a poem
Keats’ intense and complex appreciation of the nightingale’s song could be seen as an example of ‘Negative Capability’. This was a phrase Keats invented, in a letter to his brothers in December 1817:

“I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”
In other words, ‘Negative capability’ means accepting that some things may be unknowable or inconclusive, and being at peace with ambiguity. The speaker in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ surrenders himself to the resonance of the bird’s song and his own imagination, travelling through space and time and exploring various emotional reactions. He doesn’t reach any conclusions about his sense of self – instead, the poem ends with the bird’s song fading and an unanswered question.

Negative Capability is a hard state to reach; in Keats’ letter, Shakespeare has it, but fellow Romantic poet Coleridge does not. As a first step towards letting go of fact and reason, try some ‘free writing’. In the twentieth century, various writers promoted this as a way of accessing a more instinctive mode of thinking. In free writing, you simply put your pen on the page and write continuously – not worrying about grammar, or spelling, or making sense.

Set a timer for ten minutes and take a blank piece of paper, then start writing and don’t take your pen off the page. You could begin by noting down what you can hear, as in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, or words, images and feelings that struck you in the poem or painting. If you get stuck, simply repeat your last word over and over until a new thought catches you.

Let your mind wander where it wants to go, even if it seems surreal or unconnected. Once you’ve finished, underline the thoughts, words and phrases which seem most significant to you. Construct a poem from them – particularly enjoying any uncertainties, mysteries and doubts which arise from your writing.
Look closely
Keats wrote hundreds of letters in his short life, to family, friends and his “dearest Girl”, Fanny Brawne. The letters reveal the intensity of Keats’ contemplation of life, selfhood, philosophy and poetry, as well as his lively interest in everyday affairs. His letters were collected and published after his death; you can read them here, and some extracts below:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—
(22 November 1817, to Benjamin Bailey)

These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter—They talked of Kean & his low company—Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself!
(21 December 1817, to George and Thomas Keats)

We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.
(3 February 1818, to John Hamilton Reynolds)

My love has made me selfish. I cannot exist without you — I am forgetful of every thing but seeing you again — my Life seems to stop there — I see no further. You have absorb’d me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving—I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of soon seeing you.
(13 October 1819, to Fanny Brawne)

My dear Fanny—Mr. Brown is waiting for me to take a walk. Mrs. Dilke is on a visit next door and desires her love to you. The Dog shall be taken care of and for his name I shall go and look in the parish register where he was born—I still continue on the mending hand.
(April 2020, to Fanny Keats)
Look at the photograph of Keats’ original letter and read the selection of extracts. If you want to, you could dive more deeply into the whole online collection to find a favourite letter to a friend or family member.

• How would you describe Keats’ handwriting?
• How do you think the letters would feel and smell?
• What subjects – grand and ordinary – does Keats cover?
• Do you ever write or receive letters?
• Do you think emails and messages are the modern-day equivalent?
• Pick out your favourite sentence – what is it and why?

Read a poem
Read ‘When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be’. Keats was not yet ill with tuberculosis when he wrote this poem, but to the modern reader who knows of his fate, the words seem poignantly prophetic.

• Keats’ speaker details the experiences he is worried about missing out on. Rephrase these in your own words. Do they chime with you?
• Does this insight into the speaker’s “fears” feel intimate to you, like you are peeking into someone’s private thoughts?
• The poem describes death as “Ceas[ing] to be”. What do you think of this description?
• What do you make of the image of the speaker standing “on the shore / Of the wide world”? Why a “shore”, do you think?
• Do you think it’s a positive thing, that “love and fame to nothingness do sink”? Is this a sense of perspective, or a sense of loss?

Write a poem
Beginning with the words “Dear John”, write a poem back to Keats in the form of a letter, addressing the anxieties he raises in ‘When I Have Fears’.

What insights do you have to offer from your twenty-first-century perspective on his life? Maybe try hand-writing your poem, and putting it in an envelope.

Pile everybody’s envelopes together, then pick one at a time to read out loud.
Look closely
In 1811, the young John Keats left school and was apprenticed to a surgeon named Thomas Hammond. Over the next few years, as Keats assisted Hammond and learned about the body, he also read voraciously and wrote poems on increasingly political themes. In 1815, Keats began study at Guy’s Hospital, London, to become a licensed surgeon and apothecary. He bought this notebook to record his anatomy and physiology lectures, and on page 27, next to the slanting lines of notes on a dislocated jaw, we find delightful proof of the poet’s daydreaming: four doodles of flowers, inked in the margin.

First of all, dedicate ten minutes to daydreaming yourself. Stare out of the window, or doodle dreamily on your notebook page... Where did your mind and your hand take you?

Then make a note of the most interesting words in the section from Keats’ notebook, below. Don’t worry if you don’t know what the words mean; just listen to their music.

The Lower Jaw is frequently dislocated from receiving a slight Blow while the Mouth is open—it is thus indicated—the Condyles of the Jaw are thrown under the Zygomatic Arches sometimes the coronoid process projects beyond the Arch. Cover the Thumbs with an Handkerchief and depress the lower part of the Jaw elevating the Chin with the fingers—if this should not succeed.

Read a poem
A plant nestles close to a skull in another of Keats’ texts: the epic narrative poem ‘Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil’. When Isabella’s lover Lorenzo is killed by her possessive brothers, she finds his body and buries his head in a pot of basil, which she keeps by her side day and night.

Read the poem, particularly sections XXXVIII, XLIV-XLVI, and LII-LIV.

- “Upon the murderous spot she seem’d to grow, / Like to a native lily of the dell” (XLVI): Keats weaves together life and death in these later stanzas of the poem, using imagery of natural growth set against death and decay. Pick out some other examples of growth and/or decay.
- Keats calls voluptuously upon the senses in ‘Isabella’, as in many other poems – find the words he uses which evoke touch, taste and scent.
- Do you like long poems, with a detailed story to tell? How is the experience different to reading a shorter poem, like a sonnet?
Keats’ poem is based on a story from a collection of fourteenth-century Italian tales, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Why do you think tales of star-crossed lovers – from *Romeo and Juliet*, via *Titanic* and *Twilight*, to *La La Land* – are so enduringly popular? Can you think of any other examples – in literature, film or TV – of couples who are together against all the odds?

Search online for paintings of Isabella and her pot of basil – many artists have been inspired by the story. Which is your favourite version and why?

**Write a poem**

Those pages of Keats’ notebook intertwine pain with beauty, and the physical body with the imagination – themes also found in these stanzas of Isabella. Recreate and reimagine these intertwined contrasts with a collage poem.

Write out or type and print a variety of your favourite words and phrases from the medical notebook, the poem, and your own notes on Isabella, with plenty of white space around them. Cut out your words and rearrange them into a new poem on a fresh page, experimenting with different combinations before you stick them down. You don’t need to worry about small, connecting words like ‘and’ or ‘the’ – either write them in yourself, or try creating the poem without them (it doesn’t have to make grammatical sense).

If you doodled in your planning, cut out those sketches and arrange them around the poem, as in the medical notebook. Or create new doodles, inspired by the new meanings resonating from the old words. Compare with other poems in your class, and see how differently you have each used the language of the sources.

More information about collage poems is here: [https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/collage](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/collage) and a Google image search brings up dozens of examples.

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**About this resource**

**Rachel Piercey** writes and runs workshops for adults and children. Her third poetry pamphlet, *Disappointing Alice*, was published by HappenStance in 2019, and her poems have appeared in magazines including *The Rialto*, *Magma* and *The Poetry Review*. Rachel has also co-edited three children’s poetry anthologies with the Emma Press, and her first picture book came out with Magic Cat in 2021. [rachelpierceypoet.com](http://rachelpierceypoet.com)

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**Keats200** is a celebration of Keats’s life, works and legacy, beginning in December 2018 through to February 2021 and beyond. It is led by three major partners – Keats House, Hampstead, The Keats Foundation and the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association – and is open to all individuals and organisations who have an interest in Keats or poetry. The bicentenary of Keats’s most productive years as a poet, and the period when he found inspiration, friendship and love, is an exciting opportunity to (re)discover and enjoy his works as well as engage with poetry and its ongoing relevance to us all today.

**Keats House** is provided by the City of London Corporation as part of its contribution to the cultural life of London and the nation. Keats House is a registered charity (number 1053381) and you can find out more about its work and how to visit at [www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/keats](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/keats)

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