THE POETRY SOCIETY

Poetryclass Fresh ideas for learning from The Poetry Society

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The truth exposed Exploring 'Polaris' by Brigitta McKeever

This lesson plan explores 'Polaris' by Brigitta McKeever, a winning poem from the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020.

The activities can be used in a single session, or over a series of sessions.

The following activities will inspire students to consider what makes us, and others individuals. There are a number of activities for students to have a go at.

KS3   **KS4**   **KS5**

Topics at a glance
- the body
- truth
- justice
- imagery
- creative writing

Getting started

Ask students to do the following to stimulate conversation:

1. Have a look in your bag or pencil case (if you don't have it with you, try to remember what's in your bag). Choose 4 objects which you think have the most significance.

2. Explain to your partner why these objects are most significant to you.

You could repeat the same task considering:

- 4 photos on your phone

Now, give students 2 figures from popular culture which juxtapose one another (e.g. Donald Trump and
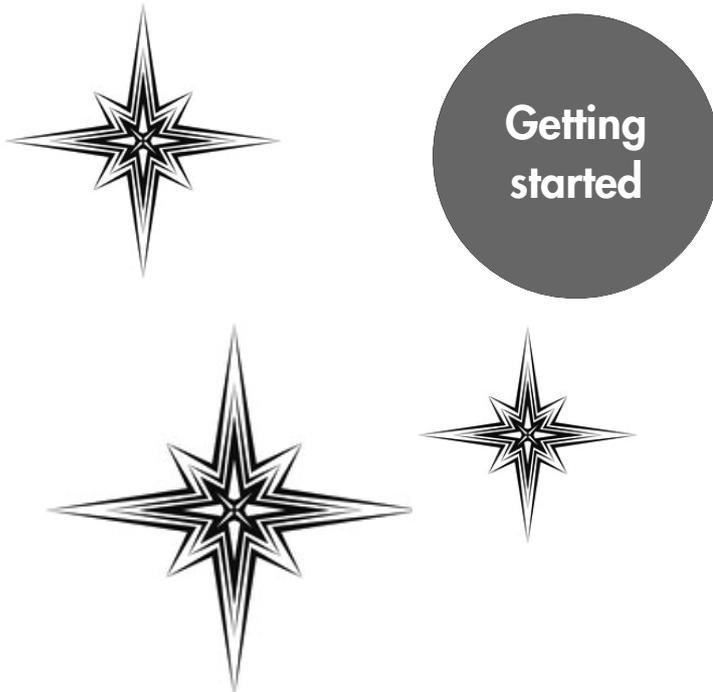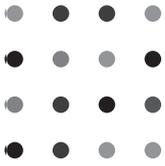
Greta Thunberg) and ask them to create a list of the significant:

- Objects in their bags
- Photos on their phones

Now discuss as a class: what do our possessions reflect about us? Can we always judge a person based on their possessions?

Reading the poem

1. First, ask students to close their eyes and listen to the poem as you read it to them.

2. Next, ask the students to pair up and read the poem aloud to one another, taking it in turns to read the stanzas.

3. Finally, ask students to whisper the poem aloud to themselves.

Students will now need three colours to identify the following:

Colour 1: Use this colour to highlight the items/objects which are uncovered throughout the poem

Colour 2: use this colour to highlight the verb used at the beginning of each stanza to describe how the objects/things are accessed

Colour 3: Highlight the final line of each stanza: note how the language remains the same/changes.

Now, ask students to draw small images around each stanza to represent what is found at different stages of the poem.

Ask the class

- Who/what is being dissected here?
- Label each stanza – what do you think is being discussed here? What could these images represent on a larger scale?
- Let's think about imagery. The poem finishes with a very complex and ambiguous image.

  a. Do you notice any religious imagery at the start? Why might this be?
  b. What/who do you think 'the boy' represents?
  c. Why is the final sentence left incomplete? What does the poet want us to do/think/feel?

Analytical activity

How does the poet use verbs to convey emotion in the poem 'Polaris'? You could take this opportunity to explore language, analysing in your school-style.

You may like to try the **PRETZIL** method:
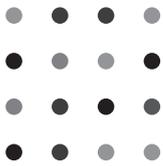
P: point

R: reference the text

E: explain 'where/why/what' for the reference

T: terminology – here we are discussing verbs

Z: zoom in – what does this piece of language and/or structure imply/convey/connote/symbolise?

I: intention – what do you think the poet's intention is here?

L: Link back to the question – what emotion is being conveyed?

Time to write!

Below are 3 activities to choose from, each requires its own planning.

Task 1: Operation!
Imagine that you are the board game "Operation" – you are going to take a look at each of these key body areas and consider:
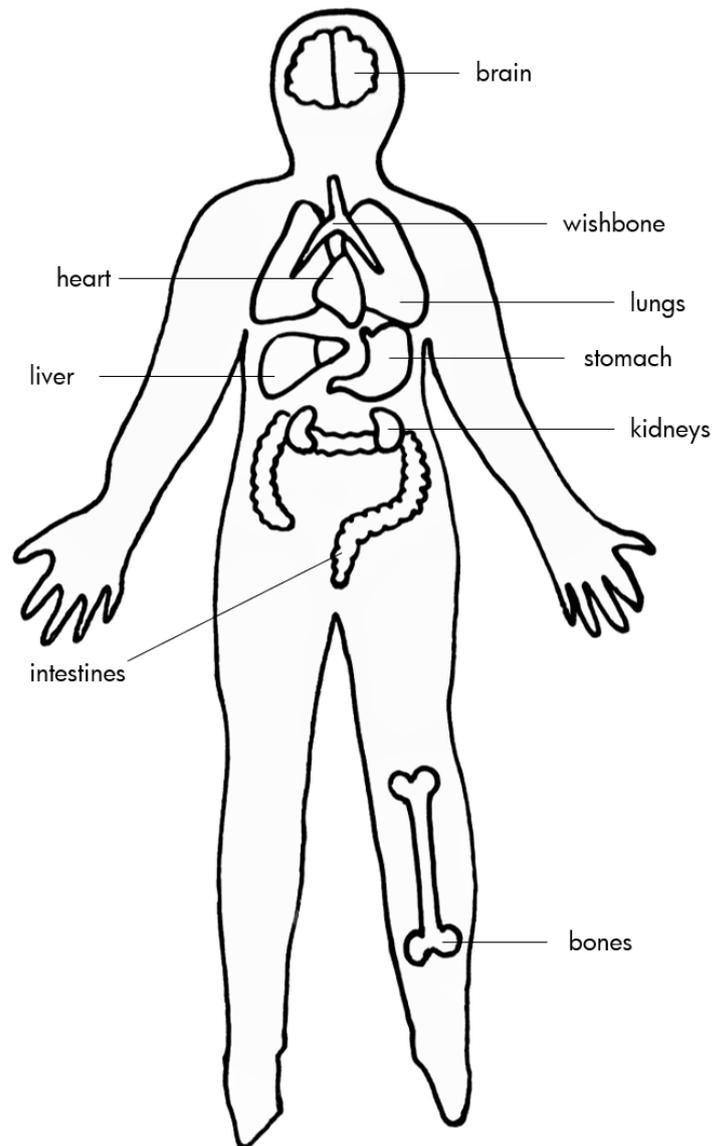
What would be in your: heart/ stomach/funny bone?

The more specific to yourself you can be, the better:

HEART
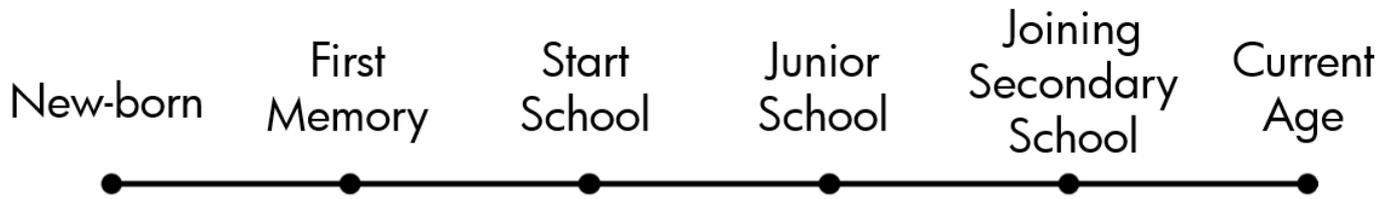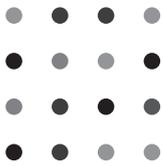
Avoid: Family/friends/partner

Try: A moment in your life where you felt loved / A place you love / A quality or affectation of someone you love

Label each area with ideas

Write it up:
- Now use these ideas to write a poem made up of short 2/3 line stanzas
- They could each start with "My _____ is made of..."

brain

wishbone

heart

lungs

liver

stomach

kidneys

intestines

bones

New-born   First   Start   Junior   Joining   Current
            Memory   School   School   Secondary Age
                                        School

Task 2: Evolution of Me
Create a timeline with the following milestones on it:

• New-born
• First memory
• Starting school
• Junior school
• Joining secondary school
• Current age

For each 'age' on the timeline, add 3 recollections (real or imagined in some cases) that sum up that age for you (this could be places/hobbies/food/friends/activities/family members…)

Now use these ideas to write a poem made up of short 2/3 line stanzas:

At the beginning of each stanza, try to use a different verb at each age to symbolise how you felt and to describe the metaphorical "inside" of you at that time.

For example (New-born):

> Stared at. Adored.
> Read to and fed, held close, tucked in.
> Rarely alone.

Task 3: The juxtaposition
Using the task from the beginning of the session, create a poem consisting of opposing stanzas:

• One describing the contents of a "good" person
• One describing the contents of a "bad" person
• Extra Challenge! Could you add in a third stanza that is neither good, nor bad? This could be from the perspective of another person, or something more abstract (like a god/animal/conscience).
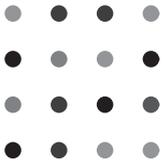
Finisher:
Polaris, often referred to as the Pole Star or North Star, is incredibly symbolic. It symbolises:

• Purposeful journeys
• Inspiration
• Hope

Around the star, label at least 3 reasons why you believe McKeever chose this title for her poem (consider all the work you have done today).

Brigitta McKeever
Polaris

Brigitta McKeever is a top 15 winner in the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020. Brigitta is originally from Colorado, but now lives in England. She started writing poetry when she was about thirteen, but it was reading the work of writers like Danez Smith and John Burnside that cemented her love of poetry and helped her to experiment more with her own writing. Alongside writing and reading, she plays the violin, mandolin, and sings, and she is planning to study English Literature at university next year.

slit through the
belly and you will find
hot air, slippery fat, rabbit bones,
a beer belch swallowed.
ask him what he has done,
and he will say / nothing.

flush out the acid
and you will see what it has
ravaged. what remains of the forest
is its rot; of its birds, a feather.
ask him what can be done,
and he will say / nothing.

break open the chest
if you desire gold, oil, bleach.
let it smother you and see how
your skin blisters, your eyes turn
to dust, the rib cages nothing.
ask him what he has gained,
and he will say / everything.
                                    (   )
burrow into his palm and
drain your milk; the North Star
thrashes in his paper folds.
let it blind you and you will see
the narrow skull of a boy, his
hollow cheeks ruddy, the bullet
between his eyes bleeding light.
ask him what he regrets,
and he will say /
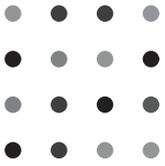
Enter the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2021

Brigitta McKeever's poem was a winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020. Now your students are writing their own poetry they can enter the competition themselves.

The Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award is the most prestigious award for writers aged 11-17. It is an annual competition that welcomes poems on any theme and entry is completely free.

Since it began in 1998, the Award has kickstarted the career of some of today's most exciting new voices. Past winners include Sarah Howe, Helen Mort, Jay Bernard and Caroline Bird.

Winners receive a fantastic range of prizes, including mentoring, a week-long Arvon writing course, Youth Poetry Society membership and books. The Poetry Society also continues to support winners' development with performance, publication and internship opportunities.

To find out more, or to request free copies of the most recent winners' anthology, *You Speak in Constellations*, along with the beautiful competition poster for your classroom or library, simply email fyp@poetrysociety.org.uk

Be sure to enter your students' work by 31 July 2021 at **foyleyoungpoets.org**