



Rewarding Learning

eGUIDE//English Literature

The Study of Poetry Pre 1900

Unit A2 2

John Keats

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Starting Point

In this Unit you will explore 14 of John Keats's poems (listed in Appendix 1).

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A04.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of poetry.

This Assessment Objective (AO) involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the poem or poems, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Specialist vocabulary should be used where necessary and appropriate. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

A02: Poetic methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyse the poet's use of such poetic methods as form, structure, language and tone. **This AO is the driver of Unit A2 2: Section A and is of primary importance.**

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in poems. This means identifying poetic methods such as form, structure and particular uses of language, and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing poetic methods - advice to students:

1. The poetic method should be:

identified, using appropriate terminology if possible;

illustrated, quotation will be expected and this should be relevant and sufficient to illustrate the feature in full. It should observe the layout of the original text, and should follow the conventions with regard to smooth and syntactically appropriate combining of the quotation with the student's own words;

analysed so as to show that the student understands its operation and effect; and

related to the key term of the question.

2. Use of the terms "image" and "imagery"

For our purposes in this section "images" and "imagery" are to be sought and found in the language of the poems, and not in the mind of the reader. The student should be discouraged from such formulations as "In this poem the reader has the image of nature



as a destroying force” where “image” is really being used to mean impression. For the purpose of A02 analysis in this section, what we mean by “image” is a figure of speech, where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification, etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as detailing.

3. Use of the term “tone”

Tone is usually understood as the poet’s words in combination with his or her attitude towards subject or reader. It may be considered both in the light of a poetic method and as an effect of other methods e.g. diction, syntax. This feature, if it is to be handled productively, requires careful treatment. As with all methods, the tone must be:

identified - here no specialist vocabulary is needed, merely a precisely chosen adjective or adjective phrase (e.g. acerbic, admiring, mocking);

illustrated - a full and apt quotation should be selected;

analysed – so as to demonstrate that the student understands how the tone is achieved (e.g. through a consideration of the syntactical features of the quotation offered); and

related to the key term of the question.

The importance of shifts of tone as a structural device (in e.g. contrast, characterisation or development) should be understood by students.

A03: Contexts

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which poetry is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the poem(s).

No specific sources are prescribed or recommended. Nevertheless, the questions address a contextual issue – social, cultural, historical, biographical, or literary – and candidates will be expected to provide appropriate information from outside the text. Contextual information of the stipulated type which is made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

To meet the requirements of this Assessment Objective, you must:

- **Demonstrate knowledge of the context which shaped the poems** – this could include social, cultural, historical, biographical and/or literary detail.
- **Comment on the significance of chosen contextual information** – link your selected contextual details to their impact on the poems’ intention and/or creation.
- **Use only relevant contextual information appropriately applied** – as stated before, it is important to focus on what is actually asked and shape your information accordingly.

Be aware that while context is important in consolidating our understanding of the poetry, you should not overuse contextual information, especially at the expense of



textual analysis. A few contextual details, succinctly expressed and strictly related to the question, are far superior to entire paragraphs on the world outside of the poem(s).

A04: Connections

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections between and within poems discussing features such as similarities, contrasts, continuity and development in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in context. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore Keats's poetry. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that the text is likely to embody more than one theme, or that a writer's preoccupation may not receive explicit statement in a poem.



A01: Textual knowledge and understanding

As you read this guide, you will begin to develop knowledge and understanding of meaning and form your own interpretations of the poems. This guide will suggest areas for discussion and further research. You will need to adapt knowledge and understanding in order to frame an examination response that is relevant to the key terms of the question. You will need to support your ideas with relevant reference to the text, and present logical interpretations. You will need to use accurate and clear language and appropriate literary terms.

A brief introduction to each of the poems:

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

Considered to be Keats's first major poem, this sonnet looks at exploration, with the poet as a literary adventurer. Written by Keats in 1816 after reading Chapman's translation of the works of Homer, it compares his wonder at Homer to that of the first European explorers arriving in the New World.

Sleep and Poetry

Keats's poem of 1816 is an extended metaphor comparing sleep to poetry and the pleasure which both of these give. Keats's lyrical musings in this poem with its classical allusions was written at a time when Keats found sleep difficult due to the pressure of his poetic inspiration.

The Eve of St. Agnes

Written in 1818 about the eve of St. Agnes (20th January) and in the awareness of St. Agnes as the patron saint of young virgins, this narrative poem looks at the relationship between Madeline and Porphyro in a castle above a chapel where prayers are being said. It is often praised for its dramatic immediacy and its sensual imagery.

Ode to a Nightingale

Written in 1820, this poem describes the sadness the speaker is experiencing and the physical ache this is causing, and contrasts this with the beauty and permanence of the song of a nightingale that he hears. This ode or lyric poem is often said to be one of Keats's most personal works.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

In this poem, written in 1819, Keats addresses a Grecian urn and reflects upon its images which he considers to be eternal. In this poem the contrast between art and life is prominent as is the formality and grandeur of language.

Ode to Psyche

In this poem, written in 1819, Keats invokes Psyche, a beautiful nymph loved by Cupid, the god of love and promises to protect her with a shrine. This ode is often considered to be an extended metaphor about poetry and the importance of the soul.

To Autumn

This valedictory poem, written in 1819, is often considered to be one of his most



controlled, structured and beautiful pieces and can be compared with works on autumn written by other poets such as Shelley. A wealth of other intertextual references taken from earlier poets is contained within this work.

Ode on Melancholy

This poem of 1819 gives Keats the opportunity to consider the nature of melancholy and of feelings in general. Keats believes that the feelings of pleasure, sorrow, joy and pain are intermingled and are complex. Keats's views here are open to debate and have proved controversial with critics.

On seeing the Elgin Marbles

In this poem, written in 1817, Keats offers a reaction to the ancient Greek statues and friezes he sees and the human endeavour needed to create them, in particular the Elgin Marbles, once part of the Parthenon. This leads on to a discussion about ageing and mortality and the limitations of mankind.

The Sea

In this poem of 1817, Keats discusses the theme of the "*eternal*" ocean, the area it covers and compares it to the land and the artificial nature of society. Keats as a true romantic admires the solace and freedom of the seas, in contrast to the newly emerging industrial society which he is critical of.

When I have fears

In this work of 1818, Keats expresses the fear that he will die before he has achieved his life's work in poetry. This sonnet shows a clear Shakespearean influence in terms of content and imagery.

Bright Star! would I were stedfast as thou art

This work of 1819 gives Keats the opportunity to look at the permanence of the stars and his desire for similar permanence. This sonnet is often linked to Fanny Brawne, whom Keats was betrothed to at the time, and her perceived perfection and beauty in Keats's eyes.

Ode on Indolence

Composed in 1819, this ode is the first in the series and it examines a young man who, after a lazy summer morning, is startled by a vision of Love, Ambition and Poesy. He is tempted to follow the figures in the vision but decides against this. Written at a time when Keats was critical of his own laziness, it is sometimes considered to be the weakest of the series of odes.

La Belle Dame sans Merci

'The beautiful lady without pity' is Keats's ballad, written in 1819, about a seductive and treacherous woman who tempts men away from their world into her world before leaving them, their dreams and lives damaged. Based on a 15th century French poem it is often considered to be one of Keats's most challenging poems.



Possible pairings of poems covering some themes in Keats's poetry (N.B. This list is not exhaustive.)

Mortality and Death

For example: 'When I have fears' and 'Ode on Indolence'

When I have fears

Written in 1818, this poem expresses Keats's fear that his death will deny him fulfillment. This fear of death for Keats, considering the numerous reminders of mortality, was not surprising. (See A03 Context Section.)

In much of his poetry he seeks permanence and this concern worried him throughout his short life, but in his mature vision he was aware that mortality increased one's sense of beauty and joy, and that all poets should be aware of the dark realities of life.

Some critics have argued that this poem is also about Keats's self-doubt as a poet, shown in the poem by a sense of disappointment and individual insignificance, as suggested by the concluding lines.

Poetic methods worthy of attention (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- this is Keats's first Shakespearean sonnet and he follows the form very closely with the end stopping of the lines and a typical Shakespearean theme of the destructiveness of Time;
- the first quatrain expresses his fears, the second that he will not reach "*high romance*", the third is based around unrequited love and the fourth leaves an image of him standing alone on the shore;
- the use of natural images to describe composition, "*my teeming brain*", and abstract ideas from which he creates a whole series of pictorial images such as his books being like barns for the "*full-ripen'd grain*"; and
- the significance of what Keats sees on the shore in the last quatrain and the final image that is portrayed.

Ode on Indolence

Written in 1819, 'Ode on Indolence' was the second of Keats's odes and reflects the thoughts of a young man who spends a drowsy summer morning lazing about when he is startled by a vision of Love, Ambition and Poesy proceeding by him. He decides not to follow them as his indolence far outweighs his ambition. There is also a suggestion that indolence and numbness is a part of the creative process in 'a dreaming self-indulgence'.

The major theme of this ode is that the numbness of indolence is preferable because the pains and frustrations caused by the inevitable end to life can be more easily borne if one is indolent rather than having experienced love and ambition too intensely.

This ode is often seen by critics as a preface to the later odes, because it begins to talk about the challenges, confrontations and reflections which the later odes will take up in more detail.



Poetic methods worthy of attention (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the structure of the six stanzas - the vision described in the first, the speaker addressing the figures in the second, the figures returning again in the third and tempting the speaker, the fourth in which the speaker is debating what to do, the fifth stanza where the speaker laments his situation and the final stanza where he sends them on their way;
- the depiction of the lazy summer setting, with the soft sounds and sensuous images such as the *"blissful cloud"*, *"drowsy noons"*;
- the use of assonance in the poem such as in Line 19 and 31;
- the use of the classical scenes imagined as if an urn and how this is transformed into a vision of the three harmonious figures. Links here to 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'; and
- the extensive imagery and symbolism around the three figures who represent Love, Ambition and Poetry and images that surround them such as the *"Ghosts"* and *"Phantoms"*.

Beauty and Truth

For example: 'Ode on Melancholy' and 'Bright star! would I were stedfast as thou art'

Ode on Melancholy

This poem of 1819 considers the nature of melancholy, which is represented as a female figure in the poem. Keats suggests a remedy for this psychological state and he takes the opportunity during this poem to examine the feelings of pleasure, pain, joy and sorrow. In this respect melancholy is one of the many elements of a contradictory reality.

The first stanza suggests we should not escape from pain through the use of *"poisonous wine"* or worship death, as this state eliminates awareness. Instead we should maintain *"the wakeful anguish of the soul"*. The second stanza suggests a preferable remedy: to feed the melancholy, to *"glut thy sorrow on a morning rose"*. The third stanza considers the state of melancholy in detail as a goddess linked to beauty, joy and pleasure and concludes that you will only know true melancholy if you have experienced intense joy.

The main argument in this poem is that sensitivity and melancholy are clearly linked and Keats encourages the reader to seek out beauty and joy. The person who experiences melancholy must have experienced joy and beauty too.

Poetic methods worthy of attention (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the dominant imagery is based on taste and eating, *"His soul shall taste the sadness of her might"*;
- the use of similes - the image of the *"weeping cloud"* is particularly powerful suggesting the rain which revives drooping flowers;
- the use of synaesthesia (the mixing of the senses) is prominent particularly around the 'raging mistress' suggesting the need of the individual to involve oneself fully in all of these senses;
- the use of the word *"glut"* in the second verse of the poem rather than 'nourish' or 'feed';
- the use of classical references and myths in the poem, *"Lethe"* and *"Psyche"* and *"Proserpine"*;



- the personification of melancholy as a goddess; and
- the structure of the poem - three stanzas, the first outlining the thesis, the second the antithesis and the third the synthesis. Is there a final solution?

Bright star! would I were stedfast as thou art

In this poem of 1819, Keats addresses a star and expresses a personal longing for similar permanence to that of the star, but not an existence which is so distant or so alone. This poem was written with Fanny Brawne in mind and she is represented in the poem as the “*fair love*” in line 10 of this Shakespearean sonnet, as Keats clearly turns towards being “*Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breast*”. In this respect although both the star and the “*fair love*” are things of beauty, Keats rejects the star in line 9.

In the latter stages of the poem immortality is discussed – is this a moment of enduring perfection? The repetition of “*ever*” and the final line, “*or else swoon to death*” appear as contradictions as Keats comes to terms with his own condition and mortality.

Poetic methods worthy of attention (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the structure of the sonnet with the octave concentrating on the image of the bright star, with the sestet concentrating on his “*fair love*”;
- the use of contrast between the cold isolation of the star which although permanent is fixed, remote and passionless with the warmth of his relationship which is erotic and is shown in the imagery;
- the use of landscapes and the natural world – “*snow*”, “*mountains*” and “*moors*”;
- the rejection of the star with the volta – “*No*”; and
- the use of religious imagery in the “*priestlike task*”.

The Classical World

For example: ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ and ‘Ode to Psyche’

On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer

This is said to be Keats’s first major poem, written in 1816, and is an example of a Petrarchan sonnet. Keats was inspired to write it by his reading of Chapman’s translation of Homer. The theme of literary exploration dominates the octave with the poet as a literary adventurer, and then the theme of terrestrial discovery is examined in the sestet. The poem is divided by the volta when Keats responds to Chapman’s Homer, “*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies*”.

There are many perceived strengths in this poem including Keats’s enthusiasm, his directness and its power, particularly around the image of Cortez staring out to sea. This poem moves cleverly from his own discovery of the classical literary world through his reading of Homer to the Renaissance world of the explorers, suggesting historical continuity and Keats’s interest in linking his own discoveries with those on a grander scale.

Keats, in this early work, is announcing his arrival on the literary stage, revealing his aspirations and ambitions.

Poetic methods worthy of attention (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):



- the structure of the poem (see above);
- the contrasts in sounds between the calmness of the first part of the poem with the energy of the second half and the final, "*Silent, upon a peak*";
- the use of specific names and places – "*Cortez*", "*Pacific*", "*Darien*"; and
- the repetition of the first-person pronoun "*I*" throughout the poem - what is the purpose here? Is Keats trying to convince his readership of his credentials?

Ode to Psyche

This poem written in 1819 is addressed to Psyche, a beautiful nymph loved by Cupid the god of love, who provides Psyche with a temple and worship appropriate for a goddess. Cupid visits her secretly every night until his identity is exposed. Psyche is sent away as a result of this and suffers but she is eventually reunited with Cupid and made immortal. This is another of Keats's poems based on a story from the classical world.

This ode has often been seen as an extended metaphor about poetry and the way in which it recreates events in different forms through the use of imagination, using a variety of language styles and interpretations. Psyche is not only a Greek goddess but she also represents the soul (Psyche is Greek for 'breath' and 'the breath of life'). Some critics have seen this classical work as an allegory discussing the true significance of the human soul.

Poetic methods worthy of attention (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the intricate and varied stanza form typical of an ode and its lyrical form to express Keats's feelings and thoughts;
- the changes of imagery from the erotic in the first tableau to the aesthetic experience in the second, the "*eye-dawn of aureorean love*" to the "*haunted forest boughs*";
- the changes of landscape from the forest to the more cultivated landscapes in the final tableau;
- the use of religious imagery in the final tableau with its added formality and change of tone, "*Yes, I will be thy priest and build a fane*" with Psyche moving from being addressed as "*a happy dove*" to a series of lofty descriptions of a goddess; and
- the use of repetition in the final stanza.

The Power of Nature

For example: 'To Autumn' and 'The Sea'

To Autumn

Many critics have seen 'To Autumn', written in 1819 as being one of Keats's most perfect and flawless poems, although it has received less attention than his other odes. This valedictory poem to the season of autumn is very controlled and symmetrical in its form; early autumn is dealt with in the first stanza, high autumn in the second and late autumn in the third.

This poem seems to be very different to Keats's other odes. Keats has taken references from several other writers such as Shakespeare, Shelley and Wordsworth to include in this poem. For that reason it often stands alone in critical opinion.

In terms of meaning, some critics have seen this poem as Keats's view of a rural and



natural utopia at a time when there were widespread food riots, growing urbanisation and political turmoil. This piece is full of nostalgia for a golden age of rural plenty. Whether Keats is painting the ideal or the actual in this poem is open to question.

Poetic methods worthy of attention (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the symmetrical structure and the imagery which represents specific parts of autumn
 - the tactile, the visual and the auditory such terms as *“plump the hazel shells”, “the fume of poppies”* to the *“wailful choir”*;
- note the rhyming couplet near the end of each verse – is this to extend the experience of the season, to emphasise abundance?;
- the different uses of syntax in each of the stanzas and the varied emphasis on descriptions of landscape with the humanized figures of autumn;
- the examples of sound and onomatopoeia in such terms as *“whistles”, “twitter”*;
- the progression over the first two stanzas from action to inaction;
- the pictorial and sensuous nature of the poem, the extensive use of personification, the emphasis on abundance through such terms as *“load and bless/With fruit”* make this a very rich poem.

The Sea

In this poem of 1817, Keats is speaking about the solace and freedom that can be found in nature with the sea as its embodiment contrasting with the artificial nature of human life shown in the *“uproar rude”*. Nature is the solution for those who are wearied by life and Keats is fascinated by the sea which is eternal and all powerful.

Some critics have argued that the sea as portrayed here represents Keats himself with his mood swings similar to the changes in the sea. Keats regards the sea as a form of therapy, with its sounds and power from which he will be given the inspiration to write.

The theme of the eternal ocean which is beyond human understanding, appears timeless and cannot be tamed is prominent throughout.

Poetic methods worthy of attention (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- this is another of Keats’s sonnets, with the first part, the octet, concentrating on the sea, its sounds and effects. The second part, the sestet, focuses on human beings and how they can be revitalized by the sea and their vexed eyeballs refreshed;
- the use of onomatopoeia to describe the sea with such words as *“whisperings”*;
- the use of the classical references to Hecate, the Greek moon goddess who could control the tides, and the imagery and symbolism evoked here such as the *“caverns”* and the shadows;
- the lack of the word ‘I’ in the poem, unusual for Keats, suggests he does not want to stand between the reader and the sea he describes and is perhaps allowing the reader to come to a more personal conclusion with this impersonal form?;
- how the power of the sea is emphasised with the *“mighty swell”*, the evoking of fear and awe; and
- the final line is perhaps an attempt by Keats to awaken the imagination of humanity to the beauty and power of what lies all around.



Listed below are some other themes that are worthy of consideration:

Imagination, Sensation and Art

Keats's poetry is known for its imagination, intensity and sensuousness, particularly strong in the registering of physical sensations. The beauty of all artistic forms has the potential to ease human suffering, argued Keats, and he commented in one of his letters, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts".¹ He believed that beauty could be accessed through the imagination and that the imagination provided a link between the ideal and the real. Keats had a keen interest in painting and sculpture and his use of pictorial imagery linked his works strongly to these interests. Works such as 'On seeing the Elgin Marbles' are based on this love of all art, particularly classical. However in his later poems the treatment of the imagination and its effects can be more negative as seen in the odes due to Keats's growing disillusionment and awareness of evil and suffering. As he commented in 1820, "An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people".² In this respect during his career Keats experienced both human joy and despair.

Negative capability

Negative capability (Keats's phrase) is the ability to contemplate the world without the need to reconcile its different aspects or fit it into logical systems, and this was a feature of Keats's poetry. Critics have argued that this belief was a definitive statement of Keats's views on poetry; doubts certainly appear in his works such as the odes. Here we see a contrast between the "camelion Poet"³ such as Keats, open to contemplation and doubt rather than the "egotistical" poet such as Wordsworth, who Keats argued, forced his own ideas and self upon the reader.

Women and romance

Female forms and visions feature heavily in Keats's works and often reveal some of his greatest anxieties alongside his expressions of intensity of love. In his earlier poems such as 'The Eve of St. Agnes' the woman takes on a traditional role with the male as a quester; there are other examples of unrequited love and the dangers of temptation as shown in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'. Often abstract figures are described as having female qualities and gender representations feature heavily in Keats's works. Romance features heavily in Keats's works too, seen particularly strongly in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. His continual use of the bower, as in 'Sleep and Poetry' is an indication of this and of the beauty he found in old romances. However it could be argued that these features appear less in his later poems.

N.B. The selection of poems under the thematic headings are offered merely as guidance for the student. Many of the poems in the Anthology will relate to a number of themes. The important examination issue is to choose a poem that may convincingly be argued to express the theme identified in the question.

¹ John Keats - Letter to Benjamin Bailey - 1818

² John Keats - Letters - 1820

³ John Keats - Letter to Richard Woodhouse - 1818



A02 Poetic Methods

You will need to analyse ways in which the poet uses form, structure, language and tone to shape meanings in poems. You will need to communicate clear, well-developed exploration of the writer's methods, in relation to the key terms of the question.

Language

Critics have often commented on the changing nature of Keats's language use in his poems. In his earlier works they argue his language is more decorative and sensuous but this moves to a more restrained and controlled use of language, with greater philosophical content in his later works. Throughout though, Keats's language is always full of movement, even when describing things that are static as seen in 'To Autumn'; full of clever use of imagery and changes in register. The changes in register from pastoral to religious are particularly marked in such poems as 'Ode to Psyche'. The description of the nightingale in 'Ode to a Nightingale' furnishes another example. Other skills which are prominent are his use of sound, repetition, assonance and alliteration, all most clearly shown in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Keats's use of rhetorical devices is prominent in such poems as 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' also, and these add to our involvement as a reader. His use of complex symbolism is another feature, seen in his use of musicians as symbols of poetry in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and a recurring theme of artistry appears in many of his poems. Keats employs a wide variety of diction and styles but unlike Wordsworth he does not use the language of the common man; his language always reflects a highly literary nature.

Imagery

Keats is considered by most critics to be the master of the image and imagery is prominent in all of his works. Most of his images are through tangible, material forms rather than the abstract form. In 'To Autumn', for example, there are strong examples of his concrete, sensuous imagery. Pictorial imagery is also a common feature and this is added to by his use of personification to explore abstract concepts, for example in 'Ode on Melancholy' where he uses the abstractions of Beauty and Joy in this personified, pictorial form. The use of synaesthesia, the fusion of senses is another feature adopted by Keats in his imagery, best displayed in 'Ode to a Nightingale' in the image of the flowers and their "*soft incense*".

Poetic Form and Versification

Keats continually experimented with a wide range of established poetic forms in his works but he also created his own forms, most obviously seen in the writing of the odes. He worked in many different genres such as lyrics, ballads, odes, sonnets and epics, and within these he used a range of forms such as Spenserian stanzas, heroic couplets, blank verse and a range of sonnet styles.

Keats was also very inventive:

- in many of his narrative poems Keats used rhymed lines or couplets, often without



the use of end stopped lines, which enabled changes in pace such as in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' which allows this highly pictorial poem to come to life;

- in some of his lyrical poems such as 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', he imitates the traditional ballad but varies the form of the stanza;
- much of Keats's work used the sonnet as a structure; both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean variants were adopted but these were adapted for his own needs as shown in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' and in 'When I have fears'; and
- Keats's most famous poems, the Odes, were based on the principles of classical times, but Keats experimented with these by varying the length of the stanzas as seen in 'Ode to Psyche' to create specific effects in terms of tone.

In conclusion, Keats used all traditional forms of versification but often combined with his own distinctive style and structural variation.

Other features

It would also be worth noting the following poetic methods:

- the removal and **absence of a speaker** or narrator in many of Keats's works, which is a contrast to the tendency of other Romantic poets to focus on the individual. Due to Keats's theory of negative capability, the poet disappears from the work so that the reader can respond without the intervention of the poet;
- the use of the **apostrophe technique** seen in several poems such as 'To Autumn' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' where someone or something who is absent or non-existent is addressed as if they are present and capable of understanding. This is used in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' where a series of objects and persons is directly addressed by the speaker; and
- **frequent allusion to and use of classical mythology** in his works. (See section in A03 on the Hellenic Revival.)



A03 Contexts

Keats's Life and Work

- John Keats was born in 1795 into a middle-class London family. His early years were full of tragedy with the death of both parents and a brother. This early instability had an enormous effect on Keats and much of his poetry questions mortality and mutability. This questioning was added to by his early years working in a hospital as a trainee surgeon.
- He was educated in Enfield and the liberal education he was given at this time, in terms of freedom of thought and expression and the strong classical and historical elements of his learning were later to become of great use in the writing of his poetry.
- He began writing poetry in 1814 spurred on by reading the works of Spenser, in particular *The Faerie Queene*, and after encouragement from his associates such as Leigh Hunt he abandoned medicine in 1816 to pursue a literary career.
- His first two collections of poetry were *Poems* in 1817 and *Endymion* in 1818 but these received mixed reviews. This period saw great intensity in his new career, meetings with other poets, particularly Shelley and Wordsworth and a glut of letters. He ventured into the writing of plays in 1819 in an attempt to add to his income but without success. From this he entered one of his first periods of the depression which was to haunt him throughout his life.
- In 1818 he met Fanny Brawne and they became engaged in 1819 but Keats lacked the financial security to allow him to marry. His odes written at the time show his growth of passion for Fanny as do his letters to her.
- In 1819 he contracted tuberculosis, most probably while caring for his brother, and in 1820 he left for Italy for health reasons. His time there has been called his "posthumous life".
- In 1820 other poetry works appeared, including: *Lamia*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes* and other poems.
- He died in 1821 in Rome aged twenty-five, the inscription on his tomb reading, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water".

Keats's Letters

- Keats's letters are crucial to an understanding of him as a poet and as a person. They are perhaps the best by any literary figure and should be read alongside his poems. They also give us an understanding of how Keats believed a poet should conduct himself.
- The letters are full of spontaneity and humour and show Keats's emotions to an extreme. They are about the literary world, the social world, the Regency society around him and several of them show his closeness to his fiancée Fanny Brawne. They range from the specific to the broad and often show how an incident coincides with a poem he wrote.
- Other regular correspondents included his sister, also called Fanny, the merchant Charles Armitage Brown, the writer Charles Cowden Clarke and the painter Joseph Severn who was with him when he died.
- His letters are often exploratory and questioning of what he was doing, often full of



contradictions and opposites, so it is dangerous to determine what he felt or believed in from them, but they do give us some understanding. They are particularly important in his views on negative capability and his aesthetic theory, but their main purpose for us is to bring us close to Keats as a person and to his stream of consciousness.

The historical background to Keats's writings

- Keats was writing in a period of huge social and political change. The French Revolution in 1789 appealed to many poets of the period. They saw this as an opportunity to end political oppression. The Industrial Revolution which was in full swing in Britain during Keats's life, led to the growth of urbanisation and appalling working conditions and also led to the questioning of authority and government.
- Keats himself was a liberal and in many of his letters he comments on his abhorrence of tyranny and his desire for change and reform; however his political beliefs rarely emerged directly into his poetry, unlike many of his contemporaries such as Wordsworth. Some critics have suggested that he remained aloof from such events whilst others have suggested that these views are apparent in his poetry on a more universal and subtle level.

Romanticism

- The Romantic Period is a term best used to define the period of English literary history from about 1789 to about 1837. The term 'Romantic' in this sense would have been meaningless at the time as it was created as a term in the latter stages of the nineteenth century.
- Romanticism is said to have a number of characteristics:
 - a value for feeling and emotion over reason;
 - a value for the investigation of the self;
 - a concern for nature;
 - a focus on the imagination and the transcendent (what is above and beyond the limits of human experience); and
 - a disregard for outmoded poetic institutions.
- The 'big six' of Romantic poets were: Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge followed chronologically by Byron, Shelley and Keats. However, these six were often divided in their views, were critical of one another and had very different experiences and successes. Keats for instance was criticised by his contemporaries for being too mild and sentimental.
- Keats was perhaps most influenced by Wordsworth, particularly his transcendent visions but he disagreed with Wordsworth in one important area: while Wordsworth attempted to impose a vision, with a poetic persona which was an authoritative affirmation of his beliefs, Keats in contrast is more speculative and he allows readers to consider possibilities and make up their own minds.

Other Literary Influences on Keats

- Throughout his works, Keats echoes the language, forms and styles of other writers such as Chaucer ('La Belle Dame sans Merci'), Shakespeare ('When I have fears'), Milton, Dante and Spenser.
- The so-called 'Cockney School' writing at the time influenced Keats into writing poetry which was pleasurable and full of excessive imagery and language.
- Keats was also part of the 'Hellenic Revival' movement led by Byron which favoured the simplicity of the ancient world and its religions, with its belief in Art and Beauty and a move away from the prevailing political and religious climate of Regency Britain.



Keats's legacy as a poet

"I think I shall be among the English poets after my death."⁴

"If I should die...I have left no immortal work behind me... If I had time I would have made myself remembered."⁵

Keats's contradictory predictions above show his self-doubt throughout his life; however he has left a very strong legacy.

- Keats's use of language and imagery, his sensuous identification with objects, his use of his imagination to evoke powerful scenes and his ability to create a vivid pictorial form have drawn lasting admiration. It is for these qualities that Keats is mainly known and in particular, for the great odes which are "the poems of sensibility, both powerful and exquisite whilst completing Keats's self-education".⁶
- Keats has meant different things to people of different ages. The Victorians adored him for his luxuriant language, and the scenes he described became the inspiration of Victorian painters. In the early twentieth century he was admired as the poet of the aesthetic experience and admired for his purity of form and structure. The war poet Wilfred Owen kept his death date as a day of mourning. In the latter stages of the twentieth century his search for universal truths was particularly appealing. Of late he has been viewed more as a politicised and historical poet, and this view is backed up by evidence of the political stance he takes in his letters where he expresses his abhorrence of tyranny and sympathy for liberal values.
- His concentrated energy over three years of writing between 1816-9, "the three great years" and his development over that short time as a poet was staggering. With most poets, such development would have occurred over a lifetime. Each major poem he wrote during this time may be regarded as a stepping-stone to another.
- Unlike some of the other Romantic poets, Keats never preached to his audience. His thoughts are more speculative and allow the reader to consider possibilities and therefore achieve greater engagement. His excitement, curiosity and interest in writing a poem is recognised by the reader.

⁴ John Keats
- Letter to his brother,
George - 1818

⁵ John Keats
- Letter to Fanny Brawne
- 1820

⁶ William Walsh
- Introduction to Keats
- 1981



A04 Connections

Students should be keenly aware that there are equal marks available for their treatment of the given poem and the second poem selected in the exam.

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections within and between Keats's poems, discussing similarities and differences in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in contexts. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

To meet the requirements of this Assessment Objective, you must:

- **Explore the connections** between the poem printed in the Resource Booklet and the poem you choose, and the external/contextual information you have studied. Always bear in mind that the Driving Objective for this unit is **A02** (Poetic Methods).
- **Note both similarities and differences** – this could be between voices, themes, aspects of imagery or any other techniques you find.
- **Make sure the connections noted are significant and relevant.**

Specimen question:

By referring closely to *Ode to a Nightingale* (Poem **4(b)**) in the accompanying Resource Booklet and one other appropriately selected poem, and making use of relevant external contextual information on the nature of Romantic poetry, examine the poetic methods which Keats uses to write about the theme of escape from reality.

N.B. Equal marks are available for your treatment of each poem.

The poetic methods selected will of course partly depend on your choice of accompanying poem, and the effects they conjure for the reader and the picture of society that emerges will be up to you to argue based on your own analysis of the two poems. However, there are facets that must be included whatever your stance, and they have to be related to the key terms of the question.

A02

- The use of classical references such as “*Lethe-wards*” to stress the feeling of escape.
- The use of contrasts such as the juxtaposition of the earth-bound speaker and the bird.
- The use of ambiguity, rhetorical questions and oxymoron such as “*Was it a vision or a waking dream?*”, “*do I wake or sleep?*” to consider escape and reality.

**A03**

The nature of Romantic poetry in the following areas:

- The Romantic interest in the world of the imagination. The ideal versus the real.
- Interest in transcendental knowledge and vision beyond the limits of human experience and in dream-like liminal states.
- The Romantic rejection of reason and logic.
- Varying levels of awareness among the Romantics of the dangers of escapism.

A04 needs connections between poems and additional external contextual information.

Other poems that could be studied alongside the named poem include: 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'.

Below are some brief comments by critics of Keats's work which could be used alongside the views that you as a reader of Keats's poetry have formed for yourself.

Views of Keats's contemporaries about his works

While Keats was alive, he was viewed negatively and at times dismissively by most critics. Lockhart writing at the time commented that, "this overambitious apothecary's apprentice would be well advised to return to his pills and plaster".⁷ On his death, his friends rallied to his defence, Shelley composing his own elegy, 'Adonais', in his honour and the general view was that he was a poet who was "a sensitive and an unworldly genius",⁸ who was taken before his time, who had little interest in the political world around him but was driven by his love of the senses and imagery.

Views of the Pre-Raphaelites and early twentieth-century views

The Pre-Raphaelites of the mid-nineteenth century were very positive in their appreciation of Keats and were heavily influenced by his works, particularly the painters amongst them. In the early twentieth century critics began to emphasise his powerful intellect alongside his other qualities but overall his poetry was still seen as unworldly. As de Man commented, "In reading Keats we are reading the work of a man whose experience is mainly literary".⁹

Historicising Keats - the modern views

Over the last fifty years or so, Keats's works have been viewed slightly differently, with Keats seen as a poet with a clear social and political message, driven on by his radical ideas based on class and heavily influenced by the political changes going on around him. To Watkins, Keats was "a poet who embodies the historical anxieties and insecurities of his age".¹⁰ Other critics have seen three clear phases of Keats's writing career: the early aesthetic idealism, the growing scepticism in the middle followed by a reconciliation to or acceptance of the human condition in the final phase. Many have commented that there is a danger of forgetting Keats's artistic skills while others have looked at issues of gender, his doubts and Keats's methodologies in recent works.

In finally considering Keats we should perhaps consider his comment in 1818:

"I have been hovering sometime between an exquisite sense of the luxurious and a love of Philosophy."¹¹

⁷ Gibson Lockhart
– Review of Poems
– 1818

⁸ Shelley
– 'In Memory of Keats'
– 1821

⁹ Paul de Man
– Selected Poetry of John Keats - 1966

¹⁰ Daniel Watkins
– Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination
– 1989

¹¹ John Keats
– Letter to John Taylor
– 1818



Remember:

- Stick to the key terms used in the question
- Think what the question is really asking you to do
- Make connections throughout, demonstrating your knowledge of the poems and the poet, and your ability to link concepts, ideas and references.

Links to other resources/ Suggestions for further reading

The following works are useful for further study:

- Robert Gittings – *Keats* - HEB -1966
- Brian Stone – *The Poetry of Keats* - Penguin - 1992
- Andrew Motion – *Keats* - Faber - 1997
- Walter Jackson – *Keats: A Collection of Critical Essays* - Prentice Hall - 1964
- Helen Vendler – *The Odes of John Keats* - Harvard - 1983
- Margaret Homans – *Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats* - Studies in Romanticism – 1990
- Nicholas Roe – *Keats and History* - CUP - 1995

For a selection of images on John Keats go to: <http://englishhistory.net/keats/images.html>

Ideas on Romanticism on: <http://www.rc.umd.edu/>

Various readings of John Keats's poems can be found on the Poetry Archive at: www.poetryarchive.org

There is a film version of John Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne called '*Bright Star*' (2009). A trailer is available on You Tube.

Appendix 1

Selected Poems named for study:

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
Sleep and Poetry
The Eve of St. Agnes
Ode to a Nightingale
Ode on a Grecian Urn
Ode to Psyche
To Autumn
Ode on Melancholy
On seeing the Elgin Marbles
The Sea
When I have fears
Bright star! would I were stedfast as thou art
Ode on Indolence
La Belle Dame sans Merci

**GLOSSARY** - this glossary is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

Aesthetic theory	the name given to the philosophical study of the nature of beauty through its appreciation and definition.
Allegory	a story for which there is a hidden second meaning beyond the autonomous narrative.
Alliteration	the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of two or more words in close proximity.
Anapaest	a foot (see Foot) with a regular pattern of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one – da-da-DUM – such as in the words ‘disbelief’, ‘incomplete’ or ‘unaware’. The pattern does not have to be confined within one word – “in the woods” or “and she screams” are also examples of an anapaest. See Meter.
Anaphora	a rhetorical feature where the same word or phrase is deliberately repeated at the beginning of a sentence or clause.
Apostrophe	a rhetorical term for a speech addressed to a poem, idea or thing which may not be present.
Assonance	the repetition of vowel sounds across words to help create a consistent effect. It can be quite subtle, so only comment on it if you feel you can link it to the effect created. As with alliteration, these can be various.
Bathos	a juxtaposition of the important with the insignificant or trivial – often to comment ironically on the actual insignificance of what is deemed important. This figure of speech can also be used purely humorously.
Cadence	inflection or emphasis, sometimes used for poetry based on a “musical phrase” of language rather than a strict metre.
Caesura	a break or pause in the middle of the poetic line, usually indicated by a punctuation mark such as a semi-colon, colon or full stop. The effect is to break the rhythm of the line.
Couplet	two lines of verse that are paired in their rhythm and/or rhyme pattern – often known as a rhyming couplet and used to ‘tidy’ the end of a longer poem with a different rhyme scheme, such as a Shakespearean sonnet.
Enjambment	the running on of the poetic line into the next, or from one stanza into the next without a break. The opposite of end-stopped lines.



Euphemism	a mild word used in place of another word which might be considered unpleasant, harsh or offensive.
Foot	a unit of metre or poetic rhythm, made up of a number of syllables arranged in a pattern. There are different names for the various combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables – examples include the iamb (one unstressed and one stressed syllable – da-DUM – such as ‘divine’ or ‘delight’), the trochee (one stressed and one unstressed syllable – DUM-da – such as ‘music’ or ‘people’), the anapaest (two unstressed and one stressed syllable – da-da-DUM – such as ‘unaware’ or ‘disbelief’) and the spondee (two stressed syllables – DUM-DUM – like ‘heart-break’). These syllabic rhythms can occur across more than one word, so try to pay attention to the line as a whole to get a sense of how many syllables there are and where the stresses fall. See Metre.
Hyperbole	language that uses exaggeration for particular effect.
Imagery	This word generally applies visually, to vivid or figurative language that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects. (See advice on discussing imagery).
Idiom/Idiomatic	group of words established in everyday speech, but where the meaning is not deducible from the literal meaning of the words used.
Irony	a contrast or discrepancy between words and their meaning. This can be verbal irony, in which a poet or character says one thing but mean the opposite, or dramatic irony, in which a poetic character’s speech takes on extra meaning because he or she is in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience.
Juxtaposition	deliberate placing of two contrasting characters, things, ideas close together for a particular purpose.
Lyric	a poem, usually short expressing the feelings and thoughts of an individual speaker.
Metaphor	where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
Meter/Metre	metre is the measurement of rhythm, expressed as the number and kind of metrical feet in a line of poetry. This measurement considers the number of syllables and where the stresses fall in each foot.
Metonymy	a form of figurative speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. One example would be referring to royalty or a monarch as “the crown”.



Motif	a dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.
Negative capability	the ability to contemplate the world without the desire to reconcile its differences.
Ode	a lyric poem characterised by its length, intricate stanza forms, grandeur of style and seriousness of purpose. Established by the Ancient Greek poet Pindar.
Persona	See speaker.
Personification	to attribute human characteristics to a non-human subject.
Pun	a word or phrase that has more than one meaning, often used humorously.
Rhetoric	the art of using language to persuade; rhetoric takes in a range of devices.
Simile	where something is directly compared to something else, using “like” or “as”.
Sonnet	a lyrical poem of 14 lines of iambic pentameter rhymed and intricately organised. There are several forms, the Petrarchan with an eight line octave, followed by a six line sestet or the Shakespearean sonnet based on quatrains.
Speaker	the person or speaking voice narrating the poem, often but not always associated with the poet.
Synaesthesia	the expression of a deliberate confusing of the senses (e.g. describing music as a colour, or light as a liquid).
Theme	a main idea or concern explored in a work of art.
Tone	the emotion or attitude intended by the writer, conveyed through use of language, rhythm and punctuation. (See advice on tone).
Volta	the change in mood and argument within a sonnet.

