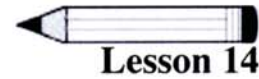


A Sample Lesson from The **Gold Book** British Literature

Poetry



Lesson 14

1. a. Poet's Corner: John Keats

John Keats was born on October 31, 1795, to a livery stable owner in London. His parents both died before he was fifteen. He did not even begin to write poetry until he was eighteen years old. Despite this inauspicious conception, his poetry has become some of the most recognizable writing from his period. He has penned such famous lines as "A thing of beauty is a joy forever" (from "Endymion") and "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (from "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). Along with Wordsworth, he is considered the greatest writer of sonnets from the Romantic Period. He contracted tuberculosis and died shortly thereafter at the age of twenty-five on February 23, 1821. In his last personal letter, he wrote to his intimate friend, Charles Brown, ending, "I can scarcely bid you goodbye even in a letter. I always made an awkward bow. God bless you. John Keats."

"No one can read Keats' poems and letters without an undersense of the tragic waste of so extraordinary an intellect and genius cut off so early. What he might have accomplished is beyond conjecture; what we do know is that his achievement, when he stopped writing at the age of twenty-four, greatly exceeds that at the same age of Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton" (1822, Norton).

b. Read "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" on page 191. This was Keats' first successful poem, published in 1816. George Chapman was a British translator of Homer's writings.

c. What does Keats mean by "realms of gold" and "western islands"? Keep in mind the title and purpose of the sonnet.

d. Who are the "bards" he talks about?

e. What is Apollo associated with in Roman mythology (besides the sun)?

f. Define demesne and ken.

g. In a few sentences, describe in your own words how Keats felt upon first reading Chapman's Homer. Why does he compare it to the things he does?

h. Begin writing poetry today. Remember to show your readers, not tell. Avoid the abstract; be clear and concrete. you will have two days to complete your poem.

2. a. Read Keats' "When I have Fears that I May Cease to Be" on page 192.

b. What type of sonnet is this Shakespearean or Petrarchan/ Classical? (Refer to Lessons 2 and 6.)

- c. What does the poet fear? Why is this poem especially poignant for Keats?
- d. What is the "full-ripened grain"?
- e. Continue working on your poem, if necessary.

3. a. John Keats' central idea was to create beauty through his poetry that would last indefinitely. This common theme in the arts views the work of art as something eternal, everlasting. The work of art, then, achieves immortality for the artist. Although the artist dies, he or she lives on through the works that are left. The sad fact that the artist lives in time and must fade in terms of his own youth and beauty was a condition that Keats called melancholy. Although there is melancholy in the fact that the artist's youth and beauty must fade, there is joy in the knowledge that beauty in his works of art remain to give him immortality.

- b. Read Keats' "A Thing of Beauty," on page 201. Note: The excerpt, "A Thing of Beauty," is from "Endymion."

Keats' early attempt at achieving an immortal poem is a lengthy work entitled "Endymion." The first line, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever," is often quoted. Unfortunately, little else about the poem is memorable, and the critics of Keats' day were quick to condemn it. Stunned, but not devastated, Keats pondered his critics' observations and learned from his mistakes. His subsequent poetry achieved the status he had hoped for and places him as one of England's greatest poets.

- c. How would you summarize the meaning of the first thirteen lines?
- d. What is Keats trying to do in lines 13-24?
- e. Why did Keats' critics say that his poem was poorly written and failed to reach its artistic goal?
- f. Continue working on your poem, if necessary.

- 4. a. Read Keats' "Ode on Melancholy," page 193.

The references to Greek mythology can be found in the dictionary. If you don't know these allusions, be sure to look them up so you can understand the full content of the poem.

- b. Summarize the meaning of the first stanza.
- c. In stanza two, what remedies are suggested to resist melancholy?
- d. How does stanza three summarize the meaning of the poem?

- 5. a. Read John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," pp. 196-197.

Note that the urn of this poem is an imaginary one. Keats is creating out of the power of his imagination something that does not fade or change over time.

- b. What is Keats' mind in the process of doing in stanza one?
- c. How do you interpret stanza two?

- d. What additional timeless element is added to beauty in stanza three?
- e. In stanza five, what does Keats mean by "When old age shall this generation waste, Thou shalt remain."
-

1.

- c. He is referring to books.
- d. Bards are the writers.
- e. He is also associated with music, poetry, and healing.
- f. demesne - one's domain
ken - one's field of vision
- g. Answers will vary.

2.

- b. It is a Shakespearean sonnet. Note the rhyme scheme.
- c. The poet fears that he will die before he has fully expressed in writing all that his mind holds. More than this, he also despairs at the prospect of losing his "fair creature of an hour."

These were very real emotions and situations for Keats. He probably anticipated an early death and produced an unparalleled collection of poetry in such a short amount of time.

- d. It is the culmination of his thoughts and emotions expressed on paper.

3.

- c. Keats opens by saying that beauty (a work of art) is a source of everlasting pleasure. He says that it will keep us from being overwhelmed by worldly concerns. Lines 4 and 5 suggest that pleasure is our escape from reality.
- d. He is trying to create beauty through a series of images. The purpose is to absorb the reader and allow him to escape into the beauty of the poem.
- e. Notice that the poem tells us what to think rather than show us. Keats' opening lines are prosaic, even a little didactic. Rather than leading the reader, Keats preaches to him. A good poem shows its intent and allows the reader to use his imagination to arrive at the meaning.

4.

- b. Keats says to resist the tendency to flee from life's responsibilities. Notice that this is a contrast to "Endymion," in which he advocates escapism.
- c. Keats advises us to fill ourselves with beauty "a morning rose," "globed peonies," and love. These things are eternal and don't die out. Notice that Keats shows us the remedy rather than trying to provide us the remedy as he does in "Endymion."

Keats laid out the images for us. In "Ode on Melancholy," he directs us to go see for ourselves. He shows us the way.

d. Keats reminds us that a person's youth and beauty must pass away. Therefore, we must retain beauty in our imagination where it never fades. If we don't do this, then melancholy will eventually wear us down and claim us "among her cloudy trophies."

5.

b. He is observing the urn. He turns it around in his mind and observes the paintings on it. His questions show that he is pondering what the urn means to him.

c. Keats pictures this scene in his mind, as if it were a painting on an urn. The last two lines remind us that paintings on urns survive over time.

d. Love is added.

e. Keats reminds us that people grow old and die. However, a work of art, which is created by the imagination, survives. Since the urn of this poem is imaginary in the first place, Keats is showing us that the reviving power of beauty can be at hand by using one's imagination. In this case, Keat's example is an urn of his own creation which was stimulated by his memories of Grecian urns he has seen.