

## Activity 2: John Keats

In this activity we will look at 'This living hand' by John Keats.

This living hand, now warm and capable  
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood  
So in my veins red life might stream again,  
And thou be conscience-calm'd – see here it is –  
I hold it towards you.

by **John Keats** (1795–1821. 'This living hand' was probably written around 1819).

In 'Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell', Keats writes that 'Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed, / But Death intenser – Death is Life's high meed.'<sup>3</sup> 'Meed' means 'reward', and in his poem 'Ode to a Nightingale', he compares death to intoxicating drugs and poisons ('I have been half in love with easeful Death').<sup>4</sup> 'This living hand' takes a more ominous or sinister approach to death. It has a dramatic quality, as if spoken very directly to the reader. It was jotted on a manuscript page of one of Keats' unfinished poems, and might have been meant to be part of a play.

### **Context**

Like Shelley, John Keats is associated with Romanticism, a movement in culture and thought that is considered to have peaked between 1770 and 1850. Romanticism is associated with a growing belief in the importance of individuality, imagination and originality, rather than the more orderly, rational ideals of Classicism. Romanticism in literature was, in part, inspired by the turbulent Revolutions in America (1765–1783) and France (1789–1799), as well as a love of rugged natural landscapes. Romantic poets tended to emphasise the importance of strong personal emotions: the poet William Wordsworth wrote in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800): 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity'.<sup>5</sup> Keats' use of sensual, potentially Gothic imagery in 'This living hand' would fit with these definitions of Romanticism. However, there are also more specific life events that may have affected this poem. Keats originally trained in medicine: he was apprenticed to his family's doctor at the age of fourteen, then trained at Guy's Hospital, before qualifying for his apothecary's licence in 1816, at the age of twenty. His medical training included observing operations

## Activity 2: John Keats

(which would have been extremely painful during this time, before anaesthetics), and dissecting corpses and body parts.<sup>6</sup> He also had personal experience of death: his father died in a fall from a horse when Keats was eight, and his mother died of tuberculosis when Keats was fourteen. He nursed his brother, Tom, through his illness and death from tuberculosis in 1819, around the same time that this poem seems to have been written. 'This living hand' is not necessarily autobiographical or personal, but Keats' first-hand contact with death and dissection might have influenced his descriptions of illness and the body in his work.

### Structure

'This living hand' is written *mostly* in iambic pentameter lines, though the iambic emphasis seems to lapse at 'capable' – 'This líving hánd, now wárm and cápable' – it doesn't feel natural to stress the last syllable here. The rhythm also seems disrupted by the dashes when we reach '– see here it is – / I hold it towards you.' There are also irregular rhymes hidden inside the poem. At first sight, it appears to be blank verse, without rhyme: however, it does contain *internal* rhymes. These don't fall regularly at the end of the poem's lines, but fall inside it. Here is the poem presented again, with the rhyme shown in **bold**, and the meter shown by accents. To work out any poem's meter, read the poem to yourself and pay attention to which syllables you emphasise, or stress, within the line. Different people might emphasise lines of poetry slightly differently: this is okay, and does not mean that you are reading the poem wrongly. Working out a poem's meter just helps you to feel the music of the poem for yourself. As well as *full rhymes* between icy/silence/thy/nights/thine/dry/my/life, veins/again, and cold/hold, the poem features alliteration (**capable, cold, conscience-calmed**), and *half-rhymes*: 'grasping', 'heart', and 'calmed', and 'would' and 'blood' *almost* rhyme. This creates a subtle irregular rhyme inside a poem that might seem, at first sight, not to rhyme at all. Keats' use of pentameter lines is also interesting, given that you can count their ten syllables on the fingers and thumbs of your own 'living hand's.

This líving hánd, now wárm and cápable  
Of éárnest grásping, wóuld, if ít were **cóld**  
And ín the ícy sílence óf the tómb,  
So háunt thy dáys and chíll thy dréaming níghts  
That thóu wóuld wísh thine ówn heart dr'y of blóod  
So ín m'y véins red lífe might stréam **agáin**,  
And thóu be cónscience-cálm'd – sée here ít ís –  
I **hóld** ít towáreds you.

As well as *full rhymes* between icy/silence/thy/nights/thine/dry/my/life, veins/again, and cold/

## Activity 2: John Keats

hold, the poem features alliteration (**capable, cold, conscience-calmed**), and *half-rhymes*: 'grasping', 'heart', and 'calmed', and 'would' and 'blood' *almost* rhyme. This creates a subtle irregular rhyme inside a poem that might seem, at first sight, not to rhyme at all. Keats' use of pentameter lines is also interesting, given that you can count their ten syllables on the fingers and thumbs of your own 'living hand's.

### **Further Analysis**

The living hand is 'warm and capable', but is then described as both 'earnest' and 'grasping'. The word 'earnest' is often associated with declarations of love, but 'grasping' sounds more desperate, possibly even greedy or ominous, as well as urgent. This is followed by a threat: 'if it were cold / and in the icy silence of the tomb', this hand would 'haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights': it's as if the speaker of the poem is *cursing* their reader, implicitly blaming them for their death. At this point, the poem begins to feel very manipulative of the reader's feelings. Appropriately enough, the word 'manipulative' comes from the word '*manos*', meaning 'hand'. It's as if the speaker is using their hand to squeeze the reader's heart.

Writing 'thy' rather than 'your' also plays into this. In Shakespeare's plays, saying 'thou' and 'thy' implies closeness and intimacy between two characters, and it is often used between lovers. However, it can also be used to emphasise an insult. "Thou art a festering sore" sounds more magnificently damning than "You are a festering sore", and in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby Belch tells Andrew Aguecheek to insult his enemy by calling him 'thou'. In this poem, both senses of 'thou' are working at once: it's a kind of intimate curse, that becomes almost vampire-like: 'thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood / So in my veins red life might stream again'. By the end of the poem, it feels as if the hand has become detached from the rest of the speaker's body. When Keats writes 'I hold it toward you', it feels as if this could be a dead hand instead of a living hand, severed at the wrist. The poem also creates an eerie sense of the poet's own presence, his hand writing on the paper, as if the poem has become the body that writes it, just for one moment. When he writes 'see here it is – I hold it towards you' the reader is brought into the poem's present.

## Activity 2: John Keats

### Tasks

1. Read 'This living hand' aloud. If you imagine this poem as spoken dialogue, who do you think is speaking? Does your response to the poem change if you imagine different kinds of speaker? Is this someone (male or female?) speaking to a romantic partner? A child speaking to a parent? A parent speaking to a child? Someone speaking to their friend? The poem allows various possibilities, and you might find that your response changes depending on the kind of speaker and story that you imagine behind the poem.
2. Do the details about Keats' personal life and medical training help you to understand 'This living hand', or do you think you would understand the poem just as well without knowing any of these facts? How relevant is a poet's life when we are trying to understand their work?
3. Why do you think Keats varies the rhythm and rhyme in this poem, rather than following a completely regular structure? Does it make the poem less predictable?
4. Do you agree with this analysis above of 'This Living Hand'? Are there ways in which you would read it differently, and if so, how would you justify or explain your reading?