

Cambridge Digital Library Resource

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Young Writers'
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with First Story and Cambridge University

FIRST STORY
Changing lives through writing



**UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**

Using Texts from the Cambridge Digital Library as Stimulus Material

The following workshop plans have been especially commissioned to mark First Story's three-year partnership with Cambridge University and the BBC Young Writers' Award. Their aim is to use the extraordinary digital archive of the Cambridge University Library as a stimulus for creative writing.

The suggested workshops follow a template where scientific texts are paired with creative or literary texts in order to create new ideas and pieces of work.

An Introduction to the Cambridge Digital Library

Over the course of six centuries, Cambridge University Library's collections have grown from a few dozen volumes into one of the world's great libraries, with an extraordinary accumulation of material. The collections cover every conceivable aspect of human endeavour, spanning most of the world's cultural traditions. The archive includes a Sanskrit collection, a Spanish chapbooks collection, and notebooks belonging to Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin and Stephen Hawking, among others.

Presenting the Collection as a Workshop

Share the collection home page and visit some links: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/>.

Collect some ideas of what an archive is, and what the purpose of a library, especially a university library such as this one, might be.

Ask students to make a quick list of three or four things they would like to archive and keep safe for generations in the future. These could be books, images, objects, more abstract things, which could be very personal to them, or generic. For example:

- A map of the planet Tatooine, from *Star Wars*.
- A toy panda my aunty gave to me.
- 'Don't Put Mustard in the Custard' by Michael Rosen.
- The smell of a McDonald's apple pie.

This could generate a more involved piece of writing in itself, with students creating an 'archive of themselves', with a list of artefacts and descriptions and explanations for why they are including these things.

- Or create a group archive, where each student contributes one thing (or one line of a list or a poem).

There is a similarity here with the collection (e.g. Newton's notebooks, some ectoplasm, photographs of ancient holy sites in the Egyptian desert...) in its eclecticism, but maybe also stress the difference between the university collection and the very personal archive of our lists. The student-created archive is perhaps different from the university one, in that the university collection aims at being a store of knowledge and experience from across the ages and cultures in a more considered, ordered way.

Cosmography

Icebreaker: Naming the Sky

Ask students to name as many stars, constellations and planets as they can.

Stimulus pieces:

Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt by Qazwīnī, Zakarīyā ibn Muhammad

<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-NN-00003-00074/53>

‘A correct globe with the new discoveries; A correct globe with ye new constellations of Dr Halley’

<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ORCS-00001-00001/1>

Exercise One: A Personal Cosmography

In this exercise, students will create their own 'cosmography' or 'cosmology'.

Ask the students to name and describe their own constellations in a way that tells us something about them. Somebody might name a constellation for the city their grandmother came from, for example, with another one called The Four Sisters (because they have four sisters), and so on.

E.g. 'There, rising in the east, sparkling on the horizon are The Four Sisters. Three close together in a band, each one slightly bigger than the next, then the fourth straggling over the earth's curve, small and sparkling and weaving a ragged journey in pursuit of the older three.

Pulsing out in space, centuries-old light comes from Kolkata, a distant galaxy...'

Evolution

Icebreaker: Transformations

Have students create a list of things which change or transform into something else, e.g. egg–chicken; tadpole–frog; iron–rust; prehistoric trees–coal.

Stimulus pieces:

Charles Darwin's Evolution Manuscripts

https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/darwin_mss/1 and page 8.

Manuscripts of Alfred, Lord Tennyson

<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/tennyson/1> and page 9.

Charles Darwin changed the way we (human beings) think about ourselves in the world. He developed his theory of evolution through close observation of the natural world, including the animals, plants and geology of the Galapagos Islands. His findings were considered controversial when he published them (and sometimes still are) and, among other things, were seen as a challenge to the creation stories of the established religions.

Alfred Lord Tennyson was a contemporary of Darwin and one of the most famous poets of the Victorian Age. One of his greatest poems is *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, which was written about the sudden death of his friend from Cambridge, Arthur Henry Hallam. The poem is about grief and how it created feelings of anger, panic and loss of faith (in God, himself and other people) in the poet, but it is also a poem about redemption and becoming strong in the face of fear.

One line from the poem – 'Nature, red in tooth and claw' – became closely associated with Darwin's theory as a metaphor for how the natural world works, and for how Darwin's ideas about 'natural selection' operate. People have used this metaphor to attack Darwin's ideas, or to say they represent a kind of nightmare, but also to praise or accept his findings, as a metaphor of a natural process with its own order and rules.

Exercise One: Darwin/Tennyson Remixed

Take one or more of the metaphors or images from the Darwin/Tennyson remixed words (maybe have them on cards) below. Students choose an image as a starting point to either

1) rewrite and adapt the metaphor. For example:

- 'Nature, eating flesh and drowning in blood'
- 'Technology, sleekly silver in zeros and ones'

or

2) continue the image. For example:

- 'Various insects flitted about, flies with monstrous wings the size of football pitches and the heads of rabid dogs; a snail with seven heads and seven tiny human mouths on each head, each mouth shouting in a different human language, left a trail of slime and echoing syllables in its wake.'

Darwin/Tennyson Remixed

1.

the tree of life

the coral of life

an entangled bank

many plants of many kinds

various insects flitting about worms crawling through the damp earth

Nature, red in tooth and claw

Dragons of the prime,
That tare each other in their slime

a hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits

an animal which breathed water... a great swimming tail, an imperfect skull & undoubtedly was a hermaphrodite

[Humanity] blown about the desert dust,
Or seal'd within the iron hills?

So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.

2.

Peace; come away...

these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us...

Exercise Two: From Chaos to Order

Depending on the group, exercises one and two could be run as separate activities, or the two could be merged. The aim is to get to the point where students are writing about their own experience or something relevant to them, using the framework we've created from the work of Darwin and Tennyson.

Darwin observed things which seemed chaotic and unconnected and worked out a set of laws which governed them. Tennyson observed the fear and anger that grief caused him and worked back towards a sense of hope and purpose. In this exercise, the students should work from chaos, terror, fear etc. towards order, hope and peace (that's the idea!).

The students should create a piece of writing which follows this pattern, using two halves. The first half should be nightmarish, chaotic, fearful and the second half should bring a sense of calm, relief and hope.

You might wish to encourage students to stick closely to the parts of Tennyson and Darwin's work featured in this resource. In this case, in the first stanza or paragraph of their writing they will have images of 'Nature, red in tooth and claw', and in the second part they will have a sense of 'peace' and 'elaborately constructed forms' working in harmony.

The writing here might be quite abstract and metaphorical. It might work on its own, or it might inform the additional writing exercise.

Additional Exercise: Your Own Experiences

Ask the students: 'What about you? Think about your own experiences. Has there been a time when you have been frightened, or alone, or felt a sense of chaos or panic? How did you overcome this? Were you able to find reconciliation or peace?'

Students may choose to keep some of the metaphors from their original piece of writing or they may wish to write this in a straightforward personal way, poetry or prose.

e.g. 1. *The day I was mugged, I saw dragons down the alley at the back of the shops...*

2. *... now friendship is my suit of armour which no dragon can pierce...*

Plenary

Read, share and edit work accordingly.

from *On the Origin of the Species* by Charles Darwin

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.

from *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin

We thus learn that man is descended from a hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits, and an inhabitant of the Old World.

from Notebook B 25-26 by Charles Darwin

The tree of life should perhaps be called the coral of life

from Letter to C. Lyell 10 Jan (1860) by Charles Darwin

Our ancestor was an animal which breathed water, had a swim-bladder, a great swimming tail, an imperfect skull & undoubtedly was a hermaphrodite!

from *In Memoriam A.H.H.* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroy'd,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete;

That not a worm is cloven in vain;
That not a moth with vain desire
Is shrivell'd in a fruitless fire,
Or but subserves another's gain.

Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last--far off--at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.

So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.

*

...And he, shall he,

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law--
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed--

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal'd within the iron hills?

No more? A monster then, a dream,
A discord. Dragons of the prime,
That tare each other in their slime,
Were mellow music match'd with him.

O life as futile, then, as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil.

*

Peace; come away: the song of woe
Is after all an earthly song:
Peace; come away: we do him wrong
To sing so wildly: let us go.