

**LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL COMMUNITY PROGRAMME
POETRY AND PICTURES POETRY WORKSHOP
JANUARY 2021 : THE ART OF STAYING IN BED**

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EXERCISE ONE: Warm up writing exercise – Wishful Photographs

Begin with this line: Here is a photograph I did not take of you...

Write a poem/piece describing a photograph you didn't take but perhaps wish you had of a person or incident. Include lots of detail - build up the picture in your mind's eye so we can see it too.

EXERCISE TWO: The Art Of Staying In Bed

Ekphrastic Poetry is a form of poetry inspired by works of art. Ekphrastic poems may find new stories about art pieces. It is not simply writing a description about a piece of art. It is more about reinterpreting art works in a new and different way. It can be like having a conversation with the artist or the artistic subject. It is about looking and experiencing artworks in a sensual way and putting your thoughts, feelings, ideas and sensations into words. Information about artworks may inform your response.

This workshop explores the theme of artworks featuring beds.

Introduction

It is a good time of year to just stay in bed. And if the combination of epidemiology and January does make you want to hide under the covers, perhaps you could tell yourself that you are a living work of art. For beds have a special place in art as places of refuge, love and protest.

<https://guardian.pressreader.com/search?query=art%20matters%20Jonathan%20Jones&newspapers=1545&startDate=2021-1-16&stopDate=2021-1-16&hideSimilar=1&type=2&state=0>



SLIDE 1. Le Lit 1893 (The Bed) - Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Lit_\(Toulouse-Lautrec\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Lit_(Toulouse-Lautrec))

<http://www.henritoulouselautrec.org/in-bed/>

Le Lit depicts two people sharing a bed. The painting has been in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris since 1986. *Le Lit* was made in oil paints on cardboard, mounted on wood. It is one of four paintings of similar date depicting individuals in bed, often interpreted as lesbian couples.

Toulouse-Lautrec became fascinated by the nightlife in Paris, particularly prostitutes and sex-workers. Through the 1890s, he spent more and more time painting everyday scenes of life in the official brothels. In 1892 he was commissioned to produce paintings for the salon at a brothel on the rue d'Ambroise. He spent time observing the brothel, its residents and visitors, while they worked and at quieter moments, and made sixteen portraits of the prostitutes. These paintings demonstrate a close and intimate observation and compassion towards the subjects.

Le Lit depicts two women in a bed, gazing at each other. The white sheets of the bed contrast with a red bedspread and with the headboard and wall behind. The disembodied heads of the women face each other, their bodies concealed beneath bedclothes. One woman is on the left with the blankets up to her face. The second woman is on the right, her face covered up to her chin. The painting is suffused by a warm glow, perhaps the rosy morning light, or a gas lamp. The painting is often interpreted as depicting a lesbian liaison.

Toulouse-Lautrec's ideals on homosexuality are well-documented. He was a firm defender of gay rights, which was a rarity in his time. It is believed that Toulouse-Lautrec chose to paint *Le Lit* and

other similar works because he was fascinated with the honesty and sensitivity of homosexuality rather than any sexual act itself.

SLIDES 2 & 3. The Dream Of St Ursula (The Saint's Dream) 1495 - Vittore Carpaccio

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legend_of_Saint_Ursula

https://www.wga.hu/html_m/c/carpacci/1ursula/2/50dream.html

<https://www.sleepandhealth.com/carpaccios-dream-st-ursula/>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dream-of-St-Ursula>



The Legend of Saint Ursula is a series of nine large wall-paintings on canvas by the Italian Renaissance artist Vittore Carpaccio (c.1460 - 1525/26), originally created for the School of Saint Ursula in Venice. They are now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice. The paintings were commissioned by the Loredan family, who had the School of St. Ursula under their

patronage.

In these works Carpaccio emerged as a mature artist of originality, revealing a gift for organization, narrative skill, and a command of light. The scene of *The Dream of St. Ursula* has been especially praised for its wealth of naturalistic detail. It is canvas No. 5 in the series. There is an intensely lyrical feeling of space, which in the painting becomes even more magical and enchanted. The elements of reality are arranged in perfect perspective constructions.

The subject is depicted lying on her back asleep, neatly occupying the near side of the bed in an elegant high-ceilinged Venetian bedroom. The angel, with long hair, flowing robe and wings has entered the room. He will tell Ursula, through a dream, that she will die and become a martyr. The light is behind the angel, casting a sharp shadow inside the room. The light penetrates into the room from the roundels below the beams, from the windows and from the half-open door leading into the next room; but it does not succeed in dispelling all the shadows in the bedroom. The room, with its canopied bed and intricate headboard is bathed in a soft, caressing light. Statues of Hercules and Venus are positioned above the doorframes and the plants are myrtle and carnations, which symbolize heavenly love and faithfulness in marriage. A table, on which Ursula's book lies open, stands at the far side of the bed while a dog lies awake on the near side. The angel brings purity and clears the saint's mind.

In this atmosphere, every detail is rendered with subdued light and soft shadows: the little slippers, the gold crown and the little dog at the foot of the bed; the little table with the hourglass on it and the book, still open at the page where Ursula stopped reading; the pots on the window ledge with carnations and myrtle growing in them, plants that symbolize earthly and heavenly love; the holy image lit by the smoking candle that we can see through the elaborately carved frame and the equally richly carved chair below it; the antique gilded bronze statuettes of Hercules and Venus above the door-frames; the cupboard with its doors ajar so that we can see its contents.

The Legend of St Ursula

The story of St. Ursula is thought to date from between 900 and 1100. It is a dramatic narrative in which 11,000 women, including Ursula, die. The legend goes like this: "Ursula was the beautiful daughter of a Christian British king, Dionutus of Cornwall, and had taken a vow of chastity, but, against her wishes, was betrothed to a pagan prince. Ursula was warned through a dream to demand his conversion to Christianity and a delay of three years as a condition of marriage, during

which time her companions were to be 11,000 virgins collected from her own kingdom and that of her suitor. Ursula and the 11,000 virgins were on a ship when a sudden breeze carried them off. They arrived in Cologne which was being sacked by the Huns, who then slaughtered the virgins after Ursula refused the advances of a Hun prince.



SLIDES 4 & 5. Front view, side view. Bed (1955) - Robert Rauschenberg

https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/robert-rauschenberg-bed-1955/

<https://www.artsy.net/article/ellen-tani-rauschenberg-made-his-bed-but-does-he>

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/robert-rauschenberg/bed>

Robert Rauschenberg incorporated the stuff of everyday life—including anything that caught his imagination, from rubber tyres to light bulbs—into his wide-ranging work. In many of his works, like *Bed*, he merged elements of abstract painting with found objects.

Bed is one of Rauschenberg's first "Combine Paintings", a term he coined to describe the works resulting from his technique of attaching found objects to a traditional canvas support, literally combining the media of painting and sculpture within a single, three-dimensional art object. In this work, however, there is no canvas. The artist took a well-worn pillow, sheet, and quilt, scribbled on them with pencil, splashed them with paint in a style similar to Jackson Pollock's action paintings, and hung the entire ensemble on the wall.



The story goes that Rauschenberg used his own bedding to make *Bed*, because he could not afford to buy a new canvas. Rauschenberg ran out of canvas and turned instead to his bed linens, first scribbling on the pillow, sheets, and quilt with pencil, then rapidly dripping and spilling paint on them. He then stretched the bed linens over a rectangular wooden support, in the place of a canvas, and attached the pillow and quilt in a way that made it appear as if the bed was made with only one corner un-tucked. He applied the paint in a loose, dripped, gestural fashion. "It was very simply put together, because I actually had nothing to paint on," he reflected years later, in 2006. "Except it was summertime, it was hot, so I didn't need the quilt. So the quilt was, I thought, abstracted. But it wasn't abstracted enough, so that no matter what I did to it, it kept saying, 'I'm a bed.' So, finally I gave in and I gave it a pillow."

Hung on the wall like a traditional painting, his bed becomes a sort of intimate self-portrait consistent with his assertion that "painting relates to both art and life...I try to act in that gap between the two." *Bed* implies a personal history: its human scale and slightly mussed sheets and pillow suggest a potentially inhabited space.

Rauschenberg, who once claimed that "a pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil, and fabric," was committed to absurdity, the multiplicity of meaning, and the messy chaos of everyday life. Painting on common materials in place of the traditional canvas, and mounting those materials on a stretcher hung vertically on the wall, Rauschenberg frustrates conventions of modern painting.



SLIDE 6. Bed-in For Peace (1969) - John Lennon and Yoko Ono

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bed-ins_for_Peace

As the Vietnam War raged in 1969, John Lennon and Yoko Ono held two week-long *Bed-ins for Peace*, one at the Hilton Hotel in Amsterdam and one at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal, each of which were intended to be non-violent protests against wars, and experimental tests of new ways to promote peace. The public proceedings were filmed, and later turned into a documentary *Bed Peace*, which is available for free on YouTube.

Knowing their March 20, 1969, marriage would be a huge press event, Lennon and Ono decided to use the publicity to promote world peace. They spent their honeymoon in the presidential suite (Room 702) at the Amsterdam Hilton Hotel for a week between March 25th - 31st, inviting the world's press into their hotel room every day between 9am and 9pm. The press expected them to be having sex, but instead the couple were just sitting in bed, wearing pyjamas—in Lennon's words "like angels"—talking about peace with signs over their bed reading 'Hair Peace' and 'Bed Peace'.

Due to the couple's very public image, the Amsterdam bed-in was greeted by fans, and received a great deal of press coverage. Following the event, when asked if he thought the bed-in had been successful, Lennon became rather frustrated. He insisted that the failure of the press to take the couple seriously was part of what he and Ono wanted: "It's part of our policy not to be taken seriously. Our opposition, whoever they may be, in all manifest forms, don't know how to handle humour. And we are humorous."

SLIDE 7. My Bed 1998 - Tracey Emin

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/oct/27/tracey-emin-my-bed-violent-mess-sex-death>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Bed

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-tracey-emins-my-bed-ignored-societys-expectations-women>



My Bed is a work by the English artist Tracey Emin. First created in 1998, it was exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1999 as one of the shortlisted works for the Turner Prize. It consisted of her bed with bedroom objects in a dishevelled state, and gained much media attention. Although it did not win the prize, its notoriety has persisted. It was sold at auction by Christie's in July 2014 for £2,546,500.

The idea for *My Bed* was inspired by a time when Emin was suffering suicidal depression brought on by relationship difficulties. She had remained in bed for four days without eating or drinking anything but alcohol. When she looked at the vile, repulsive mess that had accumulated in her room, she suddenly realised what she had created. Crumpled tissues, menstrual-stained clothing, cigarettes, empty vodka bottles, a pregnancy test, lubricant, and condoms surrounded her bed. She decided it was a work of art.

The artwork generated considerable media furore, particularly over the fact that the bedsheets were stained with bodily secretions and the floor had items from the artist's room, such as condoms, underwear with menstrual blood stains, other detritus, and functional, everyday objects, including a pair of slippers. Emin ardently defended *My Bed* against critics who treated it as a farce and claimed

that anyone could exhibit an unmade bed. To these claims the artist retorted, "Well, they didn't, did they? No one had ever done that before."

With *My Bed*, Tracey Emin turned one of her life's great low points, a bedbound drinking spree, into a theatrical arrangement worthy of Jacobean tragedy: a violent mess of sex and death. Amid the yellowing sheets there are condoms, a tampon, a pregnancy test, discarded knickers and a lot of vodka bottles. It's also very kitchen sink. That blue slab of carpet speaks of lonely rented rooms. She set a new standard for confessional art.

Tate Liverpool curator, Darren Pih, described the work as a "form of assemblage art" that "almost resembles a crime scene." Viewers can read the component pieces like detectives, reviewing forensic evidence. Yet *My Bed* also elicits warmer, more personal responses. It remains one of contemporary art's most striking depictions of vulnerability, a self-portrait that doesn't veer from the messiness of depression and heartbreak. In particular, it appealed to viewers who connected their own painful experiences to those implied by Emin's installation.

In an interview, Emin discussed how her life had changed since she first mounted the piece. "I don't smoke, I don't have sex, I don't use contraceptives, I don't have periods, I don't wear small pale blue knickers that look like one of Turner's clouds," she told the writer. "I don't make stains on the bed like that, like I used to, and if I did, I wouldn't have a bed like that, the sheets would get washed immediately."

Now look at the following poems:

Talking In Bed - Philip Larkin

http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/philip_larkin/poems/14529

If The Truth Be Known - Sara-Jane Arbury

Bedside Vigil - Anon

Things - Fleur Adcock

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/things/>

The Land Of Counterpane - Robert Louis Stevenson

<https://poets.org/poem/land-counterpane>

EXERCISE THREE: Bed Poetry

Choose an image to work with. Make notes about it. What does it make you think about? What do you notice about it? Memories? Stories?

Write a sentence or two about why you chose this image, how it makes you feel, and/or what it makes you think about.

Next, write a detailed description of the image. Be specific enough so that someone else could clearly imagine the work of art in his or her mind after reading your description. Be sure to include words that indicate size, shape, colour, light/shade, objects, figures, positions etc.

Finally, write a poem in response to your image. If you need inspiration, look back at your answers above. Remember, also, there are many different ways to go about this. Here are some approaches:

Write about your thoughts and feelings as you experience the artwork.

Speculate about how or why the artist has created this artwork.

Write from the point of view of something in the image – bring it to life and make it think and feel like a human being.

Write a poem from the point of view of the artist / someone in the artwork.

What is being revealed and what concealed in the artwork?

Imagine what was happening while the artist was creating this work.

Write a poem about your own or someone else's bed.

Your poem could be in the style of a poem you've looked at in this workshop (rhyming / non-rhyming; verses or one block of writing; playing around with the text and the white space of the page; confessional poem).

And, of course, you may write your poem in any way you want!

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