

John Keats: When I have Fears that I may cease to be

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high pil'd books, in charact'ry,
Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face, 5
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And feel that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more, 10
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

Background:

Keats had good reason to fear that he might not live a long life: both his parents had died relatively young and his beloved younger brother Tom contracted tuberculosis, dying when he was only nineteen.

Keats' great success did not come until after his death and this poem – written in 1818 - was published posthumously in 1848.



Summary and analysis:

Lines 1-4

The poem opens with Keats' fear that he will 'cease to be' before he has managed to harvest all of the ideas in his mind. The word 'When' at the start of the poem highlights the inevitability of the passing of time and the poet's awareness of this.

The imagery in the first four lines of the poem is connected with autumn and harvest, even though Keats wrote this poem in January. (Think of the importance of the time of year in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.) The metaphor of the harvest is used to describe Keats' writing: he wants to use his pen to glean, or harvest, his ideas and store them in books just as one might store grain in granaries or 'garners'.

Lines 5-8

Having told us that he wishes to preserve his thoughts and writings for posterity, Keats now presents us with an example of the world he wishes to capture in his poetry. He describes the beauty and mystery of 'the night's starr'd face' and the 'high romance' they symbolise. He wishes to 'trace / Their shadows' – in other words to write about them – but fears that he will not live long enough to do so.

Keats' view of romance here is of something elevated: 'high romance'.

Interestingly, Keats refers to the act of writing a poem as being to do with 'the magic hand of chance'. This shows us that he regards the act of writing poetry as something natural yet mysterious. It cannot be forced.

Lines 9-12

Now Keats moves on to the idea of love. He fears that he may never have the chance to fully experience love and he mourns the fact that he will 'never look on thee more'.

The 'fair creature of an hour' Keats mentions here is thought to be a young woman he saw briefly when in Vauxhall Gardens some years before. She features in a number of his other poems. Another way of looking at the phrase 'fair creature of an hour' is to see it as a comment on the transience of beauty: it will quickly fade with the passing of time.

Keats' view of love here is of something that is akin to a 'faery power' and an emotion that is best not analysed or even reflected upon too deeply.

Lines 13-14

Keats ends the poem on a bleak note. If he cannot have 'high romance' and 'unreflecting love'; if he is destined not to achieve lasting fame through his writing, then he feels despair and isolation. He sees his position in the universe and realises how small and insignificant our lives are compared to the vastness of the world and the inexorable passing of time. We cannot help but think, and when we do so we must come to the conclusion that love and fame 'to nothingness do sink'.

The inevitability of this conclusion is emphasised by the repetition of 'when' throughout the poem, followed by 'then' in the final lines.

Themes:

Fame: Keats was determined to make his mark in the world of poetry and rejected a career as a doctor in favour of writing, telling his guardian that he meant to rely on his abilities as a poet.

Love: Keats fears he will never fully experience love in his life.

Death: Whatever else we may or may not experience in our lives, there is only one certainty and that is death. Our lives, hopes, dreams, loves and so on will all come to nothing in the greater scheme of things.

Form:

This is a Shakespearean sonnet.

It is written in iambic pentameter.

The 'turn' is towards the very end of the poem, when Keats says 'then on the shore...'

The rhyming couplet at the end of the poem ties up Keats' ideas neatly and provides a memorable conclusion to the sonnet.