



When I have fears that I may cease to be

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
 Before high-piled books, in charactery,
 Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
 5 When I behold, upon the night's starred face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
 And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
 10 That I shall never look upon thee more,
 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.

stop

collect slowly / fertile

characters; printed letters of the alphabet

granary

liking or enjoyment of the taste of something.

John Keats

General

In this sonnet the speaker (in this case we know it's Keats' voice as it shares the fears of Keats) is afraid he will die before he has shown his full potential as a poet. However, there is some consolation at the end.

Line-by-Line

Line 1

When I have fears that I may cease to be

This is the first of three when-clauses (the other two being in lines 5 and 9). The 'answer' to these when-clauses is to be found in line 12 ('then'). In this first line Keats is very direct. He is not beating around the bush, he is afraid that he will die and not have finished his work (as will be shown in the next few lines).



Lines 2-4

Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;

These lines enforce the idea of dying before full potential. In line 2 Keats is afraid he will not have enough time to be able to put his thoughts and ideas on paper. Line 3 extends the idea of words on paper, now we have characters (letters) in many books. This shows that Keats thought he had the potential to write many books (and sadly he was right, as the works he had written show a large potential).

Line 7 has a simile comparing the potential books of Keats with granaries full of grain. Granaries are storehouses for grain for the winter. It is the rich harvest in Autumn which feeds the hungry in winter, like his books will feed the hungry readers. Note that the pastoral tone of this comparison connects with the Romantic idea of removing yourself from the city to the countryside.

Lines 5-8

When I behold, upon the night's starred face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;

This part starts with the second condition: 'when I behold'. So apart from the moments that he thinks he will die, he will get the same thought (starting in line 12 with 'then') when looking to the stars. The 'huge cloudy symbols' show Keats' interest in and inspiration from the cosmos. It also connects death with the cosmos: both are eternal (and void, 'nothingness', line 14).

However, he is afraid in lines 7-8 that he will not be able to put the mysteries of the cosmos (and the world) into words before he dies. The 'magic hand of chance' is elusive. It could suggest Keats thinks ideas come randomly to the poet's mind, or his fame is subject to a game of chance.



Lines 8-12

And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love

It is unclear what Keats exactly means with 'fair creature of an hour'. Being between commas indicates some extra information, not of vital importance to the main idea of the line. He could refer to himself or to a friend only living for a short amount of time in this world. It could also refer to inspiration, a muse that would inspire Keats only very briefly. Or it could be his lover. Who- or whatever it is, he fears that he will never be able to see it again.

'Unreflecting' in line 12 indicates spontaneous love, irrational, which is a Romantic element being more concerned with emotion rather than rational thinking. Faeries are mythical creatures which are connected to the Romantic idea of the imagination. Faeries are beautiful but can also be mischievous.

Lines 12-14

—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

In line 13 there is the 'volta', or turning point in the sonnet. The image of the "shore of the wide world" enforces the idea of loneliness and mirrors the imagery of the cosmos mentioned earlier on. The shore can also be seen as the border between the corporal world and eternity. The image of the ocean being death in eternity is enforced by the image of 'love' and 'fame' sinking into the depths of nothingness.

The ending is somewhat consoling. As if Keats also finds peace in the idea of nothingness. Being afraid to die, afraid to lose 'love and fame', is ill-founded. There is an unspoken consolation, an acceptance in this line.



Romanticism

The Romantic movement was characterized by its emphasis on individualism, nature, emotion and the medieval past (as opposed to the classical past like the Renaissance). Keats' sonnet focuses on the 'I', the individual. It is explicitly mentioned that the 'I' stands alone (line 13). Keats' fears and 'unreflecting love' connect to emotions and the pastoral scene of the granaries with the faeries hint towards medieval past.