

## **When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be**

**BY JOHN KEATS**

*When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,  
Before high-pilèd books, in charactery,  
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;  
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,  
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.*

### **When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be Summary & Analysis**

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to be" is an Elizabethan (a.k.a. Shakespearean) sonnet written by John Keats in 1818, although it wasn't published until 1848, which was twenty-seven years after the poet's death. A lyric poem (in the sense that it expresses personal or intimate feelings), the poem centers on a speaker's anxiety about dying before being able to achieve his or her aspirations as a poet. What makes the poem especially tragic and moving is that Keats died of tuberculosis only three years after writing it, at the young age of 25.

## **“When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be” Summary**

The speaker at times worries about dying before he or she has turned all the thoughts in his or her busy mind into poetry, before the speaker has filled stacks of books with these thoughts in the same way that a farmer would fill storehouses with harvested grain. At times the speaker looks up into the starry night sky and sees vast images of elevated (perhaps chivalrous) love there. The speaker worries about not living long enough to get the chance to translate these symbols into poetry. At times the speaker fears being unable to look upon his or her beautiful beloved, and of no longer being able to enjoy the transformative power of love. When the speaker considers these fears, the speaker feels isolated, as if standing all alone on a vast seashore. In such moments, the speaker feels as if love and fame do not matter, or perhaps are impossible in the face of death.

## **“When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be” Themes**

### **Theme fear of death**

#### **Fear of Death**

As suggested by the title, the speaker in “When I have Fears that I May Cease to Be” considers mortality and the possibility that death may come before the speaker has achieved all he or she hopes to in life. In particular, the speaker views death as isolating, and though creative endeavors and personal relationships can offer a momentary balm against the speaker’s anxiety about dying, the speaker knows these are also the very things that will be lost in death. Ultimately, the speaker seems to accept the inevitability of death—though it's unclear if, in doing so, the speaker accepts the futility of fearing death or accepts the futility of life itself.

The speaker specifically struggles with the concept of fate and the possibility that death is outside of the speaker’s control. When the speaker imagines “trac[ing]” symbols from the sky “with the magic hand of chance,” this suggests on the one hand that, if granted the opportunity, the speaker would be able to effectively “trace” the sky into poetry. However, these lines could also suggest that the speaker may not “live long enough to trace / Their shadows” as a result of the “magic hand of chance,” i.e. the whims of fate. In either case, the speaker is clearly concerned with the idea of “chance” and struggles with the notion that the achievements of his or

her life may depend on randomness. Fear of death, it seems, is intimately linked to a desire for control.

The speaker also fears death's isolating nature and attempts to come to grips with the reality that he or she is alone in the face of mortality. Note how, in lines 9 and 10, it becomes clear that one of the main anxieties produced by the thought of death is the possibility that the speaker "may never look upon [his or her beloved] more." Part of the speaker's fear of death thus stems from the fact that he or she will lose the personal relationships that have come to give the speaker solace in life. Indeed, the speaker seems to view death as a particularly lonely experience: when the speaker thinks of it, he or she feels as though "on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone." The very thought of death makes the speaker feel isolated from the entire world, just as dying will literally separate the speaker from the "wide world."

Because death is inevitable and isolating, love and fame seem empty aspirations to the speaker. No matter how much the speaker might yearn for or find comfort in the love of others or in the possibility of fame, death will come to each person "alone." Thus, "love and fame to nothingness do sink." This final line can be read several ways. It may imply that the speaker realizes that love and fame are impossible, because he or she will either die before attaining them or will attain them only to lose them in death anyways. However, the ending may also suggest that in accepting the certainty of death, the speaker actually overcomes his or her fears of losing out on love and fame by acknowledging their loss as inevitable. In such a case, the speaker may actually move beyond concerns for love and fame, realizing that there is no reason to worry about them.

## **Theme of creativity**

### **Creativity and Ambition**

The speaker of "When I have Fears that I May Cease to Be" is not merely concerned with being dead, but with the possibility of not being alive—and therefore losing the opportunity to experience the creative possibilities of the world. In essence, the speaker seems to believe that creative (and specifically poetic) accomplishments are the main point of life. It's clear, then, that the speaker is a very ambitious person, and particularly fears dying before achieving all he or she hopes to as a poet.

Note how the speaker repeatedly uses the word “before” to frame his or her fears: the speaker fears dying “Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain, / “Before high-pilèd books, in charactery / Hold like rich garnerers the full ripened grain.” In other words, there is a specific act—namely, the writing of poetry—which the speaker fears not achieving before dying. The speaker does not merely lament no longer being able to look “upon the night’s starred face,” but not being able to “trace / Their shadows”—that is, to translate what the speaker sees in the sky into poetry. Because the central aim of the speaker’s life seems to be artistic creation, it is death’s prevention of this aim that the poet most fears.

The speaker views his or her imagination as particularly productive and capable of achieving impressive poetic feats—making the potential for wasted ambition all the greater. The speaker uses language evoking fertility and fruitfulness to describe the poetic possibilities that exist in his or her mind—for example, likening a pen to a scythe that can “[glean the speaker’s] teeming brain.” The speaker’s “brain” is like farmland ready to be harvested, and the speaker’s pen is the device to reap the crops of the speaker’s mind. The harvest metaphor continues as the speaker describes the books that he or she would write like storehouses for the “ripened grain” gleaned from his or her imagination. Death would thus cause the speaker’s “teeming” poetic life to go to waste, like rotten fruit or untended crops.

Indeed, the speaker feels quite capable of very lofty achievements. When the speaker looks into the sky, he or she “behold[s] ... Huge cloud symbols of a high romance.” This image implies the speaker’s ambitiousness through a focus on large, abstract ideas. However, the phrase “high romance” may also more literally refer to a “romance” poem or long, metered narrative poem that is often recognized as the most important accomplishment of a poet’s career. Thus, the speaker seems confident enough in his or her ambitions to be able to write a “high romance” if given the opportunity—to create great art, if only granted the time to do so.

## **Theme beauty**

### **The Beauty of the Natural World**

Throughout the poem, the speaker relies on descriptions of the natural world to explain his or her poetic ambitions. In doing so, the speaker suggests that nature is the source of ultimate artistic inspiration and that poetry is a means to capture and share natural beauty. For example, the speaker describes seeing “upon the night’s starred face / huge cloudy symbols of a high romance” which he or she hopes to “trace.” In other words, the speaker describes a natural phenomenon—the starry night sky—as being a creative catalyst.

Although the ideas in these lines become a bit abstracted, referring to “symbols” of “romance,” the speaker still roots them in the natural imagery of clouds and stars. The speaker even personifies the night into a “face,” likening the beauty of the night to the beauty of another person—further underscoring the link between nature and beauty, as well as the that between beauty and creative inspiration.

The speaker also draws on natural imagery when describing his or her own imagination. The speaker envisions the books that might eventually contain his or her poetry to be like granaries storing “rich garners” of “full ripened grain.” This image of “rich ... ripened grain” gives the speaker’s art a beautiful, indulgent quality, evoking ample fields of golden wheat and again linking poetry to nature.

Specifically, the speaker views poetry as an attempt to capture or translate this beauty. Having likened the “high-pilèd books” that the speaker hopes to write to granaries or grain storehouses, the speaker likens a “pen” to a harvesting tool. This farming metaphor suggests that the speaker sees poetry as a tool that is capable of reaping the fruit of the natural world and making it digestible.

Indeed, when the speaker describes seeing “huge cloudy symbols of a high romance” in the night sky, the speaker yearns “to trace / Their shadows,” implying that poetry could recreate the beauty of the sky much like a drawing. However, this image also seems to demonstrate humility, in that the speaker may not be able to trace the actual symbols, but only “their shadows.” In other words, poetry can strive to capture the beauty of the natural world, but may only ever successfully trace its outline.

## **Theme love**

### **Love and Recognition**

Towards the end of the poem it becomes clear that the speaker is afraid of losing love upon dying. Whereas the idea of love in the poem initially centers on the speaker's wish for romantic love, it expands to reflect the speaker's wish for widespread admiration and fame. The speaker thus not only fears dying before fulfilling his or her creative potential, but also before gaining recognition for doing so.

The speaker seems to experience a particular urgency of time in regard to his or her beloved. The speaker first refers to his or her loved one as "fair creature of an hour," immediately connecting the figure of his love with a concept of time. By calling this beloved a "creature of an hour," the speaker seems to imply the brevity of that experience of love, as if that love is as short-lived as a single hour. Indeed, love seems more closely tied to timing than any of the speaker's other concerns throughout the poem. The speaker specifically fears, "That I shall never look upon thee more." To merely look upon this love is not enough—the speaker craves "more" time to do so. This is not the case with other concerns of the poem, in which the speaker merely hopes to live long enough to accomplish certain deeds. With love, it seems, there is no point at which the experience will be completed—there is no time that would be enough to satisfy that wish for "more."

In fact, the very section of the poem devoted to love is truncated. An Elizabethan sonnet is normally divided into three quatrains and a couplet. In "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be," the form is followed for the first two quatrains. However, the third quatrain on love is actually three and a half lines instead of four. The final couplet cuts into the last line of the quatrain, making the speaker's meditation on love literally run out of time formally.

However, the final lines suggest that it is not merely the speaker's love for another, but others' love for the speaker that the speaker is most afraid of losing. At the end of the third quatrain, in lines 11 and 12, the speaker notes the fear of never relishing in the "power / Of unreflecting love." "Unreflecting love" complicates the speaker's account of love, as it seems to suggest the object of the speaker's love does not necessarily reciprocate that emotion. In fact, part of the

reason the speaker wishes to have “more” time to look upon his or her beloved may be in order to overcome unrequited love and make that person love the speaker back.

When next the speaker discusses love, in the final lines, it takes on even more significant implications. In fact, the speaker specifically ends on the image of “love and fame” sinking to nothingness in death. This juxtaposition of love and fame suggests that the speaker finds a connection between the two and may be motivated both by romantic love and by celebrity. This urge for recognition complicates the entire poem, connecting the speaker’s wish for love to his or her creative ambitions rather than a more romantic ideal. Indeed, it is possible to read the final lines as an indication that the speaker wants not only to accomplish all he or she can as a poet, but to be recognized and loved for those accomplishments.

### **“When I Have Fears” popularity:**

“When I have Fears” is a famous and worldly anthologized sonnet written by John Keats. It was first published in 1848 in *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats* by Richard Monckton Milnes. The poem illustrates the essential issues like poetry, love and time. The poem expresses his fear of mortality and limitations of life. Since its publication, it has achieved immense popularity on account of its everlasting description of life’s transient nature.

### **“When I Have Fears” as a Representative of Life and Death:**

As this poem is about the fear of early death, the poet says that his short life may not allow him to outpour his innermost feelings. As a passionate poet, he wants to transcribe all his ripe thoughts in a pile of books before reaching the end of his life. Unlike others, he wants to live his life with all its joys. Not only does he praise the mysterious beauty of nature but also wishes to do justice by capturing it in his words. However, the fear of death fades away from his exuberant delights, and he realizes that he will miss all these wonders and his beloved’s company, too. The poem conveys an essential message that everything in this world such as love, fame, beauty are just transitory.

### **Major Themes in “When I Have Fears”:**

Fear of death, love, and nature are some of the significant themes layered of this sonnet. The poet uses literary elements and plenty of images to develop these themes. He starts his argument from

worrying about dying before accomplishing his goals leading to worrying about the death of his significant other. He then illustrates that all his thoughts fade away in the hands of death. He feels sad because he will miss watching the beautiful nature and the objects. He adds that his demise would also separate him from his beloved. Thus, the fear of his early death makes him insecure.