When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

POEM TEXT

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.

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.

THEMES

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 12-14

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 garners 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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Line 4
- Lines 5-8

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, at 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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,

The opening lines of "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" establish the poem's primary thematic concerns: the fear of death and the cutting short of creative potential.

In the first line, the speaker describes moments when he or she fears dying. The line is enjambed, spilling over on to the next line and quickly establishing a sense of anxiety—of the thoughts in the speaker's mind surging forward of their own accord.

The second line is a continuation of the same sentence, and reveals that the speaker does not merely fear "ceas[ing] to be" but dying "*Before* my pen has gleaned my teeming brain" (emphasis added). In other words, it is not only a fear of death itself that fills the speaker, but a fear of dying before achieving something creative. In fact, the wording "cease to be" is significant, in that the speaker does not fear death itself, but a *lack of life*, and the possibilities therein.

Specifically, the concern over dying before the speaker's "pen has gleaned [his or her] teeming brain" implies that the speaker's primary interest is writing. The line features metaphor, describing the image of a pen gleaning the speaker's mind. Such an image likens a pen to a scythe, a tool uses to harvest crops. The metaphor suggests that the speaker wishes to harvest the crops of his or her "teeming brain," or, more literally, write down the speaker's many thoughts. The metaphor is especially complex in that the speaker is both the harvester and thing harvested.

Each line also begins with a word related to time: "When" and "Before." By placing these words at the start of each line, our attention is drawn to the temporal aspect of the poem, and gives rise to a sense of urgency in the speaker's fears. "When"

suggests that the speaker has fears of dying on a regular basis, while "before" suggests that that particular fear revolves around dying too soon.

Furthermore, the lines rely on assonance, or the repetition of internal vowel sounds. "Fears," "cease," "be," 'before," "gleaned," and "teeming" each feature /ee/ sounds. Because the sound first appears in the word "fear," however, the sound's continued prevalence throughout the lines embodies the prevalence of the speaker's fear, making the word "fear" feel present in the poem even when it isn't directly.

Lastly, these lines establish the poem's meter. Written primarily in iambic pentameter, each of these lines features five perfect iambs, or unstressed-stressed beats, that add up to ten syllables. For example:

When I have fears that I may cease to be

Such perfect meter gives the impression of control, as if the speaker is able to tame his or her fear of death. Additionally, such meter was a common feature of Elizabethan sonnets, and may act as the speaker's method of gesturing toward other past writers, such as Shakespeare. Doing so might link the speaker's interest in writing with the great writing of other literary figures.

LINES 3-4

Before high-pilèd books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;

Lines 3 and 4 expand upon the speaker's discussion of writing or literature and creative potential. The imagery of "high-pilèd books, in charactery" continues to focus the speaker's attention on writing, suggesting that the speaker fears dying before filling books with his or her own words, presumably in the form of poetry. The image also suggests that the speaker feels capable of writing a substantial amount, filling enough books to pile them in high stacks.

As in line 2, line 3 also begins with the word "before." This type of repetition, called anaphora, draws continued awareness to the role that time (and more specifically, its passage) plays in the speaker's anxieties.

Additionally, these lines build on the previous farm-related language from line 2, creating an extended metaphor that likens writing and the speaker's imagination to the harvesting of grain. Using simile, the speaker imagines books that will "hold like rich garners the full ripened grain." In other words, the extended metaphor suggests that the speaker's "pen" will "glean" or reap the speaker's imagination, much like a farmer reaps grain during harvest time. The books that the speaker writes will be like granaries or storehouses, containing the "ripened grain" that has been harvested by the speaker's pen.

This extended metaphor stresses the speaker's belief that his or her "teeming brain" is "rich" and "ripened," or is bountiful with poetic material. The language of ripeness, in fact, operates even further to suggest that there will be a right time or season for the speaker to write poetry. This once again demonstrates the speaker's view of time as pivotal to creative achievement and a root cause of the fear of death.

In keeping with the speaker's time-related anxiety, line 3 is also arguably enjambed once again despite its final comma: the speaker's fear of not fulfilling his or creative potential "before" dying continues to spill down the stanza in a rush, until finally resting, briefly, with the end-stop at line 4.

LINES 5-6

When I behold, upon the night's starred face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,

Like the word "before" in preceding lines, the anaphora of "When" at the start of line 5 draws the reader's attention to the prevalence of time in the speaker's fears. The repetition of "when" also implies that the speaker "behold[s]" "cloudy symbols" in the night sky more than once. That is, just as the line "When I have fears" indicates that the speaker has such fears frequently, "When I behold" seems to suggest that the speaker also beholds symbols in the night frequently. This emphasizes the speaker's faith in his or her creative capacity, as the notion of repeatedly seeing abstract symbols in the sky is a fairly bold one.

Line 5 also features a caesura. Although the line is still in iambic pentameter, the use of a comma after "When I behold" generates a pause in the rhythm of the line. This momentary breath draws attention both to the image of "the night's starred face," which personifies the night to be like a human face, as well as the speaker's ability to "behold" the sky. Focusing on such aspects may imply the speaker can "behold" the night as one might another human face, as if the speaker is capable of bringing the vast cosmos down to a human scale.

These lines also blend concrete imagery with abstract ideas, suggesting that the speaker sees "symbols of a high romance" in "cloud[s]" and "star[s]." These images indicate that the speaker finds a particular inspiration in the natural world, and that there are "symbols" that can be interpreted in the night sky.

The meaning of the phrase "high romance," however, is unclear. On the one hand, it could mean an elevated or transcendent romance, i.e. a love that is more than just human, bodily love. On the other hand, it could more literally refer to medieval "romances"—legends of chivalric knights, which often took the shape of long, metered narrative poems. In this sense, the speaker would seem to see the "symbols" of an epic poetic project in the night sky. In either case, though, it's clear that the speaker seems to find profound, complex ideas in the natural world.

LINES 7-8

And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;

In these lines, the speaker articulates a fear that he or she may not live long enough to "trace" the "shadows" of "cloudy symbols" in the sky. In other words, the speaker fears being unable to translate the inspiration he or she finds in the natural world into poetry.

As opposed to the previous harvest metaphor, the speaker here likens the act of writing to "tracing" or drawing shadows, establishing a more direct line between the speaker's interest in life and the literal practice of art. Additionally, the explicit enjambment here allows line 7 to rush over into line 8, almost as if the word "trace" is running after these "shadows"—trying to keep up and capture them before the speaker's time on earth runs out.

The speaker also personifies the "huge cloudy symbols" of line 6 by claiming that he or she fears being unable to "trace / Their shadows." Symbols, of course, do not actually have shadows, again suggesting that the speaker feels capable of translating abstract concepts into more accessible, human terms. However, the idea of tracing "shadows" could also imply the opposite: rather than tracing actual symbols themselves, the speaker may only be capable of tracing the shadows they cast—that is, of remaining one step apart from the celestial ideas.

The final image of line 8, "the magic hand of chance," is a complicated one. On the one hand, the speaker seems to lament being unable to trace the "shadows with the magic hand of chance," suggesting that the speaker's hand itself is that magic hand, and that "chance"—opportunity and time—would allow the speaker to make poetry. This reading makes the act of poetry seem particularly powerful, capable of "magic" itself.

However, the syntax of the lines also makes it possible to read the "magic hand" as the hand of "chance" itself, *not* of the speaker. In this case, the speaker seems to be contemplating the idea of fate. Whether or not the speaker will be "live to trace" the sky, in other words, depends on the "hand" of fate—which is beyond the speaker's control and therefore a source of fear.

LINES 9-12

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—

In these lines, the speaker turns from the abstract concepts of the sky to his or her earthly love for another person. Line 9 features another caesura, creating a pause between "fair" and "feel." This hesitation draws particular attention to the speaker's emotion, as this is the first time in the poem the speaker definitively describes how he or she actually *feels*. Furthermore, the alliteration of "feel" and "fair" connects the speaker's strong emotion with the physical beauty of his or her beloved.

In these lines, notably, the speaker doesn't discuss writing or poetic ambitions. In fact, the speaker merely fears that he or she may "never look upon thee more." Whereas other fears in the poem stem from the possibility of dying before achieving certain artistic goals, in the case of love the speaker seems to view *no* point as a satisfactory time to die. The speaker purely wants "more." This could stem from the "faery power" of love, which the speaker seems to view as either a transformative force or something that is imaginary or even illusory, like a fable. Indeed, the speaker's use of the phrase "unreflecting love" suggests a lack of reciprocity, as if the love the speaker most desires is enchanting yet impossible.

These lines also place a special emphasis on time. The speaker refers to his or her beloved as a "fair creature of an hour," immediately drawing a connection between the loved one and time. The wording seems to suggest that love is as short-lived as an hour. Indeed, the speaker only wants "more." In this case, time itself seems to be the very thing the speaker fears losing.

In fact, these lines are truncated formally, literally embodying the sense of time running out. The first twelve lines of the poem are divided into three quatrains: the first centers on the harvest metaphor, while the second focuses on the night sky. This third quatrain revolves around love, but the fourth line (line 12) is actually cut in half, disrupted by the caesura in the form of a dash. This shortening makes the love quatrain shorter than the preceding two, giving the subject an extra feeling of urgency.

Lastly, the meter experiences a drastic shift in line 11, with the first foot flipping from an iamb to a trochee (or dactyl, depending on how you read it):

Never have relish in the faery power

This dramatic flipping from unstressed-stressed to stressed-unstressed places a special focus on the word "never," which begins the line and is repeated several times throughout the poem. In the falling meter of the word we feel the falling off from love and life to death. Furthermore, the "faery power" seems embodied in the changed meter of this line, as if love has transformed both the poem and the speaker.

LINES 12-13

then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think

The dash in the middle of line 12 is the poem's most prominent use of caesura. As noted previously, the disruptive break in the line serves to shorten the third quatrain on love. However, the rupture also serves as a formal representation of what happens in these lines. That is, the speaker finally resolves the "When"

clauses built up throughout the poem, explaining that when he or she has fears of dying too early, the speaker feels as though "on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone." Just as the speaker feels severed from the world and other people, so too does the caesura serve to sever the image of the speaker on the shore from the rest of the poem. This seems to suggest that the speaker's anxieties are especially disconnecting, creating a fissure between the speaker and the world that is epitomized in the fissure within line 12.

This sense of detachment is also furthered through the clear enjambment of line 12. The line breaks after "shore," causing the line itself to look and feel like a shoreline, an abrupt ending before which this is nothing but the vast, uncertain sea. This break emphasizes the speaker's sense of estrangement, contributing to the feeling that the speaker is separated from the world, just as the "shore" is separated from the subsequent line and the world that lies across the ocean.

Line 13 also relies on alliteration in the phrase "wide world." This doubling of /w/ sounds makes the wideness of the world especially noticeable, calling attention to its vastness and thus the speaker's sense of loneliness. Additionally, the subtle assonance of /o/ sounds in "shore," "world," and "alone" evoke an anguished cry or the sound of howling wind, contributing to an image of despair, desolation, and solitude.

Furthermore, the speaker uses hyperbole to describe the drastic feeling of his or her fears. That is, the speaker does not literally stand alone "on the shore / Of the wide world." However, the powerful image of a solitary figure on a seashore so big as to encompass the entire world makes the speaker's sense of loneliness feel especially potent.

Lastly, the meter of these lines also undergoes a shift, which contributes to the sense of disruption by altering the flow of the poem itself. Rather than iambic pentameter, as the majority of the poem uses, the phrase "Of the wide world" features either a pyrrhic then a spondee or two trochees, depending on how you read it:

Of the | wide world

or

Of the | wide world

In either case, the shift in meter furthers the captures the speaker's feeling of rupture, emphasizing the dramatic "wide[ness] of the world. If you read the phrase as two trochaic feet, the meter also expresses the sense of a falling-off or end-point embodied in a shoreline.

LINES 13-14

and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

As the speaker imagines being alone on the shore of the world, he or she ponders the reality that "love and fame to nothingness do sink." This is the speaker's first direct discussion of "fame," and it is notably connected to "love." Indeed, by centering the final image of the poem on "love and fame," the speaker reveals the ways in which it is not merely romantic love, but love for the speaker's poetry and work that the speaker truly craves.

This gives new meaning to the phrase "unreflecting love" in line 12. In other words, rather than simply lamenting the loss of the ability to love in death, the speaker reveals in the final lines that he or she laments the loss of the ability to *be* loved, to have love reflected. This complicates the speaker's poetic ambitions, as it suggests not only that the speaker wishes to achieve those ambitions, but that the speaker hopes to be *recognized* for them, to receive "love and fame."

However, in the face of death, the speaker ultimately accepts that "love and fame to nothingness do sink." This image resists a definitive reading. On the one hand, the speaker seems to realize that love and fame are impossible, since death will prevent them, or because even if attained they will sink into death like a ship into the sea. However, the speaker may also accept that death is inevitable, and that love and fame ultimately are "nothing," or do not matter. In this case, it seems the speaker may move beyond a fear of death and realize that he or she ought to write regardless of the possibility of achieving love or fame. Indeed, the final line returns to a perfect iambic pentameter, suggesting that the speaker has regained control of his poetic craft and has realized that perfection is possible even in the face of death.

SYMBOLS

THE SHORE

The shore embodies the isolation, disconnection, and uncertainty of death. On the shore, one is separated from the rest of the world by the vast sea. Indeed, the shore itself is an ending, the place where land runs out, a physical symbol for the end of life. Furthermore, when standing on the shore one beholds the ocean, a vast, mysterious body of water. This is much like standing at the end of life and looking toward the mysterious, impenetrable reality of death. As one sinks into the ocean, they sink into death, and the last moment of life thus occurs on the shoreline.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "on the shore / Of the wide world"

THE PEN

The pen symbolizes poetry and art. It is the tool used to write and to "trace" the beauty of the world that inspires the speaker, and thus to the speaker is a symbol of poetry and poetic ability itself. At first, the pen is related to a scythe or harvesting tool, suggesting it is capable of reaping the creative possibilities of the world. Later, the speaker describes "tracing" symbols in the night sky, now likening a pen to a drawing tool, creating a larger connecting between poetry and art in general. The act of poetry, symbolized in the use of a pen to "glean" the speaker's "brain" and "trace" the world's beauty, is the speaker's primary motivation in life, and thus the pen is his or her central tool.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "my pen"
- **Line 7:** "to trace"

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" begins with an extended metaphor that relates the act of harvesting to writing poetry. In lines 2-4, the speaker describes a fear of dying "Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain," and before "books ... Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain." In this case, the speaker implicitly aligns a "pen" with a tool capable of gleaning, or reaping, the grain from a harvest. Furthermore, the "pen" is gleaning the speaker's "teeming brain," which implies that the speaker's brain is the metaphorical farmland that the pen must harvest. In a more literal sense, this means the speaker feels that his or her imagination is full of thoughts that can be written down, presumably in the form of poetry. Thus, the speaker fears dying before reaping the crops of his or her poetic imagination.

The metaphor goes on to describe "high-pilèd books" that "[h]old like rich garners the full ripened grain." This internal simile that likens books to granaries or storehouses emphasizes the role of writing or poetry in the speaker's ambitions. It is not merely *dying* that the speaker fears, but being unable to harvest his or her imagination and store the yielded crops in books—in other words, being unable to create numerous works of poetry. The use of words like "rich" and "ripened" to describe this metaphor promotes the notion that the speaker's imagination is fertile and vivid. In sum, the metaphor of harvesting large volumes of "ripened grain" demonstrates the speaker's confidence as a poet.

The metaphor is especially complicated, however, in that it suggests that the speaker views his or her mind as fruitful while also positioning the speaker as the agent of his or her own harvesting. That is, the speaker is both the harvester of the various thoughts/poems in the speaker's mind *and* the thing being harvested. This seems to imply a self-sufficiency or individual capacity on the speaker's part, demonstrating that the speaker feels able to achieve his or her ambitions if only granted the time.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain, / Before high-pilèd books, in charactery, / Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;"

IMAGERY

The poem relies on vivid imagery throughout, sometimes serving to depict natural beauty, while at other times illustrating the speaker's sense of despair or foreboding.

The first two prominent images each describe natural phenomena. The first is the speaker's likening of his or her imagination to a field ready to be harvested. In lines 2-4, the speaker articulates a fear of dying before writing books that "[h]old like rich garners the full ripened grain" of his or her poetic imagination. This image of "full ripened grain" evokes ample fields of wheat, giving the speaker's poetic ambitions a sumptuous, indulgent, idyllic impression.

In the subsequent lines, the speaker goes on to describe looking into "the night's starred face" and seeing "huge cloudy symbols." The speaker hopes "to trace / [The] shadows" of these symbols. Thus, the speaker conjures both a vivid and abstract image of the night sky—full of stars but also like a human face—to express the profound poetic inspiration he or she finds in natural beauty. This imagery implies that nature is a wellspring of creativity for the speaker, and that part of poetry's main function seems to be translating this beauty into verse.

The last vibrant image of the poem, however, is far more melancholy. In lines 12 and 13, the speaker explains that fear of death make's the speaker feel as if "on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone." This haunting image of a solitary figure standing on a shoreline that is so vast as to encompass the "wide world" conveys the speaker's profound loneliness in the face of death. Furthermore, the image of a small figure in a massive landscape captures a feeling of meaningless or insubstantiality, foreshadowing the speaker's feeling that in death "love and fame to nothingness do sink." Lastly, a shoreline is also a threshold between land and sea, between the known and the great mystery of the ocean. Thus, the image of standing on the shore embodies the feeling of standing at the edge of life, looking toward the uncertainty of death.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;"
- **Lines 5-6:** "upon the night's starred face, / Huge cloudy symbols"
- **Line 8:** "Their shadows"
- **Lines 12-13:** "on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone,"

PERSONIFICATION

When the speaker talks about the night sky, he or she describes it as "the night's starred face." This likening of the sky to a human face serves several functions. First, it suggests a level of intimacy between the speaker and the sky, as if the speaker is capable of understanding the cosmos on a human, face-to-face level. This reading promotes the idea that the speaker's poetic capabilities are quite profound, able to bring the vast natural world to a human, sensible scale.

On the other hand, the likening of the night to a face seems to gesture toward lines 9-12, which describe the speaker looking "upon" his or her romantic love. Indeed, the speaker seems to view the natural beauty of the night as not unlike the physical beauty of his beloved, drawing a parallel between the speaker's poetic ambitions and his or her romantic ones. This connection implies that the speaker's ambitions are not purely poetic, but that part of his or her attachment to the world may stem from a wish to love and be loved, as well as to receive love and recognition for poetry itself.

Lastly, this relationship between the night's face and the face of the speaker's beloved furthers the notion that beauty, in all its forms, is the primary motivator for the speaker, and that poetry's primary duty is to translate the physical beauty of the world into writing.

The speaker also personifies the "magic hand of chance," suggesting that the "hand of chance" has a magic ability, as if fate is capable of manipulating the world like pieces on a chessboard and thereby transforming reality. This link gives chance or fate both a supernatural, "magic" ability, as well as a human, bodily one (it's embodied in having a "hand"). Thus, the speaker seems conflicted as to whether fate is a fantastical thing outside of human control, or whether fate itself *is* human and thus understandable.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "upon the night's starred face"
- **Line 8:** "the magic hand of chance"

ANAPHORA

The speaker of "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" frequently uses anaphora. In the case of this poem, clauses frequently begin with "when I," "before," or "never" formulation. For example, lines 1, 5, and 9 each begin with, "When I have fears," "When I behold," and "when I feel" respectively. These words are all connected by a thematic relation to the concept of time and loss. "When" refers to specific moments, suggesting that the speaker frequently considers his or her fears, while "before" indicates the speaker's fear of dying too soon and "never" indicates the speaker's fear of having no more time to experience certain things in life. This repetition thus emphasizes the role of time in the poem, indicating the speaker's sense of urgency by weaving time-related language throughout.

The anaphora also calls attention to slight shifts in phrasing as the poem progresses. That is, the speaker begins by saying, "When I have fears," which changes to "when I behold" and then "when I feel." This shift from fear to sight to emotion seems to indicate a shift in the speaker as the poem develops, from anxiety to poetic vision to pure feeling. Indeed, at first the speaker's "fears" seem directly correlated to his or her poetic vision and the possibility that this vision might not be achieved, but by line 9, the fears relate only to romantic love and do not even mention writing. The morphing of "when I" phrases thus seems to indicate the speaker's devolution from despair about poetry to despair about love, something so urgent and heartfelt that it may even consume the speaker's ambitions as a writer.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When I have fears"
- **Line 2:** "Before"
- **Line 3:** "Before"
- **Line 5:** "When I behold"
- **Line 9:** "And when I feel"
- **Line 10:** "never"
- **Line 11:** "Never"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker in "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" uses apostrophe to address his or her beloved, who is not literally present in the poem and thus unable to directly respond: "And when I feel, fair creature of an hour / That I shall never look upon thee more." Addressing an unnamed lover is particularly significant because up until this point the poem seems to have purely occurred in the speaker's mind without reference to any direct audience or other people.

Indeed, the lyric form of intense, first-person emotional expression may be subverted as the poem progresses from grand explorations of poetic ambitions to direct communication from the speaker to a lover. That is, while the first eight lines of the poem are devoted to the speaker's poetic goals and are completely self-referential, the introduction of a "thee" or "you" to which the speaker addresses the poem seems to switch the emphasis from the *speaker* to the speaker's relationship to *others*. Thus, the apostrophe reveals that the speaker's fear of

death does not come simply from concern over poetic accomplishment but also the loss of romantic love.

Furthermore, the use of second-person "thee" is the only indication of a context outside of the speaker's mind in the poem. While the majority of the poem could occur anywhere, in any setting, the speaker's worry over "never look[ing] upon thee more" implies that the poem is directed to someone, and that his or her beloved is the intended audience. In this case, love becomes the poem's central theme and the speaker's most urgent concern.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "And when I feel, fair creature of an hour, / That I shall never look upon thee more,"

HYPERBOLE

In the closing lines of "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be," the speaker uses hyperbole to describe his or her state of loneliness and despair. When the speaker has fears of dying, he or she explains that "on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone." This is in part another metaphor—the speaker does not *literally* stand alone on a shore—but also hyperbolic since the "wide world" does not have one singular shoreline nor is the speaker the only person in the entire world.

However, this exaggeration serves to demonstrate the speaker's feeling of immense solitude, conjuring an image of a lonely person standing on the largest shore imaginable. In the face of death, the speaker feels as alone as one in this scenario, facing the mysteries of death much as a figure standing on the shore confronts the mysteries of the vast, unknowable ocean.

Furthermore, the hyperbole of standing alone on "the shore / Of the wide world" emphasizes a sense of meaningless or insignificance. Being surrounded by expansive land and sea, totally alone, makes one feel tiny and even worthless, much as the speaker feels when confronted with the reality of death. Indeed, on this fictitious shoreline, the speaker feels the very notions of "love and fame" sinking to "nothingness," much as a person seems to sink to nothingness in a massive landscape, or sinks to nothingness in the uncertain ocean of death.

Interestingly, this notion of the death resembling being consumed by the natural world also complicates the prior discussions of nature in the poem. Whereas in earlier lines, the natural world is something beauty and a source of poetic inspiration, in the final lines it becomes an absorbing, even obliterating force that encapsulates the speaker's anxieties and the devastating reality of death.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "then on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone,"

ASSONANCE

The poem frequently relies on assonance, the most prominent example is /ee/ (or long /e/ and /ea/) sounds. These are most prevalent in lines 1-3, in words like "fears," "cease," "be," et cetera. This serves several functions. The repeating sounds create a musical quality that gives the poem a sense of masterful craft, as melodic as a song. This seems to bolster the speaker's descriptions of his or her poetic vision and ambitions, demonstrating a poetic capacity in the first few lines to indicate the speaker's strong sense of craft and abilities as a poet.

However, the long /e/ sound also notably first appears in the word "fears." This means that the central vowel sound of "fear" echoes throughout the ensuing lines, and even returns later, such as in line 9 ("feel," "creature"). This operates as a formal demonstration of the prevalence of fear in the speaker's life: just as it permeates the speaker's everyday thoughts and actions, so too does it permeate the sounds of the poem.

One other notable use of assonance occurs in lines 12 and 13, with the long /o/ sound in "shore," "world," and "alone" (complemented by the recurrent short /o/ or /u/ sound in "of" and "love"). The long /o/ sound evokes a howl or moan of despair, as well as the sound of blowing wind on a barren beach. This promotes the sense of loneliness and isolation felt by the speaker, while also contributing to the illustration of "the shore / Of the wide world" by adding a sonic element to the visual description. Furthermore, the /o/ sound makes the link between "shore," "world," and "alone" especially felt, and the three words by themselves seem to evoke all the speaker means: the speaker feels as alone as if they were at the edge of the world.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ea," "ea," "e"
- **Line 2:** "e," "ea," "ee"
- **Line 3:** "e," "y"
- **Line 8:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 9:** "ee," "ea"
- **Line 10:** "ee"
- **Line 11:** "i," "i," "y"
- **Line 12:** "O," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 13:** "O," "i," "o," "l," "o," "i"
- **Line 14:** "i," "o," "o"

ALLITERATION

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" frequently features alliteration. Like assonance, the poem's use of alliteration serves partially to give the poem a sense of musical sophistication and highly perfected craft. This serves as a formal representation of the speaker's abilities as a poet, about which the speaker seems very confident.

Some instances of alliteration also contribute to the poem's

thematic explorations. For instance, in line 9 the speaker says, "When I feel, fair creature," when addressing his or her beloved. This repeating /f/ sound creates a link between the words "feel" and "fair," emphasizing on one hand the emotional nature of the speaker's love, while on the other the fact that the speaker's love in large part stems from the beloved's beauty or "fairness." Thus, like that of the natural world, beauty itself seems to be of utmost concern to the speaker, an attribute that gives the speaker poetic inspiration and also moves the speaker to intense feelings of love.

Another significant use of alliteration occurs in line 13, with the phrase "wide world." This double /w/ sound helps illustrate the expansive quality of the world and the speaker's feeling of loneliness, making the word "world" feel expanded by the recurrence of its /w/ sound in the word "wide." Furthermore, /w/ sounds often evoke whooshing wind or breaking waves, adding a sonic aspect to the speaker's descriptions of a desolate shoreline.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "b"
- **Line 2:** "B," "b"
- **Line 3:** "B," "b"
- **Line 4:** "r," "g," "r," "g"
- **Line 6:** "H," "h"
- **Line 7:** "th," "th"
- **Line 9:** "f," "f"
- **Line 12:** "th," "th"
- **Line 13:** "th," "w," "w"

ENJAMBMENT

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" features several prominent examples of enjambment—in fact, you could argue that nearly the entire poem is enjambed, which is how we've approached it here. Recall that enjambment need not always align with a lack of punctuation: in this poem, the speaker's sense of urgency causes thoughts and sentences to spill over from one line to the next as the verse cascades downwards towards the inevitable "ceasing to be." (Line 2 is also arguably enjambed, given the continuation of the speaker's listing of anxieties; we've not marked it as such, as in our read there is a natural pause at the end of line 2 signaling a partial completion of the thought, a beat before adding yet another fear to the list.)

The first enjambment occurs in the first line: "When I have fears that I may cease to be." This line, while an incomplete clause, seems able to stand on its own, indicating merely that the speaker has fears of dying. However, after "be," the line breaks and continues on in line 2 with, "Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain." Thus, it is not merely *death* that the speaker fears, but death *before* the speaker has accomplished certain poetic goals. This enjambment complicates the speaker's fear of death by pushing the reader onto the next line in order to reveal that death alone is not the speaker's primary cause for concern; rather, death before reaching specific goals is the root of the speaker's fear. This thus also draws immediate attention to the speaker's interests as a writer, signaling the importance poetry will play in the speaker's description of their anxieties throughout the poem.

As previously noted, the enjambment in line 7 is also highly evocative: the lack of pause between "trace" and "their shadows" subtly reflects the speaker's urgency, as he or she rushes to capture those shadows—that is, to write poetry—before time runs out.

The most remarkable use of enjambment, however, occurs between lines 12 and 13: "the on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone." The line-break after "shore" creates a formal representation of the content: the word cuts off at the edge of the line, much like land cuts off at a coastline. Indeed, the break gives the word "shore" an especially precipitous quality, generating a feeling of standing at the division between land and sea just as the line is divided in the middle of the sentence. Furthermore, the word "shore" stands alone at the end of the line, separated from the rest of its description, just as the speaker feels as though they stand "alone" at the edge of the "wide world."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "be / Before"
- **Lines 3-4:** "charactery, / Hold"
- **Lines 5-6:** "face, / Huge"
- **Lines 7-8:** "trace / Their"
- **Lines 9-10:** "hour, / That"
- **Lines 11-12:** "power / Of"
- **Lines 12-13:** "shore / Of "
- **Lines 13-14:** "think / Till"

CAESURA

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" makes occasional use of caesura. These breaks call attention to certain words and turns of phrase. For example, in line 9, the comma between "feel" and "fair" makes the speaker's emotion especially visible, causing the word "feel" to stand out much as it might if it were at the end of a line. Additionally, the pause itself generates a sort of hesitation or breath when read aloud, resembling a meditative or romantic sigh. In other words, the pause in the meter causes the reader to experience the speaker's emotion physically, as if exhaling in a moment of deep affection.

One of the most salient examples of caesura occurs in line 12, with "love—then." This division of line 12 has both a formal and thematic function. Formally, it interrupts the quatrain of lines 9-12, causing the speaker's rumination on love to be cut short.

This gives the subject of love a feeling of urgency and direness, as time seems to run out both for the speaker and the poem itself.

Additionally, this caesura creates a disruptive sensation that mirrors the notion of standing "on the shore / Of the wide world." In other words, just as a shoreline is a rupture between land and sea, and as the end of life is a rupture between life and death, so does the division of line 12 stand as a rupture between what the speaker fears losing in life and the reality that he or she stands alone in the face of inevitable death. Like the speaker, the caesura causes the reader to feel severed from life, to feel the violent disconnection that death causes.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "books, in"
- **Line 5:** "behold, upon"
- **Line 9:** "feel, fair"
- **Line 12:** "love—then"
- **Line 13:** "alone, and"

VOCABULARY

Cease (Line 1) - To bring or come to an end. In this case, the speaker worries about life coming to an end.

Gleaned (Line 2) - To gather leftover grain or other produce after a harvest. The speaker uses metaphor to suggest that his or her pen will glean thoughts like a farmer would gather grain during a harvest. "Glean" can also mean to gather gradually or extract information from something, which also advances the idea that the speaker seeks to extract or gather material for poetry.

Teeming (Line 2) - To be full or swarming with something. In the poem, the speaker uses "teeming" to describe his or her fruitful imagination, which is brimming with thoughts to be turned into poetry.

High-pilèd (Line 3) - The accent mark over "pilèd" means to read the word "piled" with a stress on the second syllable. Thus, out loud the word would sound like:

pi-led.

The phrase "high-pilèd" thus merely means high-piled, or in the case of the poem a tall stack of books.

Charactery (Line 3) - The expression of thought by characters; or in other words, thoughts expressed through written text. In the poem, the speaker describes stacks of books filled with the text of his or her thoughts, presumably in the form of poems.

Garners (Line 4) - An archaic term for a granary or storehouse of grain.

High romance (Line 6) - On the one hand, "high romance" could mean a lofty or elevated love; that is, a love that transcends human boundaries. However, "high romance" may also refer to "romance" tales, or medieval narratives of chivalric knights, usually told in the form of long, metered poems. In the latter case, the speaker envisions a monumental poetic work in the night sky.

Thee (Line 10) - An archaic form of the word "you." The line thus reads: "That I shall never look upon [you] more," referring to the speaker's beloved.

Relish (Line 11) - Great enjoyment. The speaker laments being unable to enjoy love.

Faery (Line 11) - An archaic spelling of the word "fairy." The speaker describes love as having a "faery power," or supernatural or fantastical power.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" is a Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet—a 14-line poem that typically has a rhyme scheme, ten-syllables lines, and a volta (or "turn"), which is a dramatic shift in thought or emotion. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the volta always comes after the twelfth line. Additionally, the first twelve lines of a Shakespearean sonnet are typically divided into three quatrains of distinct subject matter, ending with a rhyming couplet.

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" follows many of these formal rules, with a few notable exceptions. As is usual for a Shakespearean sonnet, the poem is primarily written in iambic pentameter. It also has three distinct quatrains: lines 1-4 centered on the harvest metaphor, lines 5-8 on the contemplation of the night sky, and lines 9-12 on love. However, the form is slightly disrupted in the third quatrain, which ends halfway through line 12 rather than at the end. This shortening of the third quatrain gives the lines on love a particular urgency, suggesting that time is running out both for the speaker's love and for the poem. Thus, the final couplet is actually two and a half lines, instead of two.

This disruption also causes the volta to occur half a line early, in line 12 instead of 13. The entire poem constructs a number of unfinished "When" clauses, which finally resolve with, "Then on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone." Thus, though the speaker has lofty ambitions of creating poetry and relishing in love, the speaker's fears are ultimately isolating, and he or she accepts in the poem's final lines the inevitability of death. The fact that the volta spills into line 12 may serve to further the powerful sway death holds over the speaker, causing him or her to lose control of formal perfection.

METER

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" is written primarily in iambic pentameter, or ten-syllable lines with five beats of unstressed-stressed syllables. For example, take line 1:

When I | have | fears | that I | may cease | to be

This meter gives the poem a sense of control and perfection. The speaker, indeed, spends large portions of the poem discussing poetic ambitions and grand abilities, and the careful metrical craft seems to promote the idea that the speaker is a very capable poet.

There are notable shifts in the meter, however. The first occurs in line 4:

Hold like | rich garn- | ers the | full rip | ened grain;

The opening trochee (stressed-unstressed) followed by a spondee (stressed-stressed) creates an immediate sense of confidence. This line actually has six stresses instead of five, reflecting the speaker's assuredness in just how rich and full his or her mind is with poetry.

Another important change happens in line 11, when the first foot switches from an iamb to a dactyl (stressed-unstressed-unstressed) (or perhaps a trochee, depending on how you read it). This line also has an extra syllable that creates a feminine (unstressed) ending. We can scan it as dactyl, trochee, iamb, iamb:

Never have | relish in | the faer- | y power

Or trochee, iamb, pyrrhic (unstressed-unstressed), iamb, iamb:

Never | have rel- | ish in | the faer- | y power

In any case, this flipping of the stresses may serve to be a metrical example of the "faery power" of love, or its transformative ability. Just as it has power of the speaker, so too does it have power over the meter, causing it to break its pattern.

Another notable shift in meter occurs in line 13, when the first two feet of the line can be read as another pyrrhic followed by a spondee:

Of the | wide world

This altered metered also places emphasis on the "wide" nature of the world, doubling the feeling of vastness that surrounds that speaker and thus makes him or her feel especially alone in the face of death. Lastly, this altered meter suggests the speaker is slightly losing control of his or her craft and mastery of poetry in the face of death.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme follows the typical scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

In this scheme, each quatrain has distinct rhymes that do not carry into subsequent quatrains, and the final couplet stands on its own as a double rhyme. This creates a sense of internal unity between quatrains, as the lines 1-4 on harvesting, for example, are unified by distinct rhymes, while the next section on the night sky in lines 5-8 has new rhymes.

Additionally, the rhymes throughout "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" are always perfect (e.g., "brain" / "grain" , "face" / "trace"), adding to a sense of formal mastery in the poem. This contributes to the sense that the speaker is a capable poet who is also well-versed in poetic traditions.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is anonymous and genderless, though critics and historians often assume the speaker to be Keats himself, who struggled with a fear of death and did, ultimately, die young. Indeed, the speaker of the poem is apparently a poet, who laments dying before achieving certain poetic goals. The speaker seems to be confident in his or her poetic abilities, believing that, if granted time, the speaker will accomplish many creative goals. The speaker is also apparently in love, as he or she addresses an unnamed lover. Furthermore, the speaker seems to be young, as he or she seems to see a long life of poetic accomplishment ahead that may be truncated by death.

As the poem progresses the speaker's poetic ambitions and wish for love gain new implications, as the speaker reveals it is not merely the acts of writing and loving that motivates him or her, but the reception of "love and fame," or recognition, for the speaker's work. Thus, we come to see the speaker's ambition is partially motivated by a wish for celebrity, which could be interpreted as more superficial or vain than the lofty goals articulated in earlier lines.

SETTING

The setting of the poem is unclear. In fact, the poem could be said to exist purely in the speaker's mind. Although the speaker describes the natural world, and expresses the feeling of standing alone on the shore in the end, the speaker does not literally occupy these places, but rather considers them in his or her mind. Thus, the entire poem could be read as the speaker's thought process, making the actual setting vague and the poem's themes applicable to a variety of circumstances.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats was one of the central voices of the British Romanticism, a branch of a school of literature that emerged in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and carried through the first half of the 19th. Romanticism rejected the notions of rationalism and reason that had been dominant since the Enlightenment, and instead focused on emotion and subjectivity. This was evident especially in the proliferation of lyric poetry, a form of generally short, first-person expressions of intense emotion and thoughts. Some important purveyors of Romantic lyric poetry included Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Germany and Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Wordsworth in England. The latter especially helped promote the revival of the sonnet in England, a form that Keats frequently used.

"When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" thus embodied many of these trends: a lyric sonnet, it expresses a speaker's profound fear of death and loss of love. The poem is strongly self-conscious and subjective as well as intensely felt, serving primarily to transmit the speaker's anxieties and despairs over his or her own death.

Beyond the Romantic era, however, Keats was also massively influenced by William Shakespeare. Indeed, "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" is written in a Shakespearean sonnet form, and critics have often drawn connections between it and Shakespeare's sonnets 60 and 64, each of which deals with issues of time, death, and loss. While Keats was clearly influenced by and may have been paying homage to Shakespeare, there may be an even larger reason Keats chose this form: by writing a Shakespearean sonnet about having grand poetic ambitions, Keats may have actually been aligning himself with Shakespeare, suggesting that, if granted the time, he would be able to write poems as magnificently and legendary as Shakespeare himself.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Keats lived during the peak of the Industrial Revolution in England, when factors like poverty and urbanization were contributing to mass health crises. In particular, the conditions of urban life in England were prime for the spread of tuberculosis. According to the BMJ, by the early 19th century one in four deaths in England were due to TB.

Keats' mother died of TB when he was young, and his brother later died of the same cause. At the time, people believed TB was genetic and not a contagious disease (this wasn't discovered until 1882), so Keats grew up with a profound fear of TB and awareness that he was likely to die of it in a matter of time, just like his family members. This fear suffuses "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be," since Keats not only feared dying young but seemed to know that it would happen. Tragically, he was right: he died of TB at the young age of 25.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Reading of "When I have Fears" — A dramatic reading of "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj4nhSx3McM)
- Keats's Encyclopedia Entry — An Encyclopedia.com entry on "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be." (https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/when-i-have-fears-i-may-cease-be#H)
- Academic Analysis of "When I have Fears" — A short exploration of "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" from CUNY Brooklyn. (http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/fear.html)
- Keats's Love Letters — Selected love letters from Keats to Fanny Brawne, who many believe is the "fair creature" in the poem. (https://poets.org/text/selected-love-letters-fanny-brawne)
- Discussion of "When I have Fears" — A video from Providence eLearning discussing the background and giving an analysis of Keats's poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djhFhfAiyh0)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- To Autumn

HOW TO CITE

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