

Course: English Literature
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“When I have Fears” 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.

Summary:

This poem explores the themes of mortality, love, and the fear of not achieving artistic or personal fulfillment before an untimely death. In the three quatrains and a final couplet, Keats reflects on his anxieties about the brevity of life and the potential limitations on his creative and romantic aspirations. He expresses a fear of dying before he can fully realize his poetic potential, experience the beauty of nature, and find lasting love. Ultimately, the poem reflects the tension between the ephemeral nature of life and the enduring desires of the human heart.

Analysis:

The first stanza opens with a metaphor of harvesting introduced in the second line "Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain". Here, the speaker sees his mind as a fertile field full of knowledge that he wishes to harvest with his pen before death. The metaphor extends in the following line "Before high-piled books, in character, Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain." Here, the speaker envisions his books as storehouses of knowledge, likening them to granaries full of ripened grain which represents fresh knowledge.

The second Stanza expresses the poet's fears of not being able to trace the "high romance" he perceives from the symbols of love such as the stars that are presented in the sky at night. In other words, the last lines convey the fear that the speaker may not live long enough to fulfill his creative potential: "And think that I may never live to trace Their shadows with the magic hand of chance." The speaker worries that he may not have the opportunity to translate the lofty and inspiring symbols he sees into his own creative work.

In the third stanza, the speaker continues to express his fear of death. The speaker here hints at the idea of separation from his beloved. He goes on to express his fear of not having time to look at the ephemeral beauty of his beloved that he refers to as "fair creature of an hour". The line "never have relish in the faery power of unreflecting love" suggests his deep regret towards not having time to enjoy an unbroken experience of love. The stanza concludes with the phrase "then on the shore," leaving the reader in suspense as to what will happen on the shore. The

mention of « the shore » may symbolize a boundary or a threshold, suggesting a moment of decision or realization.

The couplet in this poem starts earlier in final line of the third stanza with "then on the shore". Here, the speaker realizes that the concepts of love and fame are ephemeral in the face of mortality.