

Sonnet analysis –
"when i have fears
that i may cease to
be"



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John Keats' sonnet "When I have Fears that I may Cease to Be," written in 1818 when the poet was twenty-three years old, deals with the young man's fears that he will not live long enough to accomplish what he wants to in life. He is afraid that his artistic and poetic potential will not be fulfilled, and that his love will be cut short. Based on Keats' letters and his biography, we can assume that the speaker is indeed Keats himself. Interestingly, the poem was written before Keats contracted tuberculosis, from which he would die a mere three years after the poem was written, adding an eerie, portentous quality to the sonnet. However, it is understandable that he would have fears of an untimely death. His mother had died of the disease a few years earlier, and his younger brother was currently suffering from it. "When I have Fears" is in many ways typical of Keats' work. He was a master of the sonnet form, and the poem is full of sensitive passion and the romantic imagery for which he is famous. Throughout the poem Keats uses a variety of poetic elements, including form and metrics, to help convey his thoughts and to emphasize his imagery. The poem takes the form of a Shakespearian sonnet, and rather strictly adheres to that structure's template. The lines follow the standard ababcbdefefgg rhyme scheme, and, making the rhymes as simple as possible, they are all perfect and masculine. Each rhyme is clearly differentiated from the others as well. Also in keeping with the definition of the form, the poem is written in iambic pentameter. All the lines have a neat ten syllables, and six of them are perfectly iambic. The remaining eight lines have generally few foot substitutions, with occasional trochees and spondees appearing. The form of the Shakespearian sonnet is so ideally suited for this poem that Keats must have seen little need to buck against it. In fact, doing so would probably undermine the perfect match of the sonnet's form with his <https://assignbuster.com/sonnet-analysis-when-i-have-fears-that-i-may-cease-to-be/>

content. In the words of Paul Fussel, "...the sonnet as a form tends to imply a particular, highly personal, usually somewhat puzzled or worshipful attitude toward experience," which is exactly what Keats conveys in this poem.

Continuing to follow the mold of the Shakespearian sonnet, "When I have Fears" is set up as a thought or long sentence that is not completed until the final lines of the poem. Each quatrain starts with the word "when" and the introduction of an elaborate circumstance, but we do not find out what happens when these things occur until the middle of the twelfth line, when the completion of the idea is thrust upon us, signaled by the word "then," which clearly marks the turn in the sonnet. Each quatrain introduces a slightly different idea, but the ideas are all related, and all tie into the fear of an untimely death. The final two and a half lines after the turn are different, as discussed above. However, under the powerful influence of the Petrarchan sonnet, "When I have Fears" slightly veers away from the true Shakespearian form. Although the ideas of the three quatrains all tie into the central idea, there is a clear distinction between the interconnected ideas presented in the octave - that he will not be able to write all he wants in his lifetime - and the separate fear expressed in the third quatrain - that his love will be cut short. This causes the feeling of a slight shift between the octave and the sestet, which is where the turn would be expected in a Petrarchan sonnet. Perhaps the leaning away from the Shakespearian sonnet occurs because sonnets of that form tend to have quick, often witty resolutions at the end, whereas Petrarchan sonnets, with more lines to slowly ease and develop the conclusion of the poem, tend to have endings that are more emotional and in depth. Supporting this notion even further, Keats found it necessary to elongate his couplet by an extra half line. With the <https://assignbuster.com/sonnet-analysis-when-i-have-fears-that-i-may-cease-to-be/>

slight melding of these two sonnet forms, Keats created a perfect, tailored vehicle for the expression of his ideas. The octave's two quatrains discuss his fear that he will not reach his poetic potential - specifically that he will not be able to write all he wants or express all he can before he dies. This idea is broken into two main images and metaphors, one for each quatrain. The poem opens with imagery of a bountiful harvest. Keats likens the unreaped bounty to himself, saying that he (his mind and emotion, his "teeming brain" (12)) is very full and fertile. He fears he will not be able to fully harvest (by writing poetry) all of his metaphorical grain in his lifetime: "Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain, / Before high-piléd books, in charactery, / Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;" (2-4). In the second quatrain, the idea expressed is that of the nearly endless supply of beauty in nature and Keats' desire to document and reflect it (to "trace" (7) it). He recognizes both the simple, clear beauty of the natural world in "shadows" (8) and "the night's starr'd face" (5), as well as a deeper, more hidden and mysterious beauty that is still partially obscured and will take time - which he may not have - to fully understand and express. He recognizes this masked beauty as "Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance" (6). It is not clear whether he means the "high romance" to refer to the potential, unwritten poetry or if it exists in nature by itself, while the unnecessary figure of John Keats stands idly by. Either way, it is clear that something is out there, untapped. The first two quatrains work together to give the impression that there is so much raw material in the world that, to continue the metaphor, as long as Keats lived his field need never be fallow. In the third quatrain, perhaps due in part to the Petrarchan influence discussed earlier, the idea shifts slightly to voice another element of Keats' concern that his life will be cut short. He now

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expresses the fear that he will lose his beloved. Just as he fears that his life will not be allowed to run its full course, he does not allow the quatrain to run its expected measure: it is only three and a half lines long. He emphasizes the abrupt cut by the use of a hyphen, conveying a sense of suddenness and even urgency that parallels his feelings: " Never have relish in the faery power / Of unreflecting love; - then on the shore" (11-12). The comparative shortness of this quatrain can have other implications as well. It can be interpreted to mean that love is short and fleeting, and can end at any minute. Calling his beloved " fair creature of an hour" (9) supports this notion. Additionally, Keats devotes more than twice as many lines to discussing his desire to write poetry than his unwillingness to let go of love, perhaps making a qualitative judgment about the two. After the three quatrains, " then" in the middle of line twelve marks a clear turn in the poem and indicates that the reader will finally find out what happens " when" all the previous thoughts occur to the poet. Accordingly, the final two and a half lines do just that. When he has such thoughts, he " stand[s] alone, and think[s]" (13), " Till love and fame to nothingness do sink" (14). That is, he feels himself put into perspective by the " wide world" (13), and feels that he is nothing, and everything is insignificant and meaningless - including his fear of not writing all he can and his thwarted desire to achieve fame and lasting love. In addition to Keats' themes of his fear of dying before his full potential is reached and of the fleeting nature of love, an interesting dichotomy between thought and feeling is explored. It is clear that Keats wants to feel and not to think. This is a bit paradoxical, since the action of writing a poem necessitates thinking (even if it is thinking about feeling).

Things that Keats states explicitly as thoughts are generally negative, often <https://assignbuster.com/sonnet-analysis-when-i-have-fears-that-i-may-cease-to-be/>

specifically referencing death (he " think[s] that [he] may never live to trace" (7)), and at the end of the poem he " stand[s] alone and think[s]2" (13), which brings on a very sad, empty feeling. Keats exalts feeling over thought. He yearns for " unreflecting love" (12). That is, love without thought. He says that he might " Never have relish" (11) in such love, implying that not only will he not experience it in the future if his life is abbreviated, but that he has not yet had it. He seems to be saying that he is not capable of stopping thought, and simply feeling, even though he would like to. Other things related to feelings as opposed to thoughts are also positive. When he " beholds" (5) nature, he is awed and inspired by it. He is not thinking about it, but simply letting the feelings it arouses wash over him. "[W]hen I feel... / That I shall never look upon thee more" (9-10) may seem to be an exception to this idea, associating feeling with something negative, but in fact it's not. He is simply using a misnomer, calling the thought of never looking upon his beloved a feeling. One final idea expressed in the poem is Keats' desire to strive for and to believe in idealistic fantasies, even though he knows that they are not realities. In the end he comes to terms with the almost cruelly indifferent, depressing world. He alludes to these fantasies when he calls writing poetry " the magic hand of chance" (8), and when he mentions the " faery power" (11) of love (in this case also playing into the idea that love is only a myth). Keats uses many poetic elements to emphasize these themes and to help convey his meanings and images. In addition to making use of essentials like meter, Keats also employs many smaller techniques throughout the poem. The repetition of the word " when" at the beginning of each quatrain and the parallel structure of the of the first lines of the first two quatrains serves to repeatedly draw attention to the focus on time, and <https://assignbuster.com/sonnet-analysis-when-i-have-fears-that-i-may-cease-to-be/>

keeps bringing the reader back into the immediate moment. Similarly, the parallelism and repetition of the word " before" in lines two and three does the same thing on a smaller scale. Not exact repetition, but the use of similar sounding words is also found. The similarity of the words " fair" (9) and " faery" (11) links the two ideas, perhaps implying that love (which " fair creature" indicates by metonymy) is only " faery" (a magical illusion). Keats uses alliteration in many other places as well. The hard " g" sound is repeated in the first quatrain with the words " glean'd" (2), " garner" (4), and " grain" (4). All of these words also carry stress. The repetition of the clear, full sound, in addition to the fact that the words are all associated with images of plentiful things, enhances the image of bountiful fields. Similarly, the " r" sound is repeated in this quatrain. It is found in the words " brain" (2), and " character" (3), as well as many times in line four, " Hold like rich garner the full ripen'd grain." Again, all of the " r" sounds are stressed. When spoken, the sound is naturally heavy and a bit drawn out, creating a feeling of indelibility, which, after all, is what Keats, would like himself and his work to be. More alliteration is found in line thirteen with the words " wide world." In this case the sound is especially pertinent to the image: when spoken, the " w" sound actually makes the mouth wide, and the sound itself seems to have a wide feel. The juxtaposition of " wide world" with " I stand alone" (both line 13) emphasizes the contrast between the two images. Keats does other little things like this that enhance the poem's imagery. The apostrophes in the words " night's starr'd" (5) form a concrete image, as they actually look like stars perched above the words. The fact that the apostrophe in " starred" is unnecessary (even if it was written " starred," the pronunciation would be the same) lends credence to the idea that Keats was

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cognizant of the image the apostrophes create. Keats' simile that books hold grain "like rich garner" (4) works within the harvest metaphor to self-consciously bring attention to the fact that it is a metaphor and a poem, maintaining no pretense of reality. He acknowledges that he is like a full field of grain, he does not try to pass himself off as one. This picks up on the theme of the disconnection between magic, fantasy, poetry, and cold reality. Then, in the same breath, he jumps back into the metaphor by saying that his poetry is not like, but is "full ripen'd grain" (4), as he strives to regain the fantasy. The last main poetic element that Keats uses in this sonnet is meter. As mentioned earlier, the meter remains rather regular throughout the poem. It is iambic pentameter, as expected in a traditional sonnet, and about half of the lines have slight variations. Since the meter of most of the poem is so regular, the slight alterations that occur seem especially important. Some of the substitutions serve specific, clear purposes in addition to simply making the rhythm of the poem interesting and not overly "sing-song" or predictable. Small words and articles throughout the poem that should be stressed according to strict iambic pentameter often are not. Some examples of these little, unstressed words are "the" (4), "of" (6), and "with" (8). Often times there are two of them in a row, like "with the" (8), and "in the" (11). The lack of an expected stress on an insignificant word allows for the stresses on the more important words to carry more weight and receive more notice. Keats inserts extra stresses in a number of places. In line three, the words "high-piléd" are both stressed, creating a spondee in the place of an iamb. The two stresses work directly with the meaning and imagery of those two words, creating a building-up feeling. It almost seems like there are three stresses in a row, since the reader nearly skips over the <https://assignbuster.com/sonnet-analysis-when-i-have-fears-that-i-may-cease-to-be/>

unstressed second syllable of "piled" to go straight to the more substantial, stressed word, "books." This third stress adds to the feeling even more, making it really feel like a big pile is being built. The word "starr'd" (5) also carries an irregular stress. Just like the concrete imagery of the apostrophes in this phrase, the three stressed words in a row, "night's starr'd face," seem almost like stars - perhaps Orion's belt, if that's not stretching it too far - which adds to the imagery. The word "Huge" in line six carries a stress for rather obvious reasons. It would be counterintuitive for a word meaning something large and grand to be unstressed. Also, the previous line starts with the word "Behold," but does not say what to behold (the "Huge cloudy symbols") until the next line. After the anticipation and excitement created by this delay and enjambment, the declaration of the object is surely worthy of a stress. The unexpected stress on the word "fair" in line nine serves to emphasize the alliteration with the word that comes before it ("feel"), again tying feeling together with positive, "fair" things. Additionally, the stress is important because it marks a change in the poem: he is now addressing someone, the "fair creature of an hour" (9), even if it is just for a couple of lines. "Never" in line eleven forms a trochee for emphasis instead of an iamb. "Never" is an extremely important word, since the whole idea is that he won't achieve the lofty goals and happy love that he desires. Lastly, "wide" and "world" in line thirteen are both stressed, as is necessary in order to highlight the alliteration and convey the "wide" feeling of the words. Throughout "When I have Fears that I may Cease to Be," Keats employs a plethora of poetic elements to convey his meanings and enhance his imagery. Form and metrics are paramount among these, as Keats

masterfully adheres to and abstracts from the sonnet form in order to reap all of its potential.