Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be

by John Keats

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5

Keats wrote the sonnet in January 1818; it was published in 1848, after his death. He had trained as a doctor and had nursed his mother through tuberculosis; he died of the same disease in 1821, at 25. It is a Shakespearean sonnet (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG) made of one long sentence, built on three "When" clauses.

THE POEM

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charact'ry,
Hold like full garners the full-ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd 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.

VOCABULARY

cease — stop, come to an end

glean'd — gathered up, like leftover grain after a harvest

teeming — overflowing, crowded

charact'ry — writing, printed letters

garners — granaries, storehouses for grain

romance — here, a grand tale of adventure or love

relish — enjoyment

unreflecting — not thinking, spontaneous

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What three fears does the speaker describe, one in each quatrain?

2. Explain the harvest metaphor in lines 1–4. What is his brain compared to?

3. What does he see in the night sky, and what does he wish he could do with it?

4. Who is the "fair creature of an hour," and what does he fear about her?

5. Where does the speaker stand at the end, and what happens to "Love and Fame"?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a poem of 10–14 lines that begins "When I have fears…" or "When I have hopes…" and lists three things you want to do in your life.

When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be — Answer Key

1. Dying before he writes all his poems; never tracing the "Huge cloudy symbols" of the night sky into poetry; never seeing his love again or enjoying love's "faery power."
2. His mind is a field full of ripe grain ("teeming brain"), and his books are "full garners" storing the harvest; he fears death before the harvest is gathered.
3. "Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance" in the stars; he wishes he could "trace / Their shadows" in his writing.
4. A woman he loves (often thought to be someone he saw briefly); he fears "That I shall never look upon thee more."
5. "on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone," thinking until "Love and Fame to nothingness do sink": compared with death, they seem to matter little.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/when-i-have-fears-that-i-may-cease-to-be-john-keats/