
©2011 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

When I Have Fears

The Poem

In the sonnet “When I Have Fears,” John Keats gives expression to his fear that his young life may be cut off before he has a chance to experience the love of a woman and to develop and complete his calling as a poet. These feelings leave him with a forsaken sense of the vanity of love and fame. The very first line, “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” captures the reader’s attention at once, for the fear of premature death is universal. Especially when the potential of a richly productive and rewarding life is anticipated so intensely, the threat to its realization is all the more dispiriting.

The first quatrain focuses on the fear that early death will cut off the poet’s life of writing. His brain is teeming with subjects, ideas, and inspirations for his work, enough to fill the bookshelf above his writing desk as a legacy of his art. It is a typical human emotion to want time for the ripening and harvesting of one’s gifts. Death at a young age would preclude one’s lasting significance.

Focus in the second quatrain is related to the first: the fear that early death will kill the imagination, the essential resource of his writing life, before it has had a chance to mature. The poet looks at nature, at the stars and clouds as vital sources of romantic inspiration. He thinks of not living long enough to exercise and develop his imagination as an artist, that would equip him to render human experience deeply imagined and felt.

The third quatrain considers the death of romantic love. In this quatrain the poet expands his thoughts from himself and his potential fame as artist to his desire for love. It is not just the quest for beauty and inspiration in nature, but also his wished-for relationship with a beautiful young woman, that is threatened by death. Not to have the chance to fulfill oneself as an artist or to experience human intimacy as a lover is to feel one’s humanity fade into insignificance.

The concluding couplet expresses that sensibility of inevitability: a recognition of universal mutability. Human needs and aspirations confront mortality. The poet’s fear that his life may soon cease and with it the magic moments of “high romance” that inspired him both as poet and as lover leaves him defeated. He sees himself as exiled, cut off from all human endeavor and love, a lone figure on a forsaken shore, lost in thought. The inspired, feeling poet and lover has been diminished into a thinker, assaulted by fears that transform “Love,” “Fame,” and even self to “nothingness.”

Forms and Devices

Keats’s studied reading of William Shakespeare, especially of the songs and sonnets, inspired him to pursue the perfection of his own poetic skills, including the mastery of the sonnet form as a supreme challenge to his artistry as poet and his mastery of its technical demands. This was his first but impressively successful attempt at a Shakespearean sonnet, with its four divisions of three quatrains, each with a rhyme scheme of its own and a rhymed concluding couplet.

The three quatrains of this sonnet are perfectly parallel, shaped as they are by their rhetorical and grammatical structure. Each refers to a different aspect of the poet's confrontation with his own mortality, introduced by the subordinating conjunction "When": "When I have fears," "When I behold," "And when I feel." In characteristic Shakespearean-sonnet fashion, these three quatrains lead up to the "then" of the last two lines: "then on the shore." Here the main clause of the poem counterbalances the three subordinating ones that precede it by expanding the personal pain to a universal lament. The solemn tone and heavy funereal beat of the couplet underscore the poet's sense of desolation.

That sense of desolation is wrought especially through the cumulative effect of the poet's choice of imagery and analogy. In the first quatrain, his choice of words such as "glean'd," "garners," and "full-ripen'd grain" obviously refers to harvest. Thus, the growth of his poetic genius is like the growing seasons that lead up to harvest time. The seasons are needed for poetic powers to grow and for the "pen" to glean such growth into "books," as granaries store the harvested grain. Hence, the poet's fear that there may be no time for developing his gifts, no time to produce what he is capable of, is like the farmer's fear that what has been sown will never come to fruition—a terrible sense of dread that something of great value will be lost.

Reference to nature's fecundity in the first quatrain shifts to nature's "high romance" in the second. Nature becomes not a source of sustenance but of inspiration. The poet thinks of "sky," "stars," clouds and "shadows," the "Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance." To a romantic poet like Keats, these serve as vital wellsprings to his imagination and his art, essential to the fulfillment of what he has embraced as his poetic calling. An early death would make a mockery of that calling.

The poem is not only about the beauty and mystery of nature; it also discusses human beauty and love, the subject of the third quatrain. Now the poet does not "think," as he did in the preceding quatrain; he says, "I feel." The need for the love of a woman—for the "fair creature of an hour"—and the fear that this need will go forever unmet are emotions of the heart. Both his heart and mind are now in the grip of fears that life will cease and cut him off from all that is most important. The imagery in the closing couplet reflects his utter desolation: a lone figure "on the shore/ Of the wide world," the waters of an endless ocean swallowing "Love and Fame," his passionate hopes for a remarkable life.

Themes and Meanings

The theme of human mortality runs strong in poetry, especially in the poetry of the Romantics. Still, to feel personally the specter of death stalking when one is twenty-two is not common. Keats had reasons for this fear, however. At age eight he had lost his father to an accident. A year later his grandfather and male protector died. While he was in his early teens, his mother died from tuberculosis. Exposed to so much death at so young an age, Keats was attuned more keenly than most to the transience of life. This sonnet poignantly gives expression to a very personal fear of his own early death, which would forever doom to oblivion his human longings and artistic ambitions. In retrospect, the quatrains tremble with prophetic import. In less than a year, Keats's younger brother Tom would be dead of tuberculosis, and shortly after that Keats learned that he himself had contracted the dreaded disease. In little more than three years after writing this sonnet, Keats succumbed, his fame not yet realized and his love of a beautiful young woman never requited.

That Keats had been reading Shakespeare may be reflected in his choice of the Elizabethan words "charactery" (characters, or printed letters of the alphabet) in line 3 and "garners" (granaries) in line 4. In any case, the sonnet form clearly suited his poetic skill and purpose, for he wrote more than sixty poems in this form. As in many of Shakespeare's own sonnets, so also in Keats the themes of love, fame, and death figure prominently. When he wrote "When I Have Fears," Keats had not yet met the young lady, Fanny Brawne, with whom he would become so hopelessly infatuated. The "fair creature of an hour" in line 9 most likely refers to a young beauty Keats had observed in Vauxhall Gardens, an amusement park, a few years

earlier and whom he addressed in another sonnet as “a Lady Seen for a Few Moments at Vauxhall.” In his imagination she had become the embodiment of absolute feminine beauty and loveliness, everything Keats longed for, simply to “have relish in the faery power of unreflecting love.”

As to fame, Keats knew that fame, should it come at all, would be directly dependent on the quality of his art. To develop his potential as poet, to ripen his poetry into a mature poetry of power, beauty, and significance, he would need time. In this sonnet, more directly and personally than in any other, Keats expresses his fear that he may not have that time, and therefore “Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.”

Copyright Notice

©2011 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:
<http://www.enotes.com/when-have-fears-salem>