**When I have fears that I may cease to be Keats**

Keats was a master of the sonnet form (and many other forms). This does not stop us subjecting his poem to some forensic questioning. Are all the words the best words in the best place? Ask students to consider, for instance:

‘Teeming brain’. What are the connotations of ‘teeming’? What other words could be used?

What about ‘charactery’? This dictionary definition is as good as any: ‘a system of written letters or symbols used in the expression of thought’. It’s a fairly obscure word and not in common usage even in Keats’ time. But, of course, it fits the necessary requirements of syllables and stresses as the original ‘charact’ry’ makes clear. ‘Before high-piled books, hold like rich garners the full-ripened grain’ make perfect sense without ‘in charactery’ so is it there just as a filler?

‘The magic hand of chance’. What do we make of this? Keats seems to be saying that he may not be able, because of a short lifetime, to pin down his visions / thoughts / ideas in his poetry. But is his poetry really written with the ‘magic hand if chance’? ‘Magic’ seems an odd word to choose and there does not seem much left to ‘chance’ in his poetry. ‘Chance’ makes a good rhyme with romance, of course… Or is there something magic about the way words sometimes fall into place in a satisfying way?

‘Fair creature of an hour! Once students have got the idea that you can subject great poems to criticism, offer them this phrase to consider, along with ‘unreflecting’, a word which a lot of the analyses I’ve seen, tend to skirt around.

None of the above is meant to demean John Keats but merely to see the poem as the creation of a human being, like the rest of us, and not in some way supernaturally perfect.

Finally, here is the poem with some words obscured with a red brick. Before giving students the complete poem, why not play around with words that might fill the gaps? If you have this as a word- processed document, you should be able to double click on the brick to reveal the word Keats chose. You can also make a word invisible by choosing white as the font colour.

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

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