

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art

by

John Keats

About John Keats

John Keats was born in 1795 and died in 1821. He was an English Romantic poet and was one of the main figures of the second generation of Romantic poets, alongside Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. He died at a very young age, at 25 years old, and his works had been published only four years before his death. Keats never saw the extent of his success, since he died from tuberculosis (or consumption) at this tender age of twenty-five. Having initially studied to become a surgeon, Keats felt torn between his passion for writing poetry, and his lack of critical acclaim distressed him greatly since he had given up so much to devote time to his craft.

An uncertain financial burden also put paid to his romance with Fanny Brawne, who many believe was the subject of '*Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art*'. It is worth reading about their relationship since his letters echo some of the sentiments found in the poem. As Keats had nursed his brother through consumption and due to his medical training, he was all too aware of what was in store as the disease took hold. This may well be a plausible reason for death being a frequent theme in his work.

John Keats's poems were not critically acclaimed during his lifetime. However, Keats's reputation grew after his death and, by the end of the century; he was considered to be one of the best British poets of all times. He had a significant influence on a great number of writers. His poems are characterized by their sensual imagery, and their use of natural imagery to accentuate extreme emotion. Some of his most famous poems are '*O Solitude if I must with thee dwell*', '*Ode to a Nightingale*', '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*', '*La Belle Dame sans Merci*' and '*On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*'.

Historical Context

'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art' by John Keats was written in 1819 and, then, revisited in 1820. Nevertheless, his biographers suggest different dates for this same poem, which contemplate his meeting with Fanny Brawne and, later, his engagement to her. Nevertheless, the poem was written between 1818 and 1819. The final version of *'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art'* was supposedly copied into a volume of Shakespeare's poetical works, opposite to *'A Lover's Complaint'*. The poem was published in 1838, 17 years after Keats's death in *The Plymouth and Devonport Weekly Journal*. The readers have frequently associated "Bright star" with Fanny Brawne, and the poem is thought of as a declaration of love. Therefore, this poem is also a love sonnet.

This poem talks about eternity. The lyrical voice makes an emphasis on the importance of the figure of the star. Consequently, the star not only represents eternity but, also makes a conjunction with transience. *'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art'* acquires a melancholic tone, as the lyrical voice longs to be someone else in several moments of the poem. Furthermore, this poem also makes a personification of the figure of the star, as it is the main symbol in the poem. The poem is also filled with natural imagery and constant mentions and comparisons to nature. Finally, the poem acquires a dreamlike tone throughout the stanzas for its constant rhythm and night setting.

Summary

'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art' by John Keats contains a speaker's desire to remain in the company of his lover forever.

'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art' by John Keats begins with the speaker stating that he wants to be "stedfast" like a star. John Keats envies its sure and stable position from which it can see the earth in all its glory. From this description of the poem he moves then to the image of him, nestled in bed against the breast of his 'fair love'. The implication is clearly that he would like to preserve this moment forever, just as the star remains fixed in its eternal spot.

Moreover, the poet immediately goes back on the first statement and gives the reader several reasons why he does not want this. The most important of these is that the stars are alone. They do not have anything to occupy their minds besides the troubles of humans down below nor do they have true companions. Hence they are alone and cold in the dark. As the poem continues, the speaker describes how he wants to take on a star's steadfast position so that he might stay with his lover. He is happiest with his head "Pillow'd" on her breast and intends to live there in his emotions for the rest of time.

Themes

'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art' by John Keats encompasses several themes such as eternal love, purity, steadfastness, sensuality, and life vs death. However, the most important theme of the poem is eternal love. The reference to the star along with its quality of being steadfast reflects a desire to be eternally in love with one's beloved. Here, the speaker wants his lover forever with her, counting each other's breath, and feeling the warmth of love. While talking about eternal love the poet doesn't dive into the concept of spiritual love in the poem. Otherwise, the poet's wish to feel the "soft fall and swell" of his beloved's breasts will seem incoherent.

There is an implied sense of physicality packed in the poem. However, it's risky to say the poet is excessively passionate about making love with his lover. Hence, the poet chooses a median path while talking about love as a whole be it, eternal love or physical love.

Tone

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art' by John Keats starts with a devotional tone. The poet adores the steadfastness of the bright star. Hence devotedly desires this quality. In the next few lines, the poet's tone reflects directness as well as a sense of peace. The images revolving around the star, moving water, and the soft-fallen mask hints there is a peacefulness in the poet's tone. In the next section where the poet quickly negates the ideas mentioned previously. Hence, there's a firmness in his tone and rationality. He knows being a star he can't be there with his lady love.

Apart from that, in the last few lines, the tone of the poem becomes emotional and excited as the poet senses the ups and downs of his beloved's bosom. In the last line, the tone somehow reflects a sense of intoxication. The cause is none other than pure love!

Poetic Form and Structure

'*Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art*' is a lyric poem and, particularly, a sonnet. Keats follows the thought-pattern of the Italian sonnet (octave & sestet). An important thing to note is that the division of the poem into octave and sestet is emphasized by a very prominent turn between the sections. Keats has chosen a sonnet as his preferred form here, but it seems a mix between a Petrarchan and Shakespearean. Traditionally in the former, an idea is set out in the octave (the first eight lines) and is resolved in the sestet. Keats' sonnet follows this pattern in that there is a clear volta (or tone change) in line nine.

Poem Meter

In '*Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art*', regarding meter, John Keats chose to mainly use iambic pentameter, the most common metrical patterns. Keats separates the lines into five sets of two. The first of these is unstressed and the second stressed. His opening line is a perfect example of how this technique plays out with the emphasis on "Star," "I," "sted-," "as" and "art." There are a few moments though in which Keats switches to trochaic pentameter, meaning the first beat is stressed and the second unstressed. It is interesting to note that this change in meter occurs in the third quatrain where the change of direction has taken place; thus the form and meter of the poem mirrors its content.

Rhyme Scheme

The rhyme scheme of '*Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art*' by John Keats is ABABCDCDEFEGG. He follows the rhyme scheme of the English Shakespearean sonnet as it is set out in three quatrains and concludes in a rhyming couplet, thus ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG.

Form

'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art' by John Keats is a fourteen-line sonnet. The lines conform to the traditional Elizabethan or Shakespearean sonnet form. The first part of the poem states that the speaker is somewhat interested in being a star and the second gives the reader a reason why.

Literary Devices

In *'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art'* by John Keats, the Speaker appears somewhat in awe of the star in its steadfast position. He makes use of personification and a series of similes to describe it, as though it were a sentient and omnipresent being, looking down with benevolence and non-judgment at the world below. The metaphor in "hung aloft the night" likens it to a lantern, a beacon of light to shine the way for us humans below. An 'Eremit' can be a Christian hermit or one who devotes their life to solitude to bring them closer to God. This use of personification is thus effective in creating a portrayal as the star as an emblem for good, looking down upon earth with kindness, almost like a Guardian Angel.

Moreover, in the second quatrain, nothing is rushed into. The iambic rhythm is unhurried, indeed languorous with the rich assonance, particularly in line ten with the repetition of soft 'o' sounds. The use of the gerund form of the verb in 'moving' and 'gazing' again contributes to these drawn out acts. The concluding line of the third quatrain uses an oxymoron of 'sweet unrest' which relates to the image of the star in the third line with its 'eternal lids apart'. Apart from that, the poet uses enjambment to internally connect the sense of the lines. This device is present in the first two quatrains. The poet takes recourse to a caesura in the third quatrain of the poem for marking a shift of the idea described in the previous section.

Analysis, Line by Line

Lines 1–2

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—

Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night

The first two words of *'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art'* inform the reader that the speaker is not addressing a person, but a particularly bright star. This star is special because it is “stedfast.” It doesn't move. He is envious of its patience and its eternal station. One can assume he is referring to the North Star, as it is the only one that does not move in the sky.

The second line is somewhat confusing. Rather than elaborating on why he wants to be a star, Keats' speaker immediately goes back on what he said and says he doesn't want to hang “in lone splendour.” There is some part of being a star that does not completely appeal to him. The speaker has no desire to be alone in the sky, he needs company.

To sum up, in this first stanza, the lyrical voice refers to a “Bright Star”. Through the first line, the lyrical voice seeks a desire for an ideal and talks to the star. He longs to be as steadfast as the star. However, he is unable to identify even briefly with the star, as he/she denies it in the second line, “Not in lone splendor”.

Lines 3–4

And watching, with eternal lids apart,

Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,

In these lines of *'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art'*, the speaker rejects the qualities and the star's steadfastness, denying the statement made at the beginning of the stanza. The star is cut off from the beauties of nature on earth and is positioned as a passive observer of life.

Notice how the lyrical voice describes the star as “Nature's patient sleepless Eremite”. As the star is mentioned and described, the setting can be thought of as a night environment. A certain melancholic tone can be perceived in the passive position of the star and its relation to the lyrical voice.

However, the poetic persona does not want to be stuck in the sky with his eyes eternally watching nature. He would become a “patient, sleepless Eremite,” or hermit. This emphasizes the speaker's fear of being alone. Even all of space and time do not make up for the solitude he would be forced to endure.

Lines 5–6

The moving waters at their priestlike task

Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

The speaker of *'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art'* continues into the next quatrain to describe what the star is forced to watch throughout its life. He describes the "moving waters" on earth that do their "task[s]" with the dedication of priests. The poet compares the ebb and flow of the tides as a daily ritual of cleansing, hence the simile 'priest-like task'. Just as a priest performs the rite of baptism here the waters do so of their own accord.

The sixth line adds more detail. Keats uses the word "ablution." It refers to ritual cleansing. The waters are cleaning the areas on which human activities take place, as a priest would absolve a believer of their sins.

Moreover, in these two lines, the lyrical voice expands on the qualities of the star. He continues to reject the qualities of the star's steadfastness. There is strong natural imagery that portrays the force of nature in human life. Religious matters are associated with nature, but in a cold and isolated way; the water has a "priest-like task" and it is followed by the depiction of a mountain full of snow. Hence, natural imagery acquires also a melancholic tone, which was already introduced in the first stanza with the image of the star. And, although nature and the figure of the star have very dissimilar connotations for the lyrical voice, they portray a certain tone towards life.

Lines 7–8

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—

In *'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art'*, the star might be watching everything that was mentioned in lines five and six. Or it might be watching something else. It could be "gazing" or gently looking, on the "new soft-fallen mask." It is looking not at a physical mask as one might associate with the term, but with a mask of "snow upon the mountains and moors."

It obscures the land just as a paper mask would obscure a wearer's face. The word "moor" is very personal to the English landscape. It refers to vast open lands that are often impossible to build on or cultivate. The snow is emphasizing the already lonely faces of the mountains and moors. It adds to the feeling of isolation, something Keats' speaker has been clear about his desire to avoid.

Moreover, there is a great elemental beauty in this poem as the Speaker uses majestic imagery to show the earth in all its beauty. The snow upon the mountains is described as a 'new soft-fallen mask' thus it is pristine and untarnished. It too is cleansed and new, like the 'human shores'.

Lines 9–10

No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,

Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,

The ninth line of '*Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art*' begins with the word "No." He is negating that he could either commit to being steadfast as the star or remain in his fluctuating human state. He describes how he can take the best aspects of a star's life the "stedfast" and "unchangeable" parts and use them to his advantage.

With these new character traits in mind, he means to remain "Pillow'd upon" his lover's "breast." It becomes clear that Keats' speaker does not have a desire to live over the world. He just wants to stay at his lover's side for as long as he can, perhaps forever. Just like the star, his eyes will remain open and his position decided.

Additionally, in these lines, the lyrical voice makes a strong statement. The first line starts with a negation. After that, the lyrical voice emphasizes the star's steadfast quality, the eternal and "unchangeable" element in it. The star is associated with the lyrical voice's loved one. This is crucial, as many have read '*Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art*' as a love poem. The star, and its eternal qualities, can be found in the loved one's breast, building a strong bond between the main symbol of the poem and the lyrical voice's loved one.

There is a repeated motif of purity, through the ablutions of the water, the fresh snow, and his 'love's ripening breast'. It might not be too much of a presumption to suppose that the couple is virginal and innocent, hence the reference to her youth, and her 'ripening' breast.

Lines 11–12

To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,

Thereafter, in '*Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art*', the lyrical voice talks about love, and how it makes him/her feel. The unchangeable character found in the star is also found in the lyrical voice's love. The lyrical voice expresses his love: "To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,/ Awake for ever in a sweet unrest". The eternal quality in the star is also found in love, as it makes the lyrical voice feel "awake for ever".

So here Keats moves from the epic imagery of the celestial and mountains and oceans to the more intimate, of feeling the rise and fall of his beloved's breast as they recline together. But he reuses the same language, the 'soft fall and rise' echoes the 'new soft-fallen mask' of the snow as though nature and humans work in harmony and all is in sync.

Lines 13–14

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

In this final couplet of '*Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art*', the lyrical voice emphasizes the figure of his loved one. He repeats the place of comfort in the breast of the loved one and the importance of his beloved in, "Still, still to hear tender-taken breath. The lyrical voice also emphasizes the eternal quality of the loved one, which associates it with the image of the star previously portrayed. The final line accentuates the eternity of love and how the lyrical voice feels about her. The alternative of death is presented as opposite as love; either love or die, "And so live ever—or else swoon to death".

However, in the speaker's world he does not look out over the barren moors and mountains or the priest-like waters, he listens to his lover's tender breaths and "live ever." The only way he would face death now is if the emotions became too strong and he "swoon[ed] to death."

The final two lines also suggest that the speaker is content to be human since the star is inanimate and thus never able to enjoy human togetherness. Although he envies its immortality, it is he who is fortuitous enough to share this moment with his love. The repetition of 'Still' initiates a pause with the reader, as though we too are to hush and contemplate this snatched moment of bliss. The alliterative compound adverb 'tender-taken' again reinforces the sense of intimacy.

The inclusion of dashes and the omission of a full stop until the final sentence almost gives this sonnet a dreamy, trance-like rhythm, and gives the reader the time to digest the beautiful images which are reinforced throughout with their allusions to each other.