Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art

POEM TEXT

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
    Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
    Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
    Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
    Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
    Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
    Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

SUMMARY

Bright star, I want to be as steady and unchanging as you are—though I don't want to hang alone in the night sky, with my eyes always open, like a hermit who never goes to sleep, patiently watching the earth's oceans wash the shores in the same way that a priest ceremonially washes people to purify them, or looking at the new-fallen snow on the mountains and hills. I don't want to be still in that sense, but I do want to be steady and unchanging, lying on my beautiful lover's chest, always feeling its rising and falling, always awake, in a pleasant sleeplessness, always hearing her breathe in and out. I want to live that way forever—or I want to die.

THEMES

LOVE AND STEADINESS

"Bright Star" contrasts two kinds of steadiness. In the first eight lines of the sonnet, the speaker describes a star, watching ceaselessly over the earth from far away. The star is an ideal of steadiness and constancy, but it is also isolated and lonely, far away from the world of human life. In the final six lines, the speaker imagines a different kind of steadiness: an intimate embrace between two lovers that lasts forever. This embrace serves as an ideal, a dream, which the speaker deeply desires, even if he or she is unable to attain it. In this imaginary embrace, the speaker achieves all the steadiness of the star with none of its isolation.

In the first eight lines of "Bright Star" the speaker admires the constant presence of a star, yet also portrays the star as being lonely and distant. The star is "hung aloft" in the sky, high above the earth. From its height it watches the world below, the "moving waters" and the "new soft-fallen mask / of snow." The star is committed and constant in its watchfulness. The speaker describes it as "sleepless," its eyelids eternally open. This seems admirable to the speaker: he or she praises it for its "stedfast[ness]" and wants to imitate it, to achieve the same "stedfast[ness]."

In doing so, the speaker plays on a long-standing poetic tradition. Because sailors used stars as fixed points to measure their position on the ocean, stars have often served as symbols of constancy and steadiness. They do so, however, at a price: the stars are constant and dependable because they are so far above earth. They are steadfast precisely because they are separated from the human life they ceaselessly shine upon. The speaker recognizes this cost, as indicated by the poem's description of the star as being an "Eremite" or hermit—a person who lives alone in the wilderness.

As the "Not" and "No" that begin lines 2 and 9 make clear, the speaker wants to have the "stedfast[ness]" of the "Bright Star," but does not want to achieve that steadfastness in the same lonely, isolated way. Instead, the speaker proposes another form of steadfastness, achieved not through distance but rather through love: the speaker wants to be "pilow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast" "for ever." In other words, the speaker wants to be locked in a tender, intimate embrace with his or her lover for eternity. This embrace might be read as being literal or as being a metaphor for a permanent, unchanging, loving relationship. Either way, this eternal embrace achieves the "stedfast[ness]" of the "Bright Star" without its isolation.

The speaker does not achieve this eternal embrace in the poem. Instead, the speaker only fantasizes about it. Indeed, the poem raises an implicit question about whether such an embrace is possible: whether the "stedfast[ness]" of the star *can* be achieved on earth—or whether it depends on the star's isolation from the complications and troubles of human life. The speaker, after all, ends the poem stating that to achieve such an embrace would mean to "live ever—or else swoon to death." It is possible to say that this line is a statement of resolve: that the speaker is saying that he or she will achieve such a loving, embrace or die trying. But it could just as easily be read as a recognition of reality. After all, everyone eventually "swoons to death," and so perhaps the dream of a loving,

steadfast, never-ending breath can never be anything more than a dream.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,

The first four lines of "Bright Star" establish the poem's form and its broad themes. The poem begins with the speaker addressing a "star" directly. This is an instance of apostrophe: the star is both very far away and not human.

In the first line of the poem, the speaker also expresses a wish to be as "stedfast" as the star. In other words, the simile suggests that the speaker wants to be as steady and as constant as the star. This wish is underlined by the assonance between "bright" and "I": there is a sonic link that binds together the speaker and the star, and justifies the speaker's desire to emulate the star. In making this wish, the speaker is playing on an old tradition in poetry. Since stars were used by sailors as fixed points to help their navigation, they were frequently symbols of stability and constancy.

But there's a problem: the star is lonely. In lines 2-4, the speaker reflects on how isolated the star is from human life, how it hangs in the sky, watching events on earth. The speaker wants to be constant and steady like the star, but not isolated.

As the speaker describes the star's isolation, he or she uses a series of devices. First, the speaker uses metaphor: giving the star "lids"—in other words, eyelids—and, implicitly, eyes, with which it watches events on earth. (The consonant /l/ sound in line 2 also reinforces the star's isolation: linking together "lone," "splendor," and "aloft," as if to insist that the star is only beautiful *because* it is so high above, so distant from, the speaker).

Then, in line four, the speaker compares the start to a "patient, sleepless Eremite." An eremite is a hermit, someone who lives alone in the wilderness. Both the metaphor and the simile personify the star giving it human characteristics. (And once the star has received those human characteristics, it seems less weird to talk to the star, as the speaker is doing here.)

"Bright Star" is a Shakespearean sonnet and, in these lines, it follows the standard meter and rhyme scheme for this form: it's written in iambic pentameter (five poetic feet per line, each with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern) and rhymed ABAB.

The speaker generally handles this prestigious, difficult form with confidence—a confidence that reflects the strength of the speaker's conviction in the poem and the wishes it expresses. But there are some blemishes in the meter. For instance, note the spondee in the poem's first foot: "Bright star." This is followed by what is arguably a trochee two feet later: "would I | were sted-| fast as …" The speaker may want to be "stedfast" but the hiccups in the meter indicate that he or she isn't quite there yet!

LINES 5-8

The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—

In the first four lines of the poem, the speaker described the "bright star" as lonely and isolated, looking down on the earth. In lines 5-8, the speaker describes what the star actually sees. Specifically, in lines 5-6, the star is watching the "moving waters"—in other words, the oceans, lakes, and streams on earth. To the speaker, these waters seem "priestlike."

The speaker explains what this simile means in line 6: the waters of the world wash all the earth's banks and shores, those pieces of land that constitute borders of human society. The speaker describes this washing as "ablution"—a fancy word that describes ritual washing for religious purposes. In other words, it looks like the waters of the world are tenderly, carefully washing the boundaries of human civilization in order to purify them. The assonant /oo/ sound in "ablution" and "human" helps guide the reader through this otherwise verbose, tricky line—and underlines the connection between the two words, the extent to which "ablution" is a distinctly human activity.

This subtle emphasis on purity extends into lines 7-8, where the speaker describes the star looking down on the "mountains and moors" and seeing them covered in a "soft-fallen mask / Of snow." (A moor is a kind of hill). Snow is a traditional symbol of purity. The mask, meanwhile, serves as a metaphor for the way that the snow covers the "mountains and moors," obscuring their surface—albeit very gently. After all, this snow didn't come from a violent blizzard: it is "soft-fallen."

The "mask" metaphor also subtly personifies the "mountains and moors," suggesting that there's a face hidden beneath the snow (note also the alliterative /m/ sounds that connect these words). At the same time, it emphasizes the isolation of the star: it is far enough away from earth that it can't see beneath the mask (essentially, it can't make contact with the reality of life on earth). This isolation is emphasized by the enjambment in line 7, which puts weight and stress on the word "mask"—and on the distance it implies.

The speaker continues to address the star directly in these lines, meaning the poem continues to be an apostrophe. As a

result, one might think of the first eight lines of the poem as a single extended metaphor—enriched by the smaller similes and metaphors the speaker uses throughout—in which the speaker gradually outlines that the star is both constant and lonely, creating an image of a kind of life the speaker in part admires and in part disdains. The speaker wants to be steadfast but, as he or she discusses in the poem's final six lines, he or she also wants to be close to other people (really, to one person in particular: the speaker's lover).

The poem continues to work smoothly through the formal requirements of a Shakespearean sonnet. It is in strong, effective iambic pentameter and its rhyme scheme is CDCD. The speaker is definite and direct about what he or she likes (and doesn't like) about the star, and that confidence is reflected in the poem's form.

LINES 9-12

No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,

The speaker spent the first eight lines of "Bright Star" describing a star. The speaker wants to copy the star's stability and dependability—but the speaker doesn't like its "lone splendour." In other words, the speaker doesn't like how isolated and lonely the star is; the speaker wants to have all its stability with none of its loneliness.

Instead, the speaker says, using a metaphor, he or she wants to be "pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast." In other words, the speaker wants to lie on his or her lover's breast as though it were a pillow. Lying there, the speaker she will "feel for ever its soft fall and swell." Notice how at the end of this line, the alliterative /s/ and /f/ sounds seem to alternate like the rhythm of a breath, in and out. The alliteration almost gives the reader a sense of how it feels to lie on the lover's breast.

The speaker wants to lie there forever, without sleeping (just like the star watches forever without sleeping). The use of repetition—with the repetition of "still" in line 9 and "for ever" in lines 11 and 12 (more specifically, these are examples of diacope)—emphasizes the passion of the speaker's desire for this embrace. And once again, alliteration and consonance underline the intensity of the speaker's passion, the /st/ sound in "still" echoing against the same sound in "stedfast" to create a strong link between them.

Line 9 marks the turn (or "volta") of the poem—the point, traditionally, where the speaker of a sonnet switches things up, starts talking about something new. In this case, the volta comes a little bit early: in a Shakespearean sonnet, it's supposed to come in line 13. This makes the sonnet feel a bit more like a Petrarchan sonnet, a similar form where the volta does fall in line 9.

In any case, The speaker employs a couple of tricks to make line 9 feel even more important. First, the speaker subtly recalls the "Not" of line 2 with the "No" of line 9. This repetition calls the reader's attention to the line, as if to show the reader that the speaker is finally getting to the point. Then, the word "No" is followed by a caesura. Splitting the line in two, the speaker emphasizes the dual, contradictory character of his or her relationship to the star: he or she wants *some* of its characteristics but not *all* of them.

Like line 1, line 9 has some metrical problems. The first foot is a trochee. The word "stedfast" shakes things up again, introducing another trochee in the middle of the line:

No—yet | still sted- | fast, still | unchange- | able

To make matters worse, there's an awkward slant rhyme between "unchangeable" and "swell" in lines 9-12. Though the poem continues to generally follow the form for a Shakespearean sonnet—it's written in iambic pentameter and rhymed EFEF—perhaps the speaker seems to have lost some confidence as he or she begins to directly express his or her desires.

LINES 13-14

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

In the final two lines of "Bright Star," the speaker reiterates the thing he or she wants most. In line 13, the speaker more or less summarizes the desire that he or she has expressed in lines 9-12: the speaker wants to hear a lover's "tender-taken breath" forever: "still, still." As in line 9, the repetition of the word "still" (here a more specific instance of epizeuxis) emphasizes the key element of the speaker's desire: the speaker wants to remain locked in an embrace with this lover "ever," as the speaker says in line 14.

After a caesura at the heart of line 14, however, the speaker opens an alternate possibility. If the speaker *can't* "live ever," if he or she can't remain locked in an embrace with this lover, then the speaker would like to "swoon to death." This sets up a serious and stark choice: either the embrace goes on forever or the speaker wants to die, right here, right now. This is, in itself, a little shocking. But it also suggests something key about the speaker's state of mind: perhaps the speaker isn't sure that it's possible to remain in this embrace "ever." The stability and constancy of the "bright star" might not really be available to the speaker down here on earth, where things are considerably more complicated than they are up there. The star is an ideal, and that ideal might not be attainable for human beings.

The poem concludes with a rhyming couplet, GG. This is the traditional ending for a Shakespearean sonnet. Lines 13 and 14 also have strong, perfect rhymes and smooth, effective meter. The speaker finds a way to describe what he or she wants without losing control of the details of the poem's form.

Perhaps this reflects the speaker's greater honesty in these lines—admitting, at last, that the perfect, never-ending embrace the speaker seeks might not be not possible on earth.

SYMBOLS

BRIGHT STAR

In the first line of the poem, the speaker addresses a "Bright Star"—which may be an extended metaphor for the speaker's lover, or an actual star in the sky. In either case, the speaker plays on a long tradition in poetry of using stars as symbols. For instance, poets often use stars as symbols of beauty, their twinkling light representing the earthly beauty of a diamond or a lover's eye. That's certainly present here—the speaker describes the star as a beautiful thing, focusing on its "lone splendour." And if the "bright star" serves as an extended metaphor for the lover herself (as we discuss in our Poetic Devices section), then the speaker is offering an elegant and moving compliment to her by comparing her to a star: she has a kind of unearthly beauty.

Poets also use stars as symbols of constancy and stability. Sailors use stars to help them navigate, since the stars offer stable reference points for navigation equipment. Of course, there's something ironic, even sad, about the fact that the stars are so far away, so inaccessible: they are symbols of constancy and stability, sure, but they are symbols that no one on earth can possess or attain. The same is true of their beauty: it seems unreal, magical. The star is a kind of ideal that the speaker wants to attain—but cannot.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Bright star"

SNOW

In lines 7-8, the speaker imagines that the "bright star" sees a "new soft-fallen mask / Of snow upon the mountains and the moors." The poem invites its readers to envision this snow, a delicate dusting over the surface of the earth. In this sense, it seems like literal, actual snow. But it may also carry some symbolic weight: snow is often used in poetry as a symbol of purity and innocence.

This suggests how the "bright star" sees the world. From its height, high above the world, it can't (or doesn't want) to see the dark, difficult parts of human life. Instead, it sees the world as a pure and gentle space. The speaker doesn't present any evidence to contradict the "bright star" and its understanding of life on earth. Indeed, the speaker seems to want to preserve that sense of purity and innocence—but to do away with the distance from earth it requires.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "snow"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

In the first line of the poem, the speaker directly addresses the "bright star," saying "would I were stedfast as thou art." In other words, the speaker wants to be as steady and constant as the star itself. But the star is also distant and isolated: the speaker compares it to an "Eremite" or hermit—someone who lives in isolation from society. So when the speaker addresses the star in line 1, this is an example of apostrophe: talking to something which is both inaccessible and inanimate.

The rest of the poem is also a form of apostrophe, as the speaker tells the "bright star" what he or she wants and doesn't want. This is a little bit like confessing a secret to a diary. The speaker gets to express his or her desires without fear of rejection or embarrassment, because the star can't reply or judge.

This might seem surprising in a love poem. Though the speaker expresses deep, passionate love, he or she isn't actually talking to a lover. In fact, the use of apostrophe suggests that there might be some tension in their relationship: perhaps the speaker addresses the star because the speaker doesn't feel comfortable talking directly to this lover herself. The speaker has passionate desires to confess, but evidently doesn't trust this lover enough to tell her about them directly.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

PERSONIFICATION

As the speaker personifies the "bright star" being addressed, the star becomes a watchful, isolated person—someone who closely observes events on earth, but does so from a considerable distance. The speaker begins to personify the star in line 3 by giving it "eternal lids" (a.k.a. everlasting eyelids, which is a rather odd way of saying that this star has eyes that, like the star itself, will never die). The speaker not only imagines the star "watching"; he or she imagines it doing so with eyes (and eyelids), as though the star had a human body.

The speaker also says that the star is like a "sleepless Eremite"—a hermit, someone who lives apart from society for religious reflection (or just because they like solitude). The speaker expresses the star's solitude, its distance from the earth, by comparing it to a person who separates themselves voluntarily from society. The speaker's use of personification

thus helps convey the star's isolation from human society—and this, in turn, helps explain why the speaker doesn't want to be like the star in all ways: the speaker wants to be both steadfast and intimate with his or her lover.

The speaker also personifies the world that the star observes. He or she describes the waters as "priestlike," as though they were human beings, performing religious rituals. The speaker extends the personification in the next line by describing the water's task as "ablution"—ritual washing for religious ceremony. Similarly, the speaker personifies the "mountains and moors" in lines 8 by describing the snow on them as a "mask"—as if they had human faces beneath it.

The speaker thus consistently turns to personification to take distant and inhuman things—stars, mountains, oceans—and make them more approachable and relatable. This has consequences for the speaker: by turning the star into a person, an "Eremite," the star becomes someone the speaker can talk to. In other words, the speaker's reliance on personification helps make possible the apostrophe that stretches through the poem. Once the star seems human, the speaker can confess dreams and desires to it.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-8
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8

SIMILE

"Bright Star" contains three similes. The first appears in the poem's opening lines. The speaker says to the "Bright star" that he or she wants to be "steadfast as thou art." In other words, the speaker wants to be as steady and unwavering as the star itself. The speaker spends the next seven lines nuancing the simile, explaining that, although he or she wants to be as "stedfast" as the star, he or she doesn't want to be as *lonely* as it is.

The next simile appears in lines 4, when the speaker compares the star to "nature's patient, sleepless Eremite." An "Eremite" is another word for a hermit—someone who lives alone in the wilderness, usually for religious reasons. The speaker is saying that the star is as isolated and lonely as a hermit. (It's "sleepless" too—the star doesn't take any breaks from watching what's going on down on earth). The simile personifies the star, turning it into a human being. And again, this helps add nuance to the poem's first simile: the speaker wants to be "stedfast" like star, but the speaker doesn't want to be a hermit. In this way, this simile work with the simile in the first line to help the speaker express what he or she values in the star—and what he or she doesn't like about it.

The next simile appears in line 5: the speaker describes the "task" of the "moving waters" as "priestlike." In other words, the water is washing the shores with the care and dedication of a priest as he performs a ritual bath, an "ablution." Once again, the simile personifies the star, making it seem human. And once again, the simile helps explain what the speaker *doesn't* like about the star. This is a poem of erotic love: the speaker doesn't want to be a priest! Instead, the speaker wants to have sensuous closeness with a lover. The poem's similes thus help the speaker characterize the star—and the speaker's own desires.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "would I were stedfast as thou art"
- **Line 4:** "Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite"
- **Lines 5-6:** "The moving waters at their priestlike task / Of pure ablution"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses metaphor throughout "Bright Star." In the first eight lines of the poem, the speaker uses metaphor to describe the star and the world it watches. In line 3 the speaker notes that the star has "eternal lids apart." In other words, its eyes never close. This is a way of saying that the star never stops shining: it is always bright and brilliant. It's also a metaphor: the star doesn't *literally* have eyes. As is often the case, the poem's poetic devices overlap: the metaphor personifies the star, giving it human features and characteristics.

Something similar happens in line 7, where the speaker describes the snow covering the "mountains and moors" as a "soft-fallen mask." The mask is a metaphor for the way that the snow covers the ground, hiding its features from the star that watches. But it also personifies the ground, making it sound like there's a human face under the mask.

In the final six lines of the poem, the speaker switches things up—describing a lover instead of the star. For instance, in line 10 the speaker describes him or herself as "pillow'd" on his or her "fair love's ripening breast." The line contains two metaphors. First, the word "pillow'd" suggests that the lover's breast is soft and supportive—like a pillow. And it shows the reader that the speaker is resting his or her head on the lover's breast. Then the word "ripening" further shapes the reader's understanding of the lover's breast: it is developing, maturing, growing, in the way a fruit ripens. This may mean that the lover is still growing physically, or it might mean that the lover's breast is developing in a more figurative sense: she is becoming a more mature, whole person. The poem's metaphors thus help to position the speaker, to describe the star, and finally to characterize the speaker's lover.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "eternal lids apart"
- **Line 7:** "soft-fallen mask"
- **Line 8:** "Of snow"
- **Line 10:** "Pillow'd," "ripening," " breast"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Over the course of "Bright Star," the speaker lays out his or her deepest desire: to be locked in a permanent, unchanging embrace with a lover. To present this desire, the speaker relies on an extended metaphor.

The speaker starts by saying that he or she wants to be as "stedfast" as a "bright star." The "star" serves as a symbol for constancy, steadiness, and devotion—and, over the course of the poem's first eight lines, the speaker explores the consequences of that metaphor, using a series of other poetic devices to extend and complicate it, including personification, simile, and metaphor. The speaker isn't entirely happy with those consequences: the "bright star" may be "stedfast" but it is also isolated and lonely, removed from human life. The speaker doesn't want that loneliness: he or she wants to embrace a lover forever. So, in the final six lines of the poem, the speaker abandons the extended metaphor and describes directly what he or she wants.

The extended metaphor has another, implicit layer. The star is ideal and beautiful: indeed, stars are traditional symbols of beauty. And in the tradition of sonnets—a tradition that Keats calls to the reader's mind by following the Shakespearean sonnet form here—male poets often use stars as metaphors for the beauty of the women they love. Although the poem never explicitly makes the connection, some readers may thus feel like the extended metaphor is, in part, a description of the woman the speaker loves, a subtle tribute to her beauty—and a subtle critique of her isolation, her standoffishness.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

REPETITION

The speaker uses several different kinds of repetition in "Bright Star," including epizeuxis, parallelism, and diacope. There are some more amorphous forms of repetition as well. For instance, lines 2 and 9 begin with "no" and "not." Though these words aren't exactly the same, they're close enough to echo—especially because they play such important roles in the poem. The speaker uses these words to complicate an initial desire: the speaker wants to be "stedfast" as a "bright star" but not as isolated or as lonely as it is. The "Not" in line 2 and the "No" in line 9 introduce the speaker's objections to the star's loneliness, and the repetition plays an important role in guiding the reader. Though the speaker spends most of the poem's first 8 lines describing the star, the "No" in line 9 reminds the reader that the speaker spent all that time describing the star in order to clarify what he or she *dislikes* about it—what he or she *doesn't* want to emulate.

In the final six lines of the poem, the speaker turns to parallelism, diacope, and epizeuxis repeating the words "still" and "for ever" in lines 9, 11, 12, and 13. The importance of these repetitions is immediately evident: through them, the speaker stresses that he or she wants the embraces he or she shares with a lover to last for eternity. The speaker is insistent about this: each repetition of "still" or "for ever" intensifies the force of the speaker's desire. By the end of the poem, then, the reader has a sense that the speaker's hopes for an unchanging, steadfast embrace are intense and passionate.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Not"
- **Line 9:** "No," "still," "still"
- **Line 11:** "for ever"
- **Line 12:** "for ever"
- **Line 13:** "Still," "still"

ENJAMBMENT

"Bright Star" only uses enjambment three times, and each of those three enjambments fall in the poem's first 8 lines. These enjambments underline the loneliness and isolation of the "bright star."

For example, note the enjambment in line 7: the star is "gazing on the new soft-fallen mask / Of snow." The enjambment allows the reader to focus on the word "mask," which stands out more as the final word in the line than it would were it to appear somewhere else, surrounded by other words rather than white space. By emphasizing the word "mask," the speaker underscores the fact that the star can't see through the snow—that is, that it is prevented from acquiring deep, intimate knowledge of the things it watches. Instead, the star can only see a deceptive surface.

Similarly, the enjambment at line 2 creates a sense of suspense: one wonders what the star is doing, "hung aloft" in the "night." The revelation at the start of the next line is sad: it's just "watching" what happens down on earth. The star's activity becomes all the more lonesome, even bleaker. In this sense, the speaker uses enjambment to emphasize the star's isolation.

Once the speaker starts describing what he or she wants in line 9—instead of describing the star, as the speaker does for the first 8 lines of the poem—he or she stops using enjambment. The final lines of the poem are thus self-contained, end-stopped. They echo a different kind of seclusion, a kind the speaker wants: to be alone, embracing a lover, for all time.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "night / And"
- **Lines 5-6:** "task / Of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "mask / Of"

END-STOPPED LINE

In the first 8 lines of "Bright Star," the speaker uses end-stop regularly: lines 1, 3, 4, 6, and 8 are all end-stopped. These end-stops are natural and unforced: they follow the speaker's speech. For instance, the end-stop in line 6 neatly separates two different things that star watches, cutting the "moving waters" off from the "new soft-fallen mask / Of snow." In other words, in these lines, end-stop plays a largely rhetorical role: it helps reinforce the ebb and flow of the speaker's ideas, but it doesn't mean much on its own.

That changes after line 8. In the final 6 lines of the poem, the speaker doesn't employ enjambment at all. This is significant. In these lines, the speaker stops describing the *star* and starts describing his or her *desires* directly. The speaker seems more confident in this section of the poem, more direct and definite. As a result, the lines become self-contained and self-sufficient, complete unto themselves. They echo the speaker's confidence—and they also echo the closed, self-contained world the speaker desires. The speaker wants to live forever locked in an intimate embrace with a lover. The outside world falls away as the speaker's life is reduced to a single embrace. This seclusion finds its reflection in the self-contained, end-stopped lines that run through the poem's final sestet.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "art—"
- **Line 3:** "apart,"
- **Line 4:** "Eremite,"
- **Line 6:** "shores,"
- **Line 8:** "moors—"
- **Line 9:** "unchangeable,"
- **Line 10:** "breast,"
- **Line 11:** "swell,"
- **Line 12:** "unrest,"
- **Line 13:** "breath,"
- **Line 14:** "death."

CAESURA

"Bright Star" contains caesuras throughout. Not all of these caesuras are especially significant for interpreting the poem, but some of them do underline or reinforce the speaker's ideas and desires. For example, take a look at the caesura in line 9, which separates "No" from the rest of the line. The caesura emphasizes the delicate, difficult balance the speaker is trying to strike. On the one hand, the speaker wants to be "stedfast" and "unchangeable" like the "bright star." But, on the other hand, the speaker also wants to refuse the star's loneliness and isolation. By splitting the line in two, dividing in between a negative statement ("No") and a positive statement ("still stedfast, still unchangeable"), the speaker emphasizes the contradictory character of his or her relationship to the star.

Something similar happens in the poem's final line. This line is split in half by a caesura, which again separates two options: either the speaker will "so live ever" or "swoon to death." In other words, the speaker either wants to live forever in a passionate embrace with a lover, or the speaker wants to die in that embrace. The caesura emphasizes the opposition between these two options.

It also emphasizes that the second option, the possibility of dying, might come out of a sense of insecurity on the speaker's part. Perhaps the speaker isn't sure that the eternal embrace being proposed here is really possible, and so, almost as an afterthought, the speaker introduces this second, much darker possibility.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", "
- **Line 3:** ", "
- **Line 4:** ", "
- **Line 9:** "—"
- **Line 13:** ", "
- **Line 14:** "—"

ALLITERATION

Throughout "Bright Star," the speaker often uses alliteration to underline certain ideas and arguments. For example, in line 9, the speaker alliterates on an /st/ sound: "still stedfast, still." (The sound also appears as consonance at the end of "stedfast"). The repetition of the /st/ sound creates a sonic link between "still" and "stedfast." In this way, the alliteration emphasizes that the speaker doesn't want to be "stedfast" for just a little while, but *forever*.

Later, the poem's alliteration evokes the intimacy and pleasure of the eternal embrace the speaker hopes to sustain with a lover. In line 11, the speaker alliterates on /f/ and /s/ sounds:

> To feel for ever its soft fall and swell

The two sounds lock together, swirling around each other. In this way, they mimic the feel of the lover's breast rising and falling. This is especially true at the end of the line, where /s/ and /f/ sounds alternate, like the rhythm of a breath, in and out: "soft fall and swell." The alliteration thus gives the reader an immediate, palpable sense of what the speaker's intimate embraces with his or her lover would actually feel like. The poem's alliteration thus underlines the speaker's ideas and the

intimacy he or she hopes to achieve.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "w," "w," "a," "a"
- **Line 2:** "N," "l," "l," "n"
- **Line 3:** "w," "w," "l," "p"
- **Line 4:** "L," "p"
- **Line 5:** "p"
- **Line 6:** "p"
- **Line 8:** "m," "m"
- **Line 9:** "st," "st," "st"
- **Line 10:** "P," "p"
- **Line 11:** "f," "f," "s," "f," "s," "w"
- **Line 12:** "w," "sw"
- **Line 13:** "St," "st," "t," "h," "h," "t," "t"
- **Line 14:** "s," "e," "e," "s"

ASSONANCE

"Bright Star" uses assonance often—and the device helps give the poem its lilting, musical feel. For instance, the /oo/ sound in "ablution" and "human" helps to smooth out a line that might otherwise feel overstuffed or overly complicated. Even if a word like "ablution" is hard to understand at first, the line's musicality helps pull the reader through it. Moreover, the shared sound in the two words emphasizes that ablution itself—in other words, ritual washing—is closely linked to human religious rituals as well as to human life more broadly.

In other words, assonance doesn't just help the poem sound good. It also underlines the speaker's ideas. Note, for instance the assonant long /i/ sound in the first line: "Bright star, would I." The speaker is saying here that he or she wants to be like the "bright star"—at least in some respects. The /i/ sound in "bright" and "I" creates a sonic version of the connection the speaker hopes to cultivate. And it suggests that the speaker could be, even *should* be, like the "bright star"—there's already a strong connection between the two of them. In this sense, assonance subtly underlines and reinforces the speaker's aspirations.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "a," "I," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 4:** "a," "a," "ee"
- **Line 5:** "ie"
- **Line 6:** "u," "u," "ea," "u," "o"
- **Line 7:** "O," "o," "o," "a"
- **Line 8:** "o," "ou"
- **Line 9:** "e," "i," "e," "i"
- **Line 11:** "e," "o," "a," "e"
- **Line 12:** "e," "ee," "e"
- **Line 13:** "i," "i," "e," "e," "ea"
- **Line 14:** "e," "e," "oo," "o," "ea"

CONSONANCE

"Bright star" contains a good deal of alliteration and assonance, but it overflows with consonance. Every single line in the poem contains multiple consonant sounds. With all this consonance, it can be hard to see when it really matters, and when it's simply noise. Indeed, not all of the poem's consonance is particularly meaningful—so it *is* necessary to weigh the instances of the device and see which ones are important and which aren't.

Generally, the device is at its most interesting when it underlines or reinforces the speaker's arguments and ideas, his or her desires and aspirations. Note line 2, with its consonant /l/ sound:

> Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night

The /l/ sound creates a link between the star's loneliness, its splendor, and its height. The star is beautiful in part *because* it is so high above the earth. But its height above the earth is also the *reason* why it's lonely. The consonance thus underlines the speaker's complaint about the star—it may be "stedfast," but it's also isolated and alone.

Something similar happens in line 10, with the /p/ sound in "pillow'd" and "ripening." The /p/ sound suggests that part of the reason the lover's breast is so welcoming is because it's ripening, still soft—rather than rigid and finished. The poem's consonance thus helps the speaker develop his or her complicated, even contradictory, desire for both "stedfast[ness]" and intimacy.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "t," "st," "r," "w," "w," "st," "st," "r," "t"
- **Line 2:** "N," "t," "n," "l," "n," "l," "n," "l," "t," "n," "t"
- **Line 3:** "n," "w," "w," "t," "r," "n," "p," "r," "t"
- **Line 4:** "L," "t," "r," "p," "s," "l," "p," "l," "ss," "r," "t"
- **Line 5:** "t," "r," "t," "r," "p," "r," "st," "k," "t," "s," "k"
- **Line 6:** "p," "r," "n," "o," "r," "n," "r"
- **Line 7:** "n," "n," "s," "f," "f," "n," "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "n," "n," "m," "n," "n," "m"
- **Line 9:** "t," "st," "ll," "st," "st," "st," "ll"
- **Line 10:** "P," "ll," "p," "r," "l," "s," "r," "p," "r," "s"
- **Line 11:** "f," "f," "r," "r," "s," "s," "ft," "f," "ll," "s," "ll"
- **Line 12:** "w," "r," "r," "s," "w," "t," "r," "s," "t"
- **Line 13:** "St," "ll," "st," "ll," "t," "h," "r," "h," "r," "t," "r," "t," "r"
- **Line 14:** "s," "l," "l," "s," "s"

VOCABULARY

Stedfast (Line 1) - Steady or unchanging.

Thou (Line 1) - You. This word isn't used in contemporary English anymore, but it was at one point very common as an

informal way of addressing someone. In other words, people used "thou" and "thy" when they were speaking to someone they were close with; "you" and "your" was reserved for more formal interactions.

Art (Line 1) - Are. An obsolete form of the verb "to be."

Splendour (Line 2) - Gloriousness or beauty. The speaker acknowledges that the "bright star" is brilliant and enchanting, even though it hangs alone in the sky.

Aloft (Line 2) - Above. In this case, in the sky.

Lids (Line 3) - Eyelids. The speaker is saying that the "bright star" never closes its eyes.

Eremite (Line 4) - Hermit. Someone who lives alone in the wilderness, usually to pursue religious reflection.

Priestlike (Line 5) - Holy, or done the way a priest would do something.

Ablution (Line 6) - Washing. The word is usually used in religious context, where it describes ritual washing done to purify the body (such as in Christian baptism).

Human shores (Line 6) - The shores of the ocean. In other words, the shores are the borders of the human world—since people live on land, not on water.

Soft-fallen mask (Line 7) - Gently fallen snow that covers the mountains and hills. In other words, the snow on the mountains didn't come from a blizzard, but from a quieter snow-storm.

Moors (Line 8) - High hills.

Pillow'd (Line 10) - Resting, as though on a pillow. The speaker is using his or her "love's ripening breast" as a pillow on which to rest his or her head.

Ripening (Line 10) - Becoming mature, growing, reaching its full potential.

Unrest (Line 12) - Wakefulness, sleeplessness.

Swoon (Line 14) - To faint (or the act of fainting). "Swoon" is often used in a specifically romantic context, with the fainting being the result of extreme love or adoration.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Bright Star" is a Shakespearean sonnet. On a broad level, this means it has 14 lines broken into an octave and a sestet, and it ends with a final rhyming couplet.

Shakespeare didn't invent the form that bears his name, but he wrote more than 150 of them. And by the time Keats wrote "Bright Star" in the early 19th century, the form was strongly associated with the bard.

Keats both follows Shakespeare's example, and tries out new things here that break from the form Shakespeare popularized. For instance, "Bright Star" closely follows the traditional meter and rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet. Though there are irregularities here and there, the poem exhibits confidence and control as it moves through a difficult and prestigious form.

In addition to its meter and rhyme scheme, a sonnet usually has a volta, or turn. This is a moment where the speaker reflects on what he or she has already said—and, often, changes his or her mind, or offers a new way of looking at things. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the volta falls at the end of line 12. In a Petrarchan sonnet, it falls at the end of line 8. Since sonnets only have 14 lines total, that means that a Petrachan sonnet gives the speaker more space to reflect, to change his or her mind.

Although "Bright Star" follows the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet, its volta falls in line 9 and continues to expand upon this idea through the rest of the poem. That's where the speaker switches things up, finally telling the reader what he or she *actually* wants; in the first 8 lines, the speaker tells the reader what he or she doesn't want. The poem is thus a kind of hybrid sonnet—a Shakespearean sonnet that follows some of the conventions of a Petrarchan sonnet.

METER

"Bright Star" is written in iambic pentameter, which is the traditional meter for a Shakespearean sonnet. A line of iambic pentameter has ten syllables total, divided up into five poetic feet with two syllables per foot. These feet follow a da DUH rhythm, with a stress falling on every other syllable. That might sound complicated, but iambic rhythm is actually a close reflection of the way people actually speak.

It's easy to see what iambic pentameter looks like by scanning line 3:

> And watch- | ing, with | eter- | nal lids | apart

Generally, the poem's meter is pretty good: the speaker is confident and direct, and that confidence expresses itself in his or her control over the poem's rhythm. There are some moments where things get more complicated, however. For instance, the poem starts with a spondee (a foot with two stressed syllables in a row), instead of an iamb:

> Bright star, | would I | were sted- | fast as | thou art

The rhythm of this first line never quite sorts itself out. After the spondee in the first foot, the next two feet are iambs. Then there's a trochee (stressed-unstressed), and a final iamb. Though the speaker wants to be steady as a "star," the meter might indicate that the speaker's not quite there yet: the poem betrays an underlying unsteadiness or insecurity.

There's a similar problem in line 9:

No—yet | still sted- | fast, still | unchange- | able

In addition to the opening trochee, there's another trochee in the poem's third foot. Once again, when the speaker imagines being "stedfast," the meter breaks, becomes unsteady and irregular. These metrical problems might remind the reader that the poem is a fantasy, not a reality. Though the speaker describes with considerable confidence being with his or her lover forever, locked in a permanent embrace, he or she isn't there yet—and may never be.

RHYME SCHEME

"Bright Star" is a Shakespearean sonnet. It follows the standard rhyme scheme for such a poem. In its first twelve lines, it follows a criss-cross rhyme pattern:

ABABCDCDEFEF

In the final two lines of the poem, the rhyme scheme shifts. Lines 13-14 form a couplet, rhymed:

GG

For the most part, the poem uses strong, perfect rhymes, like "shores" and "moors" in lines 6 and 8. Though the Shakespearean sonnet is a challenging and prestigious form, the speaker seems to handle its demands with confidence. This confidence underlines the speaker's definite, direct description of his or her desires: this speaker knows what he or she wants and does not equivocate about it.

There is one rhyme that's a little off, however: "unchangeable" and "swell" in lines 9 and 11. This pair is probably best described as a slant rhyme: the link between them lies in the consonant /l/ sound in "unchangeable" and "swell." One might interpret this slant rhyme in a number of ways. Perhaps the speaker is not quite as confident as he or she pretends to be. Or perhaps the speaker wants to underline a tension in the poem—between the speaker's "still[ness]" and the movement his or her lover's body makes, its "soft fall and swell." The speaker may be unchanging, unmoving, but the lover's body does change and move. In either case, the slant rhyme is a rare formal blemish in a poem that is otherwise very tightly controlled.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Bright Star" is someone passionately, deeply in love. The poem is dedicated to describing the speaker's desire to spend eternity lying on his or her lover's breast, feeling it rise and fall as this lover breathes, without otherwise changing and moving. The fact that the speaker needs to express this desire at all implies that it hasn't yet been realized. Maybe the speaker knows that he or she can't spend eternity lying on a lover's breast—their love will change; they will grow old and die, as the speaker acknowledges in the poem's final line: "And so live ever—or else swoon to death."

"Bright Star" doesn't give its reader much other information about the speaker: the reader never learns the speaker's gender (explicitly—given the time in which the poem was written, it's probably safe to assume the speaker is man), nor does the reader learn the speaker's education, class, or profession. This is probably intentional: the poem focuses with intense concentration on the speaker's love. Any other details about his or her life are simply irrelevant to that passionate, fulfilling relationship.

SETTING

"Bright Star" doesn't give its reader much information about its setting. The speaker addresses his or her lover in intimate, affectionate terms, using the informal "thou" and fantasizing about lying "pillow'd" on her "ripening breast." So it's safe to assume that the two of them are together, in a private space. (The poem is not, for instance, a speech addressed to a big crowd or a sermon that might get read in a church).

That's about all the reader really learns about the setting—and it's a pretty general piece of information. The poem doesn't place the speaker and his or her lover in a specific city, country, or historical moment. This is purposeful: all the speaker cares about is love. The details of time and place are irrelevant to the speaker's feelings, so he or she simply ignores them. Indeed, the speaker hopes to remain in a blissful embrace for all eternity. In other words, the speaker wants his or her love to endure in *all* times and places.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats was a major figure in a literary movement called "Romanticism." Romanticism emerged around 1790, and remained active into the 1820s, when Keats was writing. It's easiest to understand the Romantics and what they stood for by contrasting them with the kind of poetry—and the kind of thinking—that was happening in Europe before they burst onto the scene.

The 18th century is often called the "Enlightenment." It was a time when intellectuals and writers prized reason and order; they sought to organize society and art on the example of science. For early Romantic writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge, this emphasis on rationality was constraining: it denied all the vibrant, creative parts of the human spirit. It resulted in poetry without any spark. They sought to revitalize poetry by turning to the irrational, the magical, and the antiquated.

Keats belonged to the second generation of Romantic poets.

He was born in 1795, just when the movement was getting started. Along with friends like Byron and Shelley, Keats sought to revitalize the movement. This younger generation felt that the early romantic poets, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, had gotten too conservative as they aged.

There are some Romantic poems—like Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"—that are more explicit about these intellectual conflicts. But "Bright Star" bears some scars from the poetic battles of the late 18th and early 19th century literary battles—particularly in its form. "Bright Star" is a Shakespearean sonnet and it has much more in common with the passionate, hyperbolic love sonnets written during the Renaissance than the cold, mathematical poetry of the 18th century.

The sonnet is an Italian form, popularized by the Italian poet Petrarch; it came into English in the 16th century, as poets like Sir Thomas Wyatt translated Petrarch's sonnets. (See, for example, his "Whoso List to Hunt"). Though the sonnet gradually broadened—tackling religious and political questions—at its heart, it's made for love poetry. Keats revives the form, returning to its roots as love poetry, and in so doing, signals his allegiance to earlier modes of writing that indulge in deep, irrational passion.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Bright Star" does not make any references to its political or historical context. Instead its speaker turns inward, focusing only on his or her love. Indeed, it feels like the speaker might be purposely *avoiding* contemporary politics. The Romantic poets tended to be politically radical—supporting revolutionary movements that aimed to overthrow the monarchies and dynasties that ruled Europe.

In 1818-19, when Keats likely wrote "Bright Star," such political movements were in retreat. In France, a popular revolt had overthrown the monarchy in the 1790s—an event called the "French Revolution." But by the 1810s, the same royal family was back on the throne. And despite a growing and active labor movement in England, the country was also becoming more and more conservative, as the stodgy Victorian era approached. "Bright Star" focuses intensely on matters of the heart—to the exclusion of all else. Perhaps it does so because its speaker (or its author) doesn't want to think about the disappointing developments elsewhere.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Tom Hiddleston Reads "Bright Star" — Listen to the poem in its entirety by British actor Tom Hiddleston. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGh0smAt7-w)
- The Life of John Keats — A detailed biography of Keats from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)
- The Romantics — An introduction to Romanticism—the literary movement to which Keats belonged—from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics)
- Keats and Fanny Brawne — An essay on "Bright Star" and the poet's romance with Fanny Brawne—for whom many think the poem was written. (https://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/542409.html)
- "Bright Star" In 1820 — A version of the poem handwritten into a volume of Shakespeare in 1820. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bright_star,_would_I_were_steadfast_as_thou_art#/media/File:Brightstar.jpg)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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