

## Bright Star, Would I Were Steadfast as Thou Art: John Keats

### **Q. Critically analyse the poem, “Bright Star, Would I Were Steadfast as Thou Art”.**

This sonnet is written by one of the most celebrated English Romantic poets, John Keats. The Romantic poets wrote in a brief period around the beginning of the 19th century. Romantic poetry is the product of emotion and expresses the poet’s love towards any inspiring object in nature. It is commonly believed that the poet here is talking to Polaris, or the North Star which is famous for appearing to hold still in the sky, because of its brightness and unmoving nature. This star is used as a guiding star by the travellers. In this sonnet, the poet wishes to attain the unchanging and fixed status of the bright star through his love. This sonnet was written in 1919 and was revised in 1920. It is supposed to be Keats’ last sonnet.

Love, isolation and natural beauty are the major themes of this poem. The speaker in the poem observes certain qualities of the bright star and wants to adopt them. He discusses two things in the poem – the steadfastness of the star and its isolation. Thus, he wishes to be eternal with his beloved like the star but refuses to live a lonely life. He wants to stay close to his beloved. It is believed that Keats wrote this poem for his beloved.

The poem begins with the speaker stating that he wants to be “steadfast” like a star. He immediately goes back on this statement and gives the reader several reasons why he does not want this. The most important of these is that 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. They are alone and cold in the dark. The first two words of this piece inform the readers that the speaker is not addressing a person, but a particularly bright star. This star is special because it is “steadfast.” 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.

At the beginning of this love sonnet, the speaker presents the image of the star that is referred to in the title. He is addressing the star that is fixed in the sky, probably the Pole Star / North Star. This star is said to be eternal, unchanging and also beyond the speaker’s reach because it is up in the sky. The speaker wishes that he could be as steadfast as the bright star. But this star is isolated from the rest of the world. Even though the speaker admires the star and wishes to be like it, he does not want to be isolated like the star. He also does not want to have other qualities of the star, such as the star is always awake and shining. The poem speaks of a sleepless hermit who lives away from humanity. This image of the hermit is compared to other images of nature: the moving waters used for ablution, and the priestly task of religious washing or cleansing. By comparing the star with moving waters and the priestly task of purification, the speaker wishes to express that these things of nature are immortal and he can never be like them. The use of the word ‘ablution’ represents religion. So far the speaker has expressed admiration for nature; this is continued in the next part of the poem.

The next stanza describes the speaker's appreciation for mountains and moors and the beautiful snow that gathers on top of its peak. Here the speaker has presented the image of a winter and lonely place. Winter has an association with solitude and sadness. Again the speaker repeats that he wants the unchangeable quality of the star but not the loneliness or solitude and sadness. Now the speaker describes himself lying on his lover's breast and looking for relief. 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. At the end of the poem, the speaker thinks that living in comfort and happiness of love and then dying will be similar to eternal life because when one loves, one lives eternally.

As this poem is about the beautiful star, the speaker directly addresses the star and wishes to remain steadfast like it. He adores its unchangeable quality and desires to attain that quality. However, he soon realizes that the star is isolated from the rest of the world and can only observe life and the beauty of nature but cannot experience it. Also, it will never taste the fruits of love. Therefore, he decides to remain steadfast and immutable in his love like that star but not in isolation. He wants to live forever with his love. He believes that death is better than having to live without his love. What stays in the minds of the readers is the metaphorical comparison he draws to show his pure love for his beloved.

John Keats accordingly presents various themes in this poem. One of the themes is the human wish to have an eternal life. The poem gives expression to this longing; at the same time, it also states that human life is essentially temporary. It cannot be eternal. The quality of eternity brings with it the aspects of loneliness, detachment and solitude. These are not human qualities. The most valuable human quality is love. It is the essence of humanity. Keats being a Romantic poet regards love as the highest virtue. Therefore, the speaker in this poem, though attracted by the eternity of Bright Star, prefers to rest on his lover's side. The poet also shows admiration for nature. He admires the serenity (peacefulness) of natural beauty: the sea and the snow-covered peaks. The central conflict in the speaker's mind is that he wants eternity but that would mean stopping all the change. Change is a natural aspect of life. Opposing change would mean opposing human life. Hence, the speaker comes to the understanding that one can experience eternity in this life through true love. The speaker desires to remain in the company of his lover forever. In the sonnet, the 'Star' symbolizes desire.