

## Bright Star John Keats

There are numerous line by line paraphrases of this sonnet available on-line. It probably is necessary to carry out a line by line explanation as the poem does express itself in a convoluted manner with a number of archaisms along the way. The octet, comprising a separable part of the poem's single sentence, is particularly tricky to unravel on a first (or subsequent) reading. Here's a quick version which might suffice if you haven't access to a more erudite one at the moment:



Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art—  
*Bright star, I wish I was as steadfast as you are*  
 Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night  
*Not, though, splendid and lonely in the night sky*  
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
*And watching, eyes wide open*  
 Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,  
*Like a sleepless hermit*  
 The moving waters at their priestlike task  
*The seas washing the earth's shores*  
 Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,  
*(as a priest might wash away sins)*  
 Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask  
*Or gazing at the snow which has fallen softly*  
 Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—  
*On the mountains and moors like a mask...*

Once the basic meaning is clear, help students to examine Keats' word choices in more detail. Try using the synonym function in Word, for example, to create a list of alternatives. The word lists can be extended by taking one of the suggestions and using that as the starting point for more synonyms, as has been done with some of the underlined words below.

Bright star, would I were <u>steadfast</u> as thou art—	unwavering unfaltering resolute persistent committed firm solid untiring fixed constant unyielding unbending
Not in lone <u>splendour</u> hung aloft the night	magnificence finery brilliance majesty grandeur sumptuousness opulence
And watching, with <u>eternal</u> lids apart,	everlasting undying enduring perpetual unending ceaseless
Like nature's <u>patient</u> , sleepless Eremite,	enduring persistent persevering tenacious determined obstinate insistent dogged stubborn
The moving waters at their priestlike task	
Of pure <u>ablution</u> round earth's human shores,	washing cleansing splashing waves breaking tidal movement ebbing and flowing
Or <u>gazing</u> on the new soft-fallen mask	looking staring watching contemplating considering meditating observing
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—	

No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,	
<u>Pillowed upon</u> my fair love's ripening breast,	supported by   protected by   cushioned upon softened by   laid upon   reclining upon
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,	
Awake for ever in a sweet <u>unrest</u> ,	discontent   turbulence   strife   conflict disturbance
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,	
And so live ever—or else <u>swoon</u> to death.	faint   blackout   lose consciousness

Students could create their own alternative word lists or they can be provided - or there could be a mixture of the two. The task then is to decide which of the alternatives might provide the best (or at least a reasonable) substitute. This would make a good pair or group activity. Some words might make good sense but spoil the rhythm, which could be another factor in discussion. For light relief, which words would be the least suitable? One of the things that such an investigation cannot fail to highlight is the way 'steadfast' is re-emphasised in alternatives for both 'eternal' and 'patient'.

### Further thoughts

Note in the last four lines, repetitions (ever) and oppositions (sweet unrest; live ever ... swoon to death)

Are these the best words in the best order? Why would 'constant' not be a better word than 'steadfast', either throughout, or to avoid repetition?

Why 'human' shores? Why 'ripening' breast? (On line analyses are coy about this. Because the fair love is still young, immature? Or do some words come into the mind of the poet and just 'feel right' and remain unexamined? After all, the poet doesn't have to study or justify the words of a poem for an assessment...)

The film 'Bright Star' takes some liberties with Keats' biography but is worth watching, or you could pick out clips where Keats or Fanny Brawne speak the sonnet. (Fanny's recitation is right at the end of the film).

As we know, the 'I' in poems should not automatically be interpreted as the voice of the poet; it can equally well be that of a persona he or she has adopted. However, in Andrew Motion's biography 'Keats' (pp 472-474) it is made clear that 'Bright Star' is indeed as personal as most commentators have assumed.