*Bright Star!* - Synopsis and commentary

[Synopsis of Bright Star! Commentary on Bright Star! Glossary](https://crossref-it.info/textguide/john-keats-selected-poems/40/2942)

Synopsis of Bright Star!

The speaker addresses the North Star which appears unchanging in the night sky. He begins by saying that he wishes he were as ‘steadfast’ as the star – but then he says that he does not mean he wants to be in ‘lone splendour’ gazing down on the oceans, the snow-covered mountains and moors. Instead he wants to be steadfast in the sense of being close to his beloved, pillowed on her breast. He wants never to leave her and always to be close enough to her to hear her breathing.

Commentary on Bright Star!

Most scholars agree that ‘my fair love’ refers to Fanny Brawne, although Keats biographer Robert Gittings disputes this and thinks it is addressed to Mrs Isabella Jones, with whom Keats supposedly had an affair.

The evidence supporting Fanny Brawne draws a parallel between this sonnet and lines in Keats’ letter Lines to Fanny written in July 1819:

I will imagine you Venus tonight and pray, pray, pray to your star like a Heothen. Yours ever, fair Star.

However, as has been pointed out, Keats is here thinking of Fanny as the evening star, Venus, whereas in the sonnet Keats’ ‘bright star’ is the North Star.

Assuming that the poem is addressed to Fanny, Keats met her in December 1818 and they declared their love for each other shortly afterwards. They were engaged in October 1819. Because Keats burned all but her last letters – and these were buried with him – it is hard to know the precise nature of their relationship. What is clear, however, is that it was passionate (though probably not sexual) and mutual. It was the central, intense experience of their lives. Fanny copied out this poem in a volume of Dante which Keats had given her.

The poem’s opening four lines have been compared to Keats’ description of Windermere in his letter to his brother Tom in June 1818:

the two views we have had of [the lake] are of the most noble tenderness – they can never fade away – they make one forget the divisions of life; age, youth, poverty and riches; and refine one’s sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open-lidded and stedfast over the wonders of the great Power.

**Glossary**

**aloft**: both ‘aloft in the night sky’ and ‘above the night sky’

**Eremite**: recluse or anchorite (someone who has withdrawn from the world for religious reasons)

**pure ablution**: refers to the religious [rite](https://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rite)s of purification performed by a [priest](https://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/priest) (l.5). The literal meaning of ‘ablution’ is washing clean, which is what the tides (‘moving waters’) do to the ‘human shores’ twice every day.

**swoon to death**: In his poem *Endymion* Keats had associated ‘swoon’ with sexual ecstasy. In sixteenth century poetry sexual intercourse was frequently referred to as ‘the little death’.

**Investigating commentary on *Bright Star!***

* In what sense does the speaker in the poem want to be as steadfast as the star?
* What aspects of the star does he not wish to have?
* What comparisons can you find between this poem and the description of Windermere quoted in the commentary?