‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ is a ballad from the Romantic period. It was part of a literary movement that had arisen to counter the theories of the Age of Enlightenment – to bring back imagination, beauty, and art to a culture that had become science-based, theoretical, and realist. Romantic writers saw the violence of the French Revolution as proof of the failure of science and reason, and the suffocation of the human spirit.

Most of John Keats’ prolific works were written in 1819, shortly after he met the love of his life, Fanny Brawne, and contracted a mortal disease. Keats’ poems focus on a return to beauty: Greek myth, fairies, idealism, nature, and individualism are all prominent themes in not just his work, but of Romantic literature as a whole.

Explore La Belle Dame sans Merci

La Belle Dame sans Merci by John Keats

Summary

‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ by John Keats is a beautiful poem about a fairy who condemns a knight after seducing him with her singing and looks.

The first three stanzas introduce the unidentified speaker and the knight. The speaker comes across the knight wandering around in the dead of winter when “the sedge has withered from the lake/ And no birds sing.” In this way, Keats depicts a barren and bleak landscape.

The knight responds to the speaker, telling him how he met a lady in the meadows who was “full beautiful, a faery’s child”. Here, Keats’ language sweetens. The first three stanzas were bitter and devoid of emotion, but the introduction of the “lady in the meads” produces softness in the language of the knight. He reminisces on the lady’s beauty and her apparent innocence – her long hair, light feet, and wild eyes – and on her otherworldliness, as well. Moreover, he describes his sweet memories of the Lady: feeding each other, giving her presents, traveling with her, and being together.

In the eighth stanza, the lady weeps for she knows that they cannot be together as she is a fairy, and he is a mortal. She lulls him to sleep out of which he does not immediately wake. In his dream, the knight sees pale people like kings, princes, and warriors. They tell him that he has been enthralled by the woman without mercy. He wakes up from the nightmare alone, on the cold hillside, and tells the persona that is why he stays there, wandering, looking for the lady. The last stanza leaves the fate of the knight ambiguous.

Meaning

Keats’ ballad ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ describes the short encounter between a knight and a fairy lady. The title of the poem is interesting as it isn’t Keats’ own invention. He adopted the title of Alain Chartier’s French courtly poem ‘La Belle Dame Sans Mercy’. In French, the phrase means, “A Beautiful Lady Without Mercy“. Readers can see the variation of the words “Mercy” and “Merci”. It seems that Keats went with the French spelling of the word.

Alain Chartier wrote that poem presumably in 1424 and the poem consists of 100 stanzas. Whereas, Keats’ poem is comparably short and doesn’t follow Chartier’s octosyllabic line pattern. Apart from that, as the poet chose directly a French phrase, the title also follows the French pronunciation.

Structure and Form

‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ is after the form of the lyrical ballad. Many well-known poets of the romantic era used this form in their written works. This particular ballad has a meter and rhyme scheme that produces a flow that engages the reader.

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter, which simply means that the stress falls on four words per line. The effect of this scheme is that it flows like a song, smoothly and with rhythm. Thus, it is called a lyrical ballad. The rhyme and rhythm are all designed to lure the reader in, just as the knight in the poem was lured in by the beautiful fairy-woman.

Keats wrote this in an outdated form of poetry that capitalizes on simple language and imagery to bring across its story. By utilizing the ballad form, it lends the poem an air of timelessness, and an almost novelistic approach to imagery. Even the story itself is evocative of the ballad tradition. Ballads were used as entertainment, and their length was supposed to keep listeners engaged, as the ballad was a form of oral poetry.

Tone and Mood

The tone and mood of this poem are also designed to help the readers to identify with John Keats’ feelings as he neared the end of his life. One could argue that the Knight in this poem is Keats himself. Although there are some differences between his life and the knight’s story, there are certainly plenty of similarities that would suggest that he uses the knight as a speaker to proclaim to the world just what he feels as he neared his untimely death.

Literary Devices

Keats’ ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ contains several literary devices that make the emotional story of the “knight-at-arms” more heart-touching to the readers. These include but are not limited to:

Anaphora: The poem begins with an apostrophe. Using it, the poet introduces the knight as well as evokes his spirit into the poem.

Metaphor: In “squirrel’s granary” the poet uses a metaphor. Here, the poet refers to the squirrel’s hole. In “fever-dew” there is a metaphor and the comparison is between the dew and the fever.

Personal Metaphor: In “starved lips” there is a personal metaphor.

Metonymy: The word “death-pale” is a metonym. The kings and princes look pale as they have died. It’s a reference to the cause in place of the effect of being pale.

Synecdoche: The poet refers to the color of the lily in the line “I see a lily on thy brow”. It’s a use of synecdoche.

Alliteration: It occurs when the poet uses the same consonant sounds at the beginning of lines. For example, “Full” and “faery” in line two of the fourth stanza and “light” and “long” in the following line. The phrase “her hair” contains another alliteration.

Circumlocution: The phrase, “fragrant zone” contains this device. It seems that the knight has made a garland that touches the lady’s bosom.

Allusion: There is a biblical allusion in the line, “And honey wild, and manna-dew”.

Palilogy: The poet uses this device by repeating the word, “wild” twice.

Repetition: The last stanza contains a repetition of the idea present in the first line of the poem.

Caesura: It occurs when the poet uses a pause in the middle of a line. For example, “And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—” and “Full beautiful—a faery’s child.”

Imagery: It can be seen through the powerful images in the knight’s dreams as he’s forced to suffer terrible nightmares. For example, “I saw their starved lips in the gloam, / With horrid warning gapèd wide.”

Analysis, Stanza by Stanza

Stanza One

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,

 Alone and palely loitering?

The sedge has withered from the lake,

 And no birds sing.

With the opening stanza of ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci,’ the speaker sets up the scene and the subject of this poem. The speaker comes upon a knight. He knows that this man is a knight upon seeing him, but he quickly reveals that this knight is not behaving as one might expect a knight to behave. The character does not seem brave and valiant. Rather, he is alone and “loitering”. He seems to be wandering about aimlessly.

The speaker wonders why, and he asks. He also remarks about the time of year and claims that “the sedge has withered from the lake/ And no birds sing”. Here, he is indicating that spring is over, and there is no lively singing or springtime beauty in the atmosphere. He wonders why the knight would be wandering about, pale and lonely, during this time of the year. It is probably growing cold, as the birds have flown south already. The speaker finds it concerning that this knight is sickly and alone, without shelter, at this time of the year.

It is important to note here that during the summer of 1818, Keats’ younger brother Tom succumbed to tuberculosis. In the very same year, Keats began exhibiting symptoms of the disease, and thus impending death was heavy on his mind. It gets reflected in the very first stanza of the poem.

Stanza Two

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,

 So haggard and so woe-begone?

The squirrel’s granary is full,

 And the harvest’s done.

With this stanza, the reader can grasp the full picture of what the Knight looks like. The speaker describes him as “alone”, “pale”, “haggard”, and “woe-begone”. The setting is also described. It seems that the harvest is done. Therefore, the reader can imagine the bare, dry ground and the silence of nature after the birds have already flown south. Overall, this description gives ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ a very gloomy tone. The subject is down-trodden, and nature itself seems stripped of all joy. The birds have ceased their singing and the squirrels have stored up enough food to go into hiding. Thus, the lonely knight is left utterly alone.

Stanza Three

I see a lily on thy brow,

 With anguish moist and fever-dew,

And on thy cheeks a fading rose

 Fast withereth too.

In this stanza, the speaker informs the knight that he looks very ill. He tells him that his face is as pale as a lily and that his face looks moist with sweat as if he had a fever. All of his colors are fading quickly from his cheeks. It appears the speaker is very concerned about the knight’s health. He speaks to the knight to make sure he is aware of how ill he is. In the following stanza, the knight answers him.

Stanza Four

I met a lady in the meads,

 Full beautiful—a faery’s child,

Her hair was long, her foot was light,

 And her eyes were wild.

The speaker is now the knight as he gives answers to the concerns of the first speaker. He tells him of a lady that he met and describes her long hair and her light step. Her eyes were “wild”. It is clear from this stanza, that the knight fell in love at the first sight of this lady he describes. He describes her as not quite human. The knight doesn’t refer to her as fully fairy, but he does call her a “faery’s child” which gives the reader the impression that she is at least half fairy.

Stanza Five

I made a garland for her head,

 And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;

She looked at me as she did love,

 And made sweet moan

In this stanza, the knight describes his relationship with this lady. It appears that he won her heart. He made her a garland of flowers for her head. Then he made her bracelets from flowers. He also adorned her private parts with flowers. This is implied when he says that he put flowers on her “fragrant zone”. Then the knight implies that he made love to this woman. He says that “she looked at [him] as she did love” and that she made a sweet moan. This implies that the two were intimate with one another.

Stanza Six

I set her on my pacing steed,

 And nothing else saw all day long,

For sidelong would she bend, and sing

 A faery’s song.

The sixth stanza can be read as an extension of the previous stanza, where the lady riding the knight’s stallion is an extended metaphor for their continued sexual relations. On the other hand, it could be read literally. In this case, the knight would have placed her on his horse and watched her ride “all day long” while she sang. In either case, the knight is so entirely absorbed with this woman that he sees and hears nothing else. He is devoted to her the entire day long.

Stanza Seven

She found me roots of relish sweet,

 And honey wild, and manna-dew,

And sure in language strange she said—

 ‘I love thee true’.

This stanza continues to describe the fairy woman’s supernatural qualities. She feeds him sweet roots, wild honey, and manna. The “roots of relish sweet” refer to her human qualities, but the manna and the wild honey are symbolic of her supernatural qualities. In the Jewish religion, it is told that God fed the Israelite’s bread from heaven called manna. This same God promised the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey. Thus, the fact that the fairy-woman was able to feed him bread from heaven, wild honey, and roots suggests that the fairy is part human, part supernatural. The reference to “language strange” is yet another evidence of the lady’s unnatural lineage.

Stanza Eight

She took me to her Elfin grot,

 And there she wept and sighed full sore,

And there I shut her wild wild eyes

 With kisses four.

The knight continues to describe the fairy woman’s qualities. He describes her cave, or “grot” as something elf-like in nature. Then, he gives her human characteristics once again when he says that “she wept and sighed full sore”. He does not explain why she cried, but he does imply that he wiped her tears away with his kisses. This occurs between the knight and the fairy-woman allows the reader to understand the depth of their relationship. Earlier in ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, they connected physically. Here, they connect emotionally as the knight is there to wipe away her tears.

Scholars are divided on the precise motives of the lady while classes of scholars believe that the lady’s weeping in the “Elfin grot” does bring up the ideas of undivided love. Several scholars believe otherwise. However, it seems that it is the latter. The lady understands that they cannot be together, and chooses to leave him to sleep.

Stanza Nine

And there she lullèd me asleep,

 And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—

The latest dream I ever dreamt

 On the cold hill side.

With this stanza, readers can begin to feel a little uncertain about this fairy-woman. They should question why she is lulling this Knight to sleep. In the previous stanza, she cried, and there, no reason was offered for her tears. Now, she lulls him to sleep.

The knight has a dream. It is a nightmare. For in his recollection of this dream, he cries out “Ah! Woe betide!” which suggests that this dream was woeful. Then he says that this was “the latest dream I ever dreamt” which suggests that it was the last dream that he would ever dream. He does not explain how he knows that this was the last dream he would ever have, but he seems so confident of it that the reader does not question it.

Suddenly, this poem has taken a turn for the worse. Something awful has happened, and the reader can begin to understand that the fairy-woman is at fault, but there are no specifics given just yet.

Stanza Ten

I saw pale kings and princes too,

 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;

They cried—‘La Belle Dame sans Merci

 Thee hath in thrall!’

At this point, the knight begins to describe the “pale kings and princes” that he saw in his dream. In this case, “pale” is a symbol of death. Since ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ has already introduced biblical symbols of the supernatural, it is not too far-fetched to conclude that the pale warriors and princes and kings are all after the likeness of the pale horse in the book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. The pale horse and rider of the Bible symbolize death and bring destruction.

This poem continues to become more and more nightmarish as it continues. All of the pale kings, princes, and warriors cry out “La Belle Dame sans Merci”. This, of course, is the title of the poem. It is in French, and it translates to read “The Beautiful Woman Without Mercy”.

Suddenly, amid his dream, the Knight becomes aware of what is happening to him. He has been seduced by a woman who would show him no mercy. Not only that, but he is one of many who have come to ruin at the hands of this fairy-woman.

Stanza Eleven

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,

 With horrid warning gapèd wide,

And I awoke and found me here,

 On the cold hill’s side.

The knight comes to the full realization of what has happened to him. Every man that the fairy has ever seduced has died. He describes these dead men that were in his dream. They have “starved lips” and they looked at him “with horrid warning” but it was too late. The knight had already been seduced, and as a consequence of his moment of pleasure, he now faces death. When he awoke from his dream, he found himself “on the cold hill’s side” with no fairy-woman in proximity. From the original description of the knight, the readers can conclude that he is, in fact, dying.

Stanza Twelve

And this is why I sojourn here,

 Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is withered from the lake,

 And no birds sing.

In the final stanza, the knight finally answers the original question of the first speaker. He claims that because of being seduced by the fairy-woman, he now sojourns “alone and palely loitering” in his near-death state. Keats ends ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ with the line with which the first stanza ends. He repeats the first speaker’s observation that “the sedge is withered from the lake/ And no birds sing”.

The readers are left to grieve the loss of the knight. He dies alone with no one to comfort him in his last moments. Not even the birds are there to sing a song to offer comfort in his death. He is utterly alone in his last moments, and all because he was seduced by that beautiful fairy-woman without mercy.

Although the language used is simple, Keats manages to create two parallel universes. The real world, where the knight is found alone, and palely loitering, is dark and dismal and wintery. The other world, where the Lady lives, seems exotic and beautiful, with such glorious foods as honey wild and manna-dew. The nightmarish imagery that exists between the worlds can be taken to be part and parcel of the lady’s world, as it is she who whisks young men away, willing or unwilling, to their doom.

Themes

‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ contains several themes such as dejection in love, heartbreak, sadness, death, and illusion vs reality. The most important theme of the poem is dejection in love. There is a sense of separation in the knights that makes him appear lifeless. His loitering in the wild without any hope depicts the need for love in his life. The lady’s illusory existence makes him sadder about his reality. The person with whom he had spent some time, doesn’t exist at all. This thought pains the knight deep. Apart from that, the themes of sadness and heartbreak go side by side in the poem. The knight’s mental condition is so sad that the poet thinks even nature laments his loss.

It isn’t fallacious to think that the theme of death is also an integral part of the poem. While writing this poem, the poet was going through a similar kind of condition. It seems that through the story of the knight the poet somehow tried to express his feelings. He knew about his approaching death and also aware of the fact that unison with his beloved wasn’t possible. As being close to entering the gate of death, the poet’s mind was flooded with the thoughts of oblivion.

The first two stanzas reflect not only the knight’s but also the poet’s state of mind. In the tenth stanza, the theme of death is visible. Here, the dead kings and princes remind the knight that the lady without pity captivated his mind. Hence, it’s useless to wait any longer for her.

Historical Context

John Keats wrote ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ in the summer of 1819 when he was dying from tuberculosis. Then he was in Wentworth Palace, the home of his friend Charles Armitage Brown. Their neighbors at Wentworth Palace were Fanny Brawne and her mother, and because they lived in the other half of Wentworth Palace, they saw each other daily. After a while, he fell in love with Fanny Brawne, though being poor, he could not marry her.

He had already seen his mother and brother die from this terrible disease before he contracted it himself. The knowledge of his imminent death likely inspired this poem. While his mother died in 1810, he contracted the same disease in 1819. He had seen the effect that the disease had on his mother and his brother, and he knew what was to come for himself.

Even more tragic than his contraction of tuberculosis is that he was newly engaged and desperately in love. He claimed that he could bear to die, but he could not bear to leave his love. It is not difficult to make a connection between this poem and Keats’ life. Although he does not appear to view his real-life love as the cause of his death, there remain striking parallels. Both the knight in this poem and John Keats himself fell in love shortly before death. Both were unable to enjoy love for very long before death became imminent in their lives.

About John Keats

Sadly, John Keats, one of the best 18th-century British poets, died at the young age of twenty-five. Having studied some medicine, Keats knew his symptoms well enough to know that his time was limited. Just as Keats had found love, best just as his poetry was beginning to be noticed, he faced his early death. Being fully aware of his symptoms and the result of his disease, Keats also faced depression. It occurred to him his life was to end just as it was beginning. He left behind a fiancee whom he desperately loved and a plethora of poems that would eventually become some of the most renowned and beloved John Keats poems of all time.

FAQs

What does ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ mean in English?

The meaning of “La belle dame” is “the beautiful lady”. The French preposition “sans” means “without” and “merci” is a French exclamation for saying “thank you”. But the word “merci” stands for the English word “mercy” in the title of Keats’ poem. Literally, it means “The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy”.

How is ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ a romantic poem?

Keats’ ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ is a pure romantic poem. Several characteristics of romantic poetry can be found in this poem such as imagination, nature, melancholy, medievalism, supernaturalism, and subjectivity.

How is ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ a tragedy?

This ballad presents a tragic character and his destiny after being deceived by the unmerciful lady. Keats’ speaker describes his present condition by depicting his mental state as well as the ambiance around the character. It is a tragic poem as the hero suffers badly for the choice (intentional or unintentional) he made after encountering the lady for the first time.

What is the nature of “La Belle Dame”?

The “La Belle Dame” was “sans merci” or without mercy as the title of the poem asserts. Her physical beauty was so lucrative that the knight could not help but fall in love with her in the first instance. Her “wild eyes” hints at the nature of the lady. She stole the knight’s heart but she abstained hers.

What did the beautiful lady give the “knight-at-arms” to eat?

The beautiful lady gave sweet roots, wild honey, and manna-dew to the “knight-at-arms”.

Why is the knight in ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ so pale and ill?

The knight was all alone on the cold hill’s side when he awoke from his dream. The lady who said, “I love thee true” left him after she lulled him to sleep. For the abrupt ending of his love story, he was extremely sad and his physical appearance reflected his mental state.

What does the knight gift the beautiful lady?

The knight gifted the lady a handmade garland, bracelets, and last but not least four warm kisses.