# "La Belle Dame sans Merci" - Selection of Commentary

**Summary**

An unidentified speaker asks a knight what afflicts him. The knight is pale, haggard, and obviously dying. "And on thy cheeks a fading rose / Fast withereth too — ." The knight answers that he met a beautiful lady, "a faery's child" who had looked at him as if she loved him. When he set her on his horse, she led him to her cave. There she had sung him to sleep. In his sleep he had nightmarish dreams. Pale kings, princes, and warriors told him that he had been enslaved by a beautiful but cruel lady. When he awoke, the lady was gone and he was lying on a cold hillside.

**Analysis**

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a ballad, a medieval genre revived by the romantic poets. Keats uses the so-called ballad stanza, a quatrain in alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines. The shortening of the fourth line in each stanza of Keats' poem makes the stanza seem a self-contained unit, gives the ballad a deliberate and slow movement, and is pleasing to the ear. Keats uses a number of the stylistic characteristics of the ballad, such as simplicity of language, repetition, and absence of details; like some of the old ballads, it deals with the supernatural. Keats' economical manner of telling a story in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is the direct opposite of his lavish manner in *The Eve of St. Agnes.*Part of the fascination exerted by the poem comes from Keats' use of understatement.

Keats sets his simple story of love and death in a bleak wintry landscape that is appropriate to it: "The sedge has wither'd from the lake / And no birds sing!" The repetition of these two lines, with minor variations, as the concluding lines of the poem emphasizes the fate of the unfortunate knight and neatly encloses the poem in a frame by bringing it back to its beginning.

In keeping with the ballad tradition, Keats does not identify his questioner, or the knight, or the destructively beautiful lady. What Keats does not include in his poem contributes as much to it in arousing the reader's imagination as what he puts into it. La belle dame sans merci, the beautiful lady without pity, is a *femme fatale,*a Circelike figure who attracts lovers only to destroy them by her supernatural powers. She destroys because it is her nature to destroy. Keats could have found patterns for his "faery's child" in folk mythology, classical literature, Renaissance poetry, or the medieval ballad. With a few skillful touches, he creates a woman who is at once beautiful, erotically attractive, fascinating, and deadly.

Some readers see the poem as Keats' personal rebellion against the pains of love. In his letters and in some of his poems, he reveals that he did experience the pains, as well as the pleasures, of love and that he resented the pains, particularly the loss of freedom that came with falling in love. However, the ballad is a very objective form, and it may be best to read "La Belle Dame sans Merci" as pure story and no more. How Keats felt about his love for Fanny Brawne we can discover in the several poems he addressed to her, as well as in his letters.

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/k/keats-poems/summary-and-analysis/la-belle-dame-sans-merci-original-version>

**The Title**

Keats took the title from a poem by the medieval poet, Alain Cartier. It means, the beautiful woman without mercy.

**General Comments**

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" seems easy to understand at the narrative level. An unidentified passerby asks the knight what is wrong (stanzas I-III). The knight answers that he has been in love with and abandoned by a beautiful lady (stanzas IV-XII). Because Keats is imitating the folk ballad, he uses simple language, focuses on one event, provides minimal details about the characters, and makes no judgments. Some details are realistic and familiar, others are unearthly and strange. As a result, the poem creates a sense of mystery which has intrigued many readers.

The poem has also puzzled most readers. What does the poem mean? What is the nature of La Belle Dame sans Merci? What is the meaning of the knight's experience? Why has the knight, one of Keats's dreamers, been ravaged by the visionary or dream experience? What is the meaning of the dream? Was the knight deluded by his beloved or did he delude himself?

**Part I: The Anonymous Speaker**

Most readers take the anonymous speaker at face value: he is a concerned passerby who comes upon the knight accidentally and who describes accurately and factually the condition of the knight and the place where they meet. However, is it possible that the knight's pitiful condition exists only in the mind or perception of the anonymous speaker? We have only his word that the knight looks pale, haggard, woe-begone, etc. To carry this train of thought to an extreme, we could ask whether there really is a knight. Could this entire poem be the hallucination of a madman? If we accept any of these interpretations of the anonymous speaker, is the meaning of the poem affected? Is the effectiveness of the poem affected?

Do we automatically make assumptions about the speaker? Is the anonymous speaker male? Whether the speaker is male or female, do we assume that the speaker is white? Why? Do these assumptions affect our reading of the poem and its effect on us?

**Stanzas I-II**

In the first two lines of stanzas I and II, the anonymous speaker asks a question. The first line of both questions is identical ("O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms"). The second lines differ somewhat; in stanza I, the question focuses on his physical condition ("Alone and palely loitering"); in stanza II, the question describes both the knight's physical state and his emotional state ("Haggard and woe-begone"). This repetition with slight variation is called[incremental repetition](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/lit_term.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22ballad) and is a characteristic of the folk ballad.

This speaker sees no reason for the knight's presence ("loitering") in such a barren spot (the grass is "wither'd" and no birds sing). Even in this spot, not all life is wasteland, however; the squirrel's winter storage is full, and the harvest has been completed. In other words, there is an alternative or fulfilling life which the knight could choose. Thus lines 3 and 4 of stanzas I and II present contrasting views of life.

**Stanza III**

This stanza elaborates on the knight's physical appearance and mental state, which are associated with dying and with nature. In the previous stanzas, the descriptions of nature are factual; here, nature is used metaphorically. His pallor is compared first to the whiteness of a lily, then to a rose; the rose is "fading" and quickly "withereth." The lily, of course, is a traditional symbol of death; the rose, a symbol of beauty. The knight's misery is suggested by the "dew" or perspiration on his forehead.

What is Keats trying to emphasize by using both "fading" and "fast withereth"? Is there a difference in the effect of "fading," the word Keats uses, and "faded"?

**Part II: The Knight**

The knight's narrative consists of three units: stanzas IV-VII describe the knight's meeting and involvement with the lady; stanza VIII presents the climax (he goes with her to the "elfin grot"); the last four stanzas describe his sleep and expulsion from the grotto. Thus, the first four stanzas (IV-VII) are balanced by the last four stanzas (IX-XII). The poem returns to where it started, so that the poem has a circular movement; reinforcing the connection of the opening and the ending, Keats uses the same language.

**Stanzas IV-IX**

The roles of the knight and the lady change. In stanzas IV, V, and VI, the knight is dominant; lines 1 and 2 of each stanza describe his actions ("I met," "I made," "I set her"), and lines three and four of these three stanzas focus on the lady.

But a shift in dominance occurs; stanza VII is devoted entirely to the lady ("She found" and "she said"). In stanza VIII the lady initiates the action and takes the dominant position in lines 1 and 2 ("She took me" and "she wept and sigh'd"); the knight's actions are presented in lines three and four. In Stanza IX, she "lull'd" him to sleep (line 1) and he "dream'd." The rest of this stanza and the next two stanzas are about his dream.

**Stanzas X and XI**

Eight and a half lines of this poem are devoted to his dream (the poem itself is only 48 lines long) and the last six lines are about the consequences of the dream. The men he dreams about are all men of power and achievement (kings, princes, and warriors). Their paleness associates them both with the loitering pale knight and with death; in fact, we are told that they are "death-pale." The description of her former lovers, with their starved lips and gaping mouths, is chilling. Is it appropriate that he awakens from this dream to a "cold" hill?

Can a political meaning be read into the poem based on the fact the fact that the men in his dream are all kings, princes, and warriors? Or is there a simpler explanation for their status? The knight is of their kind and class, so naturally he dreams of men like himself. Perhaps La Belle Dame sans Merci is attracted to this kind of man. Or Keats may merely be imitating the folk ballad, which is a traditional and conservative form and tends to observe class lines.

**Stanza XII**

The knight uses the word "sojourn," which implies he will be there for some time. The repetition of language from stanza I also reinforces the sense of no movement in connection with the knight. Ironically, although he is not moving physically, he has "moved" or been emotionally ravaged by his dream or vision.

**The Significance of La Belle Dame sans Merci**

Whereas the impact of the lady on the knight is clear, her character remains shadowy. Why? You have a number of possibilities to choose among; which one you choose will be determined by how you read the poem.

1. We see the lady only through the knight's eyes, and he didn't know her. As a human being, he cannot fully understand the non- mortal; she is a "faery's child," sings a "faery's song," and takes him to an "elfin grot." She speaks "in language strange" (VII). Whether she speaks a language unknown to the knight or merely had an unfamiliar pronunciation, the phrase suggests a problem in, if not a failure of communication. They are incompatible by nature.

2. The references to "faery" and "elfin" suggest enchantment or imagination. Her "sweet moan" and "song" represent art inspired by imagination. The lady, symbolizing imagination, takes him to an ideal world. The knight becomes enraptured by or totally absorbed in the pleasures of the imagination--the delicious foods, her song, her beauty, her love or favor ("and nothing else saw all day long"). But the imagination or visionary experience is fleeting; the human being cannot live in this realm, a fact which the dreamer chooses to ignore. The knight's refusal to let go of the joys of the imagination destroys his life in the real world.

Or is she possibly the cheating or false imagination, not true imagination? Does the food she gives him starve rather than nourish him? The men in his vision have "starved lips." Think of the ending of "Ode to a Nightingale" with its "deceiving imp."

3. This possibility is a variant of choice #2. The lady represents the ideal, and the poem is about the relationship of the real and the ideal. The knight rejects the real world with its real fulfillments for an ideal which cannot exist in the real world. In giving himself entirely to the dream of the ideal, he destroys his life in the real world.

4. The lady is evil and belongs to a tradition of "femmes fatales." She seduces him with her beauty, with her accomplishments, with her avowal of love, and with sensuality ("roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna dew"). The vision of the pale men suggests she is deliberately destructive. The destructiveness of love is a common theme in the folk ballad.

5. Is the knight self-deluded? Does he enthrall himself by placing her on his horse and making garlands for her? The knight ignores warning signs: she has "wild wild" eyes, she gives him "wild" honey, she avows her love "in language strange," and she "wept and sigh'd full sore" in the elfin grotto. Also he continues to desire her, despite the wasteland he finds himself in and despite the warning of his dream.

**One Last Point: The Short Line**

Lines 1, 2, and 3 of each stanza generally have four feet and eight or nine syllables. However, the last line of each stanza is a shorter line; it has only two or three [feet](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/lit_term.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22meter) and only four or five syllables. This change is heard by the ear, even if the mind is not conscious of the change, and calls attention to the short line. Look at the last line of each stanza and consider whether the idea presented in any of these lines warrants this kind of emphasis or attention. Or did Keats make a mistake?

**An Alternate Reading**

Other readings of this poem are possible and plausible, even compelling. I am including a persuasively argued reading which was proposed by a student,[Johnson Fleury-Stanis](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/belle_alt.html), which you may prefer or which may inspire you to find your own reading of the poem.