

# AQA English Literature A-level

## Poetry: Love Through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

John Keats: “La Belle Dame sans Merci”

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## LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

John Keats

### Brief Summary

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (French for “the beautiful lady without pity”) is a ballad of 12 quatrains following a regular ABCB rhyme scheme. It tells the story of how a knight encounters a beautiful elfin woman who abandons him and leaves him distraught and void of life and love.

### Synopsis

Stanza 1: The unknown voice acts as a device through which the story is revealed. They ask the knight what he is doing loitering alone by a lake. This description contrasts with the **traditional romantic image** of a noble knight on an energetic quest. The speaker also sets the scene lakeside and in a **barren, lifeless area**.

Stanza 2: The voice continues to ask what pains the knight and why he looks so unwell. The speaker suggests winter is coming, the harvest is over and the animals are preparing for the cold months.

Stanza 3: The speaker describes the knight’s pale complexion, emphasising that he looks unwell.

Stanza 4: The knight takes over and **starts telling his tale**. He says he met a lady who was an absolute picture of beauty. He describes her as a “**faery’s child**”, implying her beauty was other-worldly.

### Summary

**Context** – Keats wrote “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” in 1819, a significant year for the writer as one of love and loss. In that year, his brother died of tuberculosis and his relationship with his neighbour Fanny Brawne reached its climax. The poem can be seen as an exploration of fellow poet William Coleridge’s notion of “willing suspension of disbelief” and a development of Keat’s own theory of “negative capability”.

**Structure** – 12 quatrains in the form of an English Ballad. Keats used the balladic stanza to root his poem in tradition and tie the form to mythic content. The poem follows a traditional ABCB rhyme scheme.

**Language** – The poem has two speakers, one unnamed and the other the knight who tells his story of love and abandonment. There is significant use of symbolism throughout the poem. This creates vivid imagery. There is careful attention to sound through alliteration, assonance and repetition.

**Key points** – Keats challenges the line between reality and imagination and the deceptive nature of love. Enhanced by its ballad form and vivid lyrical language, the poem warns that love, beauty and joy are short-lived and that physical attraction and seduction can mislead anyone, even a noble, chivalrous knight.



Stanza 5: The knight bestowed upon the lady hand-made gifts of garlands and bracelets. He thought that he could see love in her eyes when he gave them to her. There is a **suggestion of some sexual act** in “**and made sweet moan**”.

Stanza 6: He let her ride on his horse and was **bewitched** by not only her beauty but also her voice which was like a song.

Stanza 7: He describes that she fed him roots and other plants found in the surroundings and told him in a strange or unfamiliar language that she loved him.

Stanza 8: She took him to a cave where she cried and they embraced. He kissed her whilst she closed her eyes.

Stanza 9: She encouraged him to sleep and he had a dream which he notes was the last time he slept before being found by the first speaker.

Stanza 10: In his dream he saw pale kings and princes all crying out that the beautiful, merciless woman has him in her grasp. This can be interpreted as a **warning for the knight**; the woman has enchanted many others before him and made them **sick with love**.

Stanza 11: The horrible faces and cries of the men in his dream wake him and he finds himself alone in the limbo space between the cold hill side and the lake.

Stanza 12: He explains finally that these are the reasons why the first speaker has found him here by the lake, perhaps waiting for the woman to return or sombrely lamenting his loss. He suggests his tale and his ordeal is also the reason why the plants “wither'd” and “no birds sing”. Possibly **his perception of the world**, after being tricked and abandoned in love is **limited to this pessimistic, melancholic view**.

## Context

### Historical Context:

- 4 years before the poem was written, **Napoleon's army had fallen** at the Battle of Waterloo and England was revering in the money gained from supporting the dictator's opposition.
- King George III was mentally ill and unable to rule so his son, Prince George of Wales ruled England as a proxy. This situation influenced writing such as Percy Shelly's sonnet “England in 1819” which ridiculed the King.



- Industrialisation in British cities created a working class that constantly agitated for better working conditions and political rights.
- Queen Victoria was born in 1819 and the society that flourished under her rule would elevate Keats' writing to the place it now holds in the English canon.

### Literary Context:

- Keats wrote "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in the early **Spring of 1819**. This was just a few weeks before he wrote some of his most powerful odes and **close to his death** in 1821.
- The poem was published in May 1820 in the journal *Indicator*. This year, a year before his death, was his most productive. Some examples of the odes he wrote are "To Autumn", "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode to a Grecian Urn" which are now some of the most famous poems in the English language.
- The poem is **infused with Keats' personal life and conflicts**, seen in the predicament of the dying medieval knight, the predominant character of the ballad.
- It is suggested that this poem also **seals Keats' pact with literary immortality**. From his letters at the time, there is a sudden merging between his thinking about poetry and poetic theory and the gestation of his works.
- Keats also took **much inspiration from his contemporaries**, their practice and theories, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. The aforementioned poets wrote a collaborative book, *Lyrical Ballads*, which significantly influenced the English Romantic movement.
- Coleridge's notions of "willing suspension of disbelief" fostered Keats' concept of "negative capability" which is an important working principle in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". The theory refers to the **poet's ability to follow inspiration** without letting prejudice interfere. The two characters, the knight and the beautiful woman, are "shadows of imagination" (Coleridge) and ask the reader to engage in **poetic faith**, which Keats spoke of in letters to his brothers George and Thomas Keats.

. . . I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. (Letter XXIV—December 21, 1817)

- Keats believed that the poet had to allow the imagination to overcome the critical demeanor of the traditional poet. This is seen in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" by transferring **human emotions** onto **supernatural characters**, making them seem true and plausible.
- "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" was written in April 1819 and draws inspiration from Alain Charrier's poem which tells a similar story.
- The **flower imagery** Keats uses is common in English literature before the Romantic period (around 1798-1837). The period was one of great change and



many writers found inspiration in the French Revolution and the economic and political atmosphere of the time.

### Keats' personal history:

- For Keats, this was a difficult time of love and loss.
- His brother, Tom, died in December 1818 of tuberculosis.
- Keats, who was trained as a surgeon, was Tom's nurse and would die of the same disease 2 years later. There are some suspicions that he first became infected whilst nursing his brother.
- The spring of 1819 was also the peak of his relationship with his neighbour Fanny Brawne. He was engaged to her in 1819 though he died before they were married.
- He dedicated several of his works to her, such as "Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art".

### **The Title**

- The title is French, meaning "**The beautiful lady without mercy**".
- Keats **alludes to a much earlier work** of literature, the poem of the same name, written by Alain Chartier. This is why the title is in French, rather than translated to its English equivalent.
- By titling the poem as such, Keats associates the poem from the start with ideas of **medieval romance** explored within the original.
- It also, for an English audience, brings in an element of the exotic and the unknown, presented in the fary-tale style and enigmatic lady the knight falls in love with.



## La Belle Dame sans Merci

Enigmatic “o” emphasises the speaker’s pity for the knight.

Indicative of his physical health.

Personification- the plant moves away from the water, a life-giving source, creating suspicion and warning the reader of the unattractiveness of the lake.

Uses old language, typical of Medieval romances. Sense of pity for the knight.

Metaphor for the abundance of the natural world, attempt to lighten the mood.

Symbolism- the lily is white, like his face but also the traditional funeral flower, suggesting an impending death.

Withering is repeated several times, a leit-motif, emphasising the dead and decaying landscape and sad fate of the betrayed knight.

Knight uses the same language as other speaker- makes it hard to tell them apart. This is part of the ballad tradition Keats mimics

Long loose hair at the time was associated with sensuality and sexuality

Signs of his adoration and attempts to conquer her. The “fragrant zone” is likely a euphemism.

Throughout the poem there is ambiguity in who seduced who.

The knight has emotionally moved into another world. He’s totally absorbed by the woman and lost touch with reality.

Sidesaddle suggests she doesn’t face him front on, she’s deceptive and dishonest.

The plants are not typically found in Winter, suggesting the woman gave him feelings of warmth and Spring.

Implies the knight is reassuring himself of his truthfulness. Keats toys with the perversion of language;

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

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.

I see a lily on thy brow,  
With anguish moist and fever-dew,  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
Fast withereth too.

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.

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

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.

She found me roots of relish sweet,  
And honey wild, and manna-dew,  
And sure in language strange she said—  
‘I love thee true’.

The pace starts off slow, appropriate for the depressed mood of the knight

Note: water is later linked to the female and may provide an explanation for the “withering”. Lack of life, knight is left bereft. Representative of the knight’s inner emotional life. Joy is gone. Spondaic (1 syllable words), definitive. They’re sensitive to the knight’s emotional and physical state.

Relation to water and the female- has the woman induced the knight’s fever?

Metaphor- the rose, a symbol of love, fading implies the knight felt a love so strong it is possible to see it physically leave his body.

Typical chivalric romantic trope.

The knight associates the woman with mythical, other-worldly beauty. Consider Greek Mythical Sirens who lured sailors to their death.

Emphasises a sense of other-worldly enchantment. “Wild” contrasts the archetypal beauty, giving the woman an element of danger.

Ambiguity in this line; does she look at him while she was in love or as if she was in love?

Suggestive of love making or a spiritual love.

Potential euphemism for sex. The knight has a dominant role where the lady is the object of the sentence.

The song could be destructive and fatal like a Siren’s song. Note: the only music in the poem and it is placed in the centre. Stanzas in the middle section end with love whereas the periphery stanzas describe death and decay.

God gave the Israelites manna when they fled Egypt and were wandering the wilderness. It is as if the woman gives the knight life and





*the moment something is insisted, it becomes suspicious.*

*Indication that something is amiss; she speaks a foreign language that he understands.*

*Adds to uncanny nature.*

*Signifies danger.*

*The knight thinks he can solve her problems with kisses. Male ignorance, in reality he's at her mercy.*

*Repetition of dream highlights the strange and unreal quality of the time spent with the woman. Latest could mean the most recent or the last dream; the knight is dying.*

*Paleness links them to the knight's complexion. The strength and status of these people has been drained.*

*Their warnings alert the knight for the first time that he is in danger.*

*Repetition from earlier stanza gives the poem a cyclical feeling. An example of epistrophe. There is a change in tense as if the speaker removed himself into a new consciousness.*

*The last stanza reiterates the first, the woman overcomes the knight. It is possible that at the time of writing, Keats knew of his impending death of tuberculosis and could be using the knight as a representation of himself.*

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.

And there she lullèd me asleep,  
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—  
The latest dream I ever dreamt  
On the cold hill side.

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!'

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.

And this is why I sojourn here,  
Alone and palely loitering,  
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

*sustenance to live and without her he would die.*

*In her territory, she takes control and the knight is now prey. The power changes hands.*

*He is under the impression that he is in control. Shutting eyes = indicative of death, implies one or more of the characters will die.*

*Knight is now the object of the sentence and lady becomes dominant.*

*But this is not where he falls asleep? The contrast shows the detachment between a life in love and a life in reality.*

*Repetition reinforces the point that anyone is susceptible to the woman's prowess.*

*Archaic for twilight- the point of transformation from day to night. A metaphor for transition from life to death.*

*Temporarily reside. Either the knight thinks he is about to die or he thinks the woman is coming back.*



## Themes

### Love and Loss

- In the poem the knight's **love transforms into an obsession** as although the beautiful woman is likely an illusion, he is unable to get her out of his mind. The poem expresses, therefore, warning about the dangers of intense romantic love.
- The knight's complexion suggests intense love and loss drains a man of his emotional energy. When the object of love disappears, the lover left behind undergoes a **spiritual death** and is unable to see beauty in the world anymore, only in what he has lost. The poem's warnings suggest that love, though wonderful in the moment, is dangerous and when obsessive leads to distraught.
- The knight describes the woman as a "**faery's child**" (line 14), suggesting her ability to charm him is a supernatural force.
- The **line between enchantment and obsession is thin**; the lady becomes the knight's sole focus and besides the lady he sees "**nothing else...all day**" (line 22)
- The reference to Manna in stanza 7 suggests that the lady is responsible for the knight's survival, **she is the very substance which he feeds off**. This can be seen as obsession; without the "**belle dame**", the knight cannot live.
- In the dream sequence, the knight sees a glimpse of what is in his future; the "**pale kings and princes**", "**death pale**" (lines 37-38). They are enslaved to the memories of their time with the "**belle dame**" and sucked dry of joy and life.
- Strangely, the lady's merciless behaviour consists of the love and joy she provides. It is her disappearance that causes pain. The poem suggests that **anything one falls in love with can cause joy and pain**. Anything can end in an instant. The **poem warns** that the joys and beauty of an intense love, like that experienced by the knight, is ultimately not worth the pain and suffering it can cause should such love come to a (potentially inevitable) end.

### Love through the ages according to history and time:

- The poem is set in the **Medieval period**. In the first stanza, the reader is introduced to the archaic "**thee**" (line 1) which immediately hints at the time setting.
- The following address, "**knight-at-arms**" confirms this. The precise placement of "**knight-at-arms**" in the line reflects some of the poem's main themes.
  - This is the knight's formal title. It represents honorable and chivalric codes of conduct that knights in Medieval times swore by.
  - The hyphens accentuate the **monosyllabic words** and "knight-at-arms" is isolated by a **caesura** on one side and an end stop on the other.
  - This highlights the **tension between the expected image of what a Medieval knight should be**, valiant and strong, **and the state in which this particular wallowing knight is found**.





- It also alienates the knight visually and grammatically from his context.
- Keats uses the Medieval setting and fairy-tale style of the ballad to create a tone which matches the beautiful, **other-worldly nature of love** but also has the capacity to expose love's **harshness**. The noble knight is overcome and his beautiful fairy-woman disappears.
- In Medieval times, the lack of scientific knowledge meant there was a greater belief in mythical and other-worldly creatures such as the fairy woman in the poem. It was believed that beautiful children were gifts from fairies.
- The tragic ballad is **based on a 15th century poem by Alain Chartier**; Keats seems to be saying that love does not change with the times, it is absorbing and destructive no matter what time or by whom it is experienced.
- In his Medieval revival, Keats brings romanticism to its culmination; the typical Medieval atmosphere of enchantment and marvel allows him to explore his theory of "negative capability".
- The beautiful fairy lady who bewitched the knight is reminiscent of the Medieval vampire who sucked men's blood cold. Her "**elfin grot**" (line 29) and the dream visions of "**pale kings and princes**" (line 37) diffuse the poem with a **mood of awe and wonder** associated with the Medieval mind. Nothing is certain and definite, instead, Keats allows the reader to use their imagination. We wonder about the nature of the "**faery child**" and the fate of the poor knight. This is what Keats wanted; to challenge the reader's perception and to make them recognise the transformative nature of poetry. It is possible to consider Keats' composition of the poem as an act of love itself.

### Truth and deception:

- The illusion of the beautiful woman means that the knight is unable to see through her disguise and recognise her merciless nature. He falls for the disguise and pays the price for doing so; her **love is death**.
- The narration is interesting as a mode of deception. Keats **asks the reader to occupy a liminal space**, to **suspend their ideas about reality** and instead believe in the fictional world drawn up in the literature. The poem is therefore **deceptive on several levels**; firstly, the reader is deceived by the words of the author by accepting them as true. Secondly, the knight is deceived by the beautiful lady whom he falls in love with. We then ask whether the knight is not in fact deceived by his own imagination, is it possible the woman never existed? Could the knight be merging the real world with his imagination? The speaker at the start is also set up to be deceived by the knight's tale. It is within all this deception that we can deduce Keats' exploration of the **complexities of love and expression**.
- Keats seems to say that love is a true and powerful emotion but it is also deceptive. What the knight experiences may not actually be love. He thinks it is because he feels the emotion so intensely. Keats warns his readers that **not every intense**



**visceral emotion or attraction can be labelled as love.** The knight is tricked by the persuasions of a “**belle dame**” but he also fools himself for believing love could come so easily.

- The **verisimilitude** of the knight’s experience with the woman may also tempt the reader to believe his experience was real and not imagined. The truth is that we will never know and Keats maintains an **element of ambiguity** akin to the knight’s bewilderment, giving the reader a little taste of angst and desperation for an answer to his problems.

### Imagination and reality:

- “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” **explores the boundaries of what is real and what is imagined.** The knight’s story contrasts the barren and dark landscape in which he found to such an extent that it could be assumed that the world he talks of is a fairy-tale. His sickness, however, emphasises that the two worlds are bound together, that imagination can be so powerful as to shape reality.
- The descriptions of the settings create a strong **contrast between the two worlds.** The first stanza uses **harsh imagery** to describe a cold, barren and inhospitable landscape. The knight’s story, however, blends the line between fantasy and reality. It capitalises on the fanciful aspects of his experience but is also ambiguous in its details. The woman speaks “**in language strange**” (line 27) and takes the knight to her “**elfin grot**” (line 29). It is not entirely clear whether these terms are meant literally. His insistence in the world being true, for example in confessing “**sure**” (line 27) she spoke a strange language, creates a suspicion that his tale may not be the literal truth. The knight describes what he saw and how he was affected, this is the reason why he has been found loitering by a cold lake.
- The dream section in stanzas 9 to 11 are significant when considering the **importance of imagination versus reality** in the poem. They are a fantasy within his fantasy; he wishes that he had foreseen the pain such love would cause him but really, he learns the truth about what his future holds.
- By the end of the poem, the knight’s reality becomes a **confused merging of the two worlds**; the lakeside and the memory of his experience. It is possible to interpret the knight as having been dreaming all along, but given the **intense detail of the imaginary world**, it seems real and this means that waking doesn’t imply an escape from torturous love.
- The final stanza is a repeat of the first but the knight speaks instead of the unnamed speaker. The poem ends with a **final depiction of a lifeless man** lingering on the memory of an experience that may never have happened. Ultimately, the presence of the beautiful woman is irrelevant as the knight is trapped in the place where imagination merges with reality and he is unable to escape back into either world after his experience.



## Romanticism:

- The ballad is known for its **romantic nature**.
  - It tells the story of a mortal bewitched by an enchantress.
  - The **transference of a mortal to the elfin world** is a **recurrent theme** in **ballad literature**.
  - The poem follows the nature of a romantic ballad in its simplicity and lyrical nature.
- It also follows the romantic trope of carefully and faithfully depicting nature.
  - It depicts the winter landscape with its barrenness and desolation: **“the sedge has withered from the lake, / And no birds sing.”** (lines 3-4).

## **Structure**

### Form:

- The poem is divided into **12 quatrains**.
- The form of the English ballad has its Romantic precursors.
- Keats used a variation of the traditional balladic stanza, the quatrain being the principal stanza form with **alternating tetrameters and trimeters**.
- Keats used *Lyrical Ballads* (written by William Wordsworth and Coleridge) as a principal reference.

### Metre:

- There is a **strong meter** that **drives the poem forward**.
- The quatrains have alternating tetrameters and trimeters. These metrics evolved from folk idiom and early minstrel forms to create a **rolling and sing-song pace**.
- The first three lines of each stanza are **iambic tetrameter** with each final line shortened to 4 or 5 syllables, **iambic dimeter**, which creates a start-stop rhythm.
- This **start-stop rhythm** can be related to the poem's interest in life and death.
- It is likely Keats took inspiration from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* which was written in alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter with 8 syllables followed by 6.
- Keats makes something new out of an old form by fitting 3 lines of each quatrain into tetrameters and the final line faster.
- Keats follows rules and also breaks them, the poem is **not perfect in metre**, there are moments where the nature of the metre is debatable.



“O **what** can **ail** thee, **knight** - at - **arms**,” (line 1)

- This line is iambic. Resultantly, the key words are stressed:
  - “What”- introduces the central question
  - “Ail”- informs the reader of the knight’s emotional state
  - “Knight”- introduces the primary character
  - “Arms”- emphasises the image of a strong knight
- This metre also establishes the **fast-paced rhythm**, like the trotting of a knight’s horse, that will follow through to the end of the poem.

“**Set** her on my **pacing steed**” (line 20)

- The reader gets a strong sense of rhythm from lines like this whereas, at other points, the meter is reliant on how it is read aloud; loitering, depending on the reader’s pronunciation, can be two syllables or it can be three.
- “Loitering”, as a 2 syllable word is a trochee (a word with a stresses-unstressed syllable combination).

“**Alone** and **palely loitering**” (line 2)

- Even if the reader pronounces “loitering” with 3 syllables the last two syllables are read as unstressed or not heavily stressed.
- This means that either reading gives the desired effect, to

Another example is:

“**Pale** warriors, **death** pale **were** they **all**.” (line 38)

- Like “loitering”, “warriors” can be read with 2 or 3 syllables.
- With 3, the line becomes one of the longest in the poem which reflects the knight’s torturous and long dream.
- This line also starts with a spondee, a foot with 2 stressed syllables and this makes the words aggressive, increases the intensity and horror of the dream and makes the tone sound like a fearful shout.



Occasionally stresses are rearranged for emphasis:

“I saw **pale kings** and **princesses too**” (line 37)

“I **saw** their **starved lips** in the **gloom**” (line 41)

- The characteristically smooth metre is skewed to reflect the knight’s turmoil and horrors of recollection.
- The stresses bring to the reader’s attention the most important, symbolic and meaningful elements of the lines. Not just deathly pale princes but princesses too, both men and women of noble stature, those high up individuals that seem untouchable. The tone created is one of disbelief, grievance and trauma.

Final lines of stanzas:

- All are 4 or 5 syllables.

“And **no birds sing**” (line 48)

“I **love** thee **true**” (line 28)

- This results in a **quickened and almost rushed end** which gives the poem its pace and they also act as reminders of the knight’s impending doom.

Rhyme Scheme:

- The poem follows the traditional rhyme scheme of an English ballad, where the even lines rhyme.
- Each quatrain follows: ABCB.
- The reason for this rhyme scheme is because ballads were initially accompanied by a song and dance. Clear rhyme would have enhanced the **lyrical nature** of such a poem.
- Keats’ therefore **honours the traditional English ballad** in La Belle Dame Sans Merci, making reference to the origin of the form and grounding the poem in tradition which reinforces the myth-like tale and “willing suspension of disbelief”.

Internal rhyme:

- There are cases of **internal rhyme** which add to the lyricism and flow of the text as well as drawing attention to certain themes.
- “**Ail thee**” (line 1) and “**paley**” (line 2)
- The sounds of the words are **drawn out like cries** which keeps the rhyme going and also gives an **indication of the knight’s emotional state**.



## Language

### Speaker:

- The poem has **2 speakers**.
- The first is an unknown and unidentified voice which opens the poem, asking “O what can ail thee” (line 1).
- The speaker is obviously concerned for the knight who is clearly distraught. From the final stanza, the reader knows the knight is loitering by a barren lakeside in the country. From this, we may discern that the first speaker has come across the knight in this territory.
- The speaker becomes a listener after the third stanza and the knight tells his tale.
- The second speaker is **the knight who takes over in stanza 4** and engages in the dialogue by answering the first speaker’s question with his tale.
- He tells of how he met a beautiful woman whose appearance was absolutely “**full beautiful**” (line 14) and the knight devotes himself to her. He adorns her with gifts like woven garlands and a ride on his steed. The lady, however, vanishes and the knight is left melancholic. His previous passion for life has been drawn away which resembles a form of **spiritual death**, induced by the disappearance of the beautiful woman who enchanted him.

### Setting:

- The middle ages (a period in Europe between 5th and 15th centuries) in the countryside.
- It is possible to specify the time period because of the way the knight kindly and nobly treats the beautiful lady. The **chivalric code** was introduced in the 11th century, so we may presume the poem is set after this introduction.
- The country may be Keats’ England or Alain Chartier’s France. This is a possibility because Keats based his poem on Alain Chartier’s with the same name.
- Because the plants are “**withered**” (line 3) and “**the harvest’s done**” (line 8), it must be late Autumn, nearly winter which creates a coolness to the atmosphere when the specific place is mentioned as between a lake a “**cold hill side**” (line 36).
- The knight wakes from his dream here and he describes how he rode with the lady and embraced her in a cave in the same area. We can consider the **dream space** part of the setting, a place populated by “pale kings and princes” (line 37) which reflects the real setting of the cold hill and lakeside.
- The **enigmatic setting** is designed to make the reader question where the border between reality and dream lies. Is it possible that the knight’s tale is entirely a dream? This follows Keats’ personal investigation with the poetic suspension of reality and “negative capability”





## Symbols:

### 1. Flowers

- **Flower imagery is used throughout** the poem, mostly with some form of symbolic weight.
- We usually associate flowers with Spring, love and life but this is not always the case in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”.

#### Line 9: **“I see a lily on thy brow”**

- Lilies are often associated with death in Western culture. **“A lily on thy brow”**, therefore, is a bad sign for the knight, possibly hinting at an imminent death. The metaphor also tells the reader of his pale complexion, emphasising his generally chaotic and pitiful state.

#### Line 11: **“on thy cheeks a fading rose”**

- Roses are often associated with love in Western culture. So, the knight’s cheeks have been flushed with love which is now fading. The romance is dwindling and leaving the knight’s body. The metaphor further describes his increasingly pale complexion.

#### Line 17-18: **“I made a garland for her head”**

- The knight adorns his lover with flowers which are used as a symbol for his love. The knight associates flowers with love and blossoming relationships and **his offerings emphasise his adoration**.

#### Line 18: **“fragrant zone”**

- This is included in the list of items the knight uses to seduce the beautiful woman. It is a flower belt but also can be interpreted as a euphemism for her anatomical “zone” below the belt.

### 2. Seasons

- The beginning and end of the poem suggest the season in Autumn or Winter. The middle section, however, when the knight describes his time with the woman, seems to be set in the summertime. This suggests that her beauty changes the knight’s perception of the world.

#### Line 3: **“the sedge has withered from the lake”**

- Grass-like plant that grows in marshy conditions.
- The plant’s withering suggests Autumn is coming. Autumn is often associated with images of fallen leaves and death which doesn’t bode well for the knight.



Line 4: **“and no birds sing”**

- This creates a quietness associated with winter and the cooler months. The acknowledgement of their absence increases the intensity of the desolate setting where the knight is found.

Line 8: **“and the harvest’s done”**

- The crops have been cut which adds to the **landscape’s desolation** and explains why the birds have flown away to find food elsewhere.
- This gives the impression that the two voices are the only living things in the landscape. They are isolated and alone.
- This does however, indicate a cyclical nature; the harvest is celebrated as yielding crops and grain and the re-sowing of seeds for the future.

3. Paleness

- The opening of the poem; **“O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,/ Alone and palely loitering?”** immediately brings to the forefront of the imagination, images of paleness and colourlessness.

Line 2: **“palely loitering”**

- The knight is immediately drawn as a pale character, such a complexion is associated with **illness, unease and discontent**. Something is definitely wrong with him. The **repeated “I” sounds** make the line musical and draws our attention to the words, especially “palely” which is used in an unusual way as an adverb.
- “Palely” also creates a subtle internal rhyme with “ail thee” from the first line,, which links the knight’s pale complexion to whatever is ailing him.

Line 9: **“I see a lily on thy brow”**

- The flower metaphor emphasises the whiteness of the knight’s face.
- It is also a possible **foreshadowing of the knight’s death**. Whilst Keats was a Romantic era poet, which predates the Victorian period, in Victorian times particularly (and before), lilies were **traditional flowers at funerals**.

Line 37-38: **“I saw pale kings and princes too, / Pale warriors, death-pale were they all”**

- The knight uses the word **“pale”** repeatedly in these 2 lines whilst describing his dream in the fairy lady’s cave. He associates their paleness with death, confirming the previous associations.
- The repetition in the stanza emphasises the similarity between **“pale”** and **“all”**, **“belle”**, **“thrall”**. This consonance links the words together and makes the reader wonder how the **“belle dame”** is responsible for the **“paleness”** of all the kings



and princes in the knight's dream. As readers, we begin to develop an awareness of the ambivalent woman who seems to bring sorrow and deathly paleness to all those she has **"in thrall"**. The knight's dream seems like a warning that he is unable to heed, blinded by his admiration for the beautiful woman.

#### 4. Dreams and Sleep

- The poem appears like a **dream sequence or a fantastical tale**. The knight's explicit dream sequence, however, encourages questions of consciousness and the nature of reality. We are led to ask where the boundaries lie between the two states and as readers are asked to recognise our willingness to suspend reality in order to allow ourselves to be absorbed into fictional worlds such as the one erected in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci".

#### Line 33: **"and there she lulled me asleep"**

- The word has a gentle quality due to the "ll" which is enigmatic of drifting into a dream state

#### Line 34-35: **"And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!— / The latest dream I ever dreamt"**

- The repetition of **"dream"** shows the knight's insistence on the vision he had, he wants the listener to believe it was imaginary and dreamt up. He insists on a distinction between what is real and what is imagined. The repetition, however, makes us question whether he insists too much. Has the knight been confused and blurred the line between imagination and reality?

#### Line 40: **"Thee hath in thrall!"**

- The **harshness of the repeated "th" sound** is made to bring the knight out of his slumber. He is warned by the people in his dream of the danger of the beautiful woman and is awoken.

#### 5. Dew and water

- Medieval romances often **associate women with water** and Keats uses this tradition to great effect. The result is that the man who falls for such a woman is left weak and drained.

#### Line 3: **"The sedge has withered from the lake"**

- The speaker associates death and **"withering"** with a body of water. This counters the usual association of water as a life-giving, hydrating source and instead we are asked to imagine it as something ominous, to move away **"from"**.



- The water in the poem is also stagnant, in a lake. If we are to associate the lake and the water with the beautiful woman, then her presence pauses the knight's progress. Her **stagnancy** leaves him to stop in the natural flow of life and lie dormant, to fester like a still lake which grows algae and putrefies.

Line 10: **“With anguish moist and fever-dew,”**

- The knight seems unwell and sweaty. He is anxious and has a fever. The reader is led to question how he came to be in this state.
- We see the word **“dew”** repeated in line 27; **“she found me roots of relish sweet, / and honey wild and manna-dew”**. This associates the knight's fever with the fairy lady who gave him things to eat. Has she poisoned him and made him sick?
- **“Manna”** is the heavenly food that the Jewish Scriptures say the Israelites ate in the wilderness after they escaped slavery. This possibly links the way the knight is momentarily afforded an escape from the mortal world through his love for the woman and his slumber.

Assonance:

Line 6: **“So haggard and so woe-begone”**

- Repetition of vowel sounds puts emphasis on the knight's emotional state.
- The sounds of the words are evocative of pain and discomfort.
- The repetition of “so” stresses the degeneration of such a noble man and his fall from a position of power and grace.

Line 25: **“She found me roots of relish sweet”**

- Repetition of “s”, “e” and “r”.
- It is interesting to look at how the sound repetitions link the words together. For example **“she”**, **“me”**, and **“sweet”**. The knight is deceived and believes the coupling to be **“sweet”**, a good thing that gives him happiness. He cannot foresee the danger or the destruction in sweet food. It is **ironic that what tastes so good** and what gives most satisfaction is the very thing that **will cause his downfall**. This is seen in a lot of fairy-tale literature across the ages. For example in the 19th century tale of Snow White where the sweet apple she bites is poisoned.
- The “s” sound, hints at an unnerving or slightly dangerous circumstance. Its **elongation** over the 2 words **“relish sweet”** is **particularly unsettling**.



### Repetition:

Line 31: “And there I shut her **wild wild** eyes”

- Reiterates the wildness of her eyes but also indicates and introduces an **element of danger**. This is the first time the beautiful woman is described as anything other than beautiful.
- “**Wild**” insinuates a primitive or uncultivated state; she’s other worldly, found in the natural environment and untamed by the society the noble knight comes from.
- She is uncontrollable, however much the knight attempts to dominate her by giving her gifts and “**set[ting] her on my pacing steed**”, she is untamable and will get her way.

### Refrain:

- The stanzas that are repeated at some distance in the poem such as the first and last.

“**And no birds sing**” (first and last stanzas)

“**On the cold hill side**” (stanzas 9 and 11)

- This gives the poem a **cyclical feel**. The knight finds himself back where the first speaker discovered him- in the cold and barren landscape beside the lake.
- The coldness of the hillside indicates the knight’s emotional state, reflected in his surroundings. A form of **pathetic fallacy**.
- We are reminded that although the knight may momentarily be able to escape back to the world of happiness and joy he experienced with the “**belle dame**”, he must always return to cold reality. His memories are merely that, fantasies of the past.

### **Critical Views**

#### Feminist Reading:

- It has been argued that “La Belle Dame sans Merci” is **anti-feminist** by taking the female figure as a seductive **femme fatale who deceitfully draws a man away from his masculinity** (represented by the Knight’s valiant social position) and then leaves him in ruin.
- There is discussion over how the “**faery child**” (line 14) is represented within the poem and how the power dynamics act out throughout the poem. It is important to focus on power relations between the man and woman considering the social context of the 19th century - context in which men and women were by and large confined to different spheres.
- A feminist reading may allow us to better read the allegorical insinuations and question whether the allegory holds truth.



- **Feminist critics argue that the woman is misrepresented** throughout the poem, including in its 12 quatrain form. The form Keats used was revived by Romantic poets, and in the case of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, creates a haunting effect which seems to foreshadow the destruction the female figure is about to inflict upon the knight. This and the supernatural motif are used, according to feminist critics, as a way of warning readers of **the deadly powers of women**.
- Focus on the woman’s eyes in “**wild wild eyes**” (line 31) acts as another form of warning to men of the dangers of the female ability to hypnotise, overpower and emasculate men through methods of seduction.
- If we consider the context of the 19th century, when Keats wrote the poem, a male audience would never have deemed the feminine power as a positive motif. This is because **the ideal female at the time was dependent, submissive and pure**. Keat’s woman is none of these things. This suggests that in writing the poem, Keats intended to conform to the social ideals of the time; that a submissive woman was more desirable than a free and independent woman, because when a woman was free and independent, she was dangerous to man.
- Keats goes as far as to imply the woman is something “**other**”. Through her use of “**language strange**” (line 27), he suggests that she operates and communicates in different ways to men, that she is **essentially different in character**. Feminist critics object to this as they believe that gender differences are socially constructed.
- Feminist critics may also question how far we can trust the speaker of the poem. It may be argued that it is not the obligation of the woman to love a man; the knight’s perspective is subjective.

Theresa M. Kelley: “Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keat’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci””

“Because the poem that bears her name is evidently **riddled with signs of its indebtedness to earlier poems**, it presents a strong, perhaps deliberately exaggerated, case for the poetic value of figures that acknowledge their history”

- Kelly suggests that Keat’s use of another poem’s title connects it to a rich history of texts.
- It is implied that the historical consciousness of Romantic poets is important as they use tropes and allegorical messages that relate to the past and can be better understood when considered within the specific literary context.
- The poem is therefore, possibly an **ode to poetry itself**; Keat’s “Belle Dame” suggests that poetic construction may be entwined with exigencies of publication and critical reception as well as personal circumstance.





## Jane Rabb Cohen: "Keats-Shelly Journal Vol 17 1986"

"The knight at arms also **defies convention, but he prompts laughter and pity** if viewed as a self-caricature of his creator"

- Cohen suggests that reading the poem contextually, and reading Keats' personal life into the poem makes for humorous reading.
- Instead of acting as a knight should, he defies the social expectations of his class and appears a fool.
- If read in this way, **the knight's pain can be interpreted as hyperbolic, accentuated and over-the-top**. Keats mocks the social construct of donning power to men who are actually weak and no better than the civilians they are meant to protect.

## Comparisons

### "At an Inn" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"

#### 1. Love and Loss

"At an Inn" explores several kinds of loss but most deeply examines the loss of perceived opportunity. The main focus of the poem is the speaker's **regret in not feeling love** towards a woman in the early stages of their relationship, or not allowing himself to (considering the context of the poem and the fact it may relate to Hardy's real life situation where the women he had desires for was married and so was he at the time). He explicitly points out **"never the love-light shone"** (line 19) clearly telling the reader the couple, although perceived as lovers, were not interested in each other romantically. However, by the end of the poem, we learn that this friendship and enjoyment of each other's company has developed into love and this is what he yearns for. He wishes endlessly that there was now no barrier for them to be together but they are unfortunately separated by **"sea and land"** (line 37). This kind of loss causes the speaker **a similar kind of yearning** as the knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". This is seen in the **nostalgic and retrospective natures of the two poems**; both speakers take the form as an opportunity to reflect on a time when their lover was with them. In contrast, however, the knight tells the story of how he was smitten with the elfish woman and this distinguishes his loss from that of the speaker in Hardy's poem as it seems more profoundly visceral. **The speaker in "At an Inn" wishes for more than he can remember** in the past because he never had a romantic relationship with the woman he now loves, **whereas the Knight feels the pain of a loss of something that he once had**.

Another noticeable difference is **the Knight's solitude is clear**: **"And this is why I sojourn here,/ Alone and palely loitering"** (lines 45-46). His loneliness after his loss is also reflected by the sparse, barren setting in which he is found, compared to the



abundant nature descriptions of when he is with the elfish woman. By contrast, **the speaker in “At an Inn” never seems to extract himself from the partnership** he longs for. He mentions the physical distance between the pair in the last stanza, leaving it to the end to press the fact that they are separate. This may imply a **deeper emotional connection** between the couple, that despite the physical distance between them they are bound in mind. The knight’s loss seems so recent that he cannot fathom this kind of progressed acceptance of the loss of a lover.

## 2. Romantic love of many kinds

The love between the couple in “At an Inn” seems **mature and gentle**, like it has come about after years of them knowing one and other. This is partly due to the nostalgic tone of the poem and the speaker’s ability to look back at a point in time which we may view as the beginning of a long relationship journey. In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” the love the knight experiences is closer to **infatuation or obsession**. He is so **physically in love** that it makes him sick and changes his countenance, hence his **“palely loitering”** (line 2) mode and his **“so haggard and wo-begone”** appearance (line 6). We can also draw a comparison between the speaker in “At an Inn” and his wishing for a love that never came to fruition and the similarly wishful nature of the knight’s love as it is never made clear whether the knight imagined or dreamt up the beautiful woman who he mourns.

Another difference between “At an Inn” and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” is the presence or absence of references to sex. Perhaps unusually for a poem that follows in the **courtly love tradition** - a tradition in which women were elevated and idealised, and in which all references to sex were usually omitted - “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” uses several **euphemisms** or **double entendres** that seem to be referring to the lady’s genitalia **“fragrant zone”** (line 18) or the act of making love **“made sweet moan”** (lines 19-20), **“I set her on my pacing steed”** (line 21). In contrast, there is no **overt or subtextual** references to sex in “At an Inn”. However, this may be due to the different contexts in which they were written; Hardy’s poem was written in the late Victorian era - a time that was known for its **strict sexual mores**; perhaps he could not make reference to sex if he wanted to avoid **ensorship** or **condemnation**.

## 3. Young love and mature love

The love in “At an Inn” seems more mature, like that of an older man, someone with more experience than the knight in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, his tone is more **measured** and his assessment of the love that he has lost or missed out on is mournful but in some ways accepting. He states the way it is, his poem is a wishing for something that cannot happen and he sees that now as at the end of the poem he calls out in exasperation **“ere death, once let us stand/ as we stood then!”** (lines 39-40). In this way, **he accepts that in this life, their union is not possible**. The knight, however, remains **“palely loitering”** (line 2) throughout the whole poem in the same barren landscape which he is found in. He is **lovesick to the point of no return**. He is unable to move forward with his life and in



fact has been left both **physically and psychologically ravaged** by its loss. This is partly why he seems young and inexperienced in love; his description of falling in love with the elfish woman is **fast paced and sudden**. We can liken it to the description in “At an Inn” of **“love/ which quicks the world”** (lines 10-11). However, the intensity of his experience is unmatched by the longing of the speaker in “At an Inn”.

#### 4. Proximity and Distance

Both poems consider proximity and distance; in neither of them do we actually meet the female lover, only **iterations of her through memories** in “At an Inn” and dreams or memories in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. The female lovers of both poems are slightly **distant and ambiguous**, she is - for us - just out of reach. In this way, we experience a part of the distance her male lover feels.

The poems **both move through modes of proximity**, ultimately ending in distanced lovers. In “At an Inn”, the couple start close together physically; **“left alone”** (line 17), **“Love’s own pair”** (line 18), **“between us”** (line 20) but by the end they are physically distanced by the **“severing sea and land”** (line 37). The physical proximity of the couple is paired with an emotional distancing, seen in **“never the love light-shone”** (line 19) and **“love lingered numb”** (line 28). This is the opposite in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” where the knight is firstly found **“alone and palely loitering”** (line 2). It is only when he **“met a lady in the meads”** (line 13) that his sense of aloneness is altered and the couple engage in several acts which implies close proximity; **“she looked at me as she did love,/ and made sweet moan”** (lines 19-20), **“I set her on my pacing steed”** (line 21), **“she took me”** (line 29), **“I shut her wild wild eyes”** (line 31). It is noticeable that the proximity of the two is intense, they do a lot of things quickly (almost something new in each stanza) whereas in “At an Inn”, the speaker uses the poem to only talk about one instance of proximity, that being spending time sitting with the woman at an inn. The effect of this is that although the Knight and his elfish lady seem to do a lot, the experience seems brief and rushed. We sense the opposite in “At an Inn”. For this reason, the Knight’s sudden experience of distance; **“I awoke and found me here,/ On the cold hill’s side”** (line 43-44) is more painful and raw, possibly fresher than the gradual distance established by the speaker and his lover in Hardy’s poem.

#### “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”

##### 1. Love and sex

Although sex in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” is not **overt**, we can infer that sexual activity occurs between the two **“lovers”**, which only increases the knight’s infatuation with his **“lady in the meads”** (line 13). The insinuation in **“she looked at me as she did love / and made sweet moan”** (line 19-20) is subtle and therefore fitting of the time it was written, when **overt references to sexual activity were taboo**. The **“sweet moan”** gives



the man the power, indicating a **temporary shift in the power dynamics**, as he is able to pleasure the “faery” woman and assert his masculine identity. This is **later subverted** as she “**lull[s]**” him “**asleep**” (line 33); the woman reclaims control and uses her powers to send the exhausted knight to sleep. The sex in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” is much more **explicit and shocking** for its time. This is particularly because of the mention of the “**bought red mouth**” (line 9) which tells us that the speaker is paying for the company of a woman. Her “**red**” mouth is **symbolic of lust, desire and passion** but also offers a controversial viewpoint on love. The speaker enjoys the physicality of the woman’s company, but this is where the love appears to end. Similarly, for the knight, the love ends where the couple are together, one falling asleep. The idea of sleep and love is interesting as a person is most vulnerable in sleep and to fall asleep with another person implies a feeling of complete trust. This therefore, **links to the theme of truth and deception** as in both partnerships, there is one person who is more willing to trust and to fall in love than the other.

## 2. Love and loss

The loss experienced by the knight in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” is **intense and raw**. This is emphasised by the pace of the poem when the couple are together and the number of things they do together. The **poem is a rush of love and emotion** in the middle, straddled by the two scenes where the knight wallows “**palely loitering**”. The knight’s loss is emphasised by the barren landscape which he inhabits; “**the cold hill’s side**” (line 44), “**no birds sing**” (line 48). The opposite can be said of the speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” who, instead of accepting his loneliness like the knight, **attempts to fill the emptiness with other women**, “**dancing**” (line 15), “**feast[ing]**” (line 20) and “**flug[g] roses**” (line 14). The **comparative clutter** of the poem is striking and illustrates the different ways individuals deal with loss.

The love of the two men is similar in its **obsessive nature**. The knight cannot extricate himself from the grip of the “**faery’s child**” (line 14) because the love he feels is so strong that it is constantly compared to something otherworldly, something so intense it cannot be mortal. The woman is **a seductress, a sorcerer**, a “**faery**” (line 14). The love experienced by the speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” is different in that it is interruptive, the speaker has moments of redress where he is **able to forget his former lover**. For example, when he sleeps with the “**bought red mouth**” (line 9) the tone and metre of the stanza implies a comfort found in the physical pleasures of the sexual experience. However, this is then interrupted by the resurfacing of Cynara “**when i awoke and found the dawn was grey**” (line 11).

Another similarity between the two is their obsession which is founded in **their own conjuring-up of the women they desire**. We meet neither woman in the flesh in the poems, they are both iterations of the man’s mind. In “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, the speaker remembers Cynara and is haunted by “**thy shadow**” (line 2)



and in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” the knight **“awoke and found me here”** (line 43) which gives the impression all that came before the awakening was a dream. **Is it possible that the men conjure up the women they desire?** The knight wants an all encompassing, rich and intense love from a beautiful, pure - and therefore otherworldly - woman, but perversely also wants to be slave to this love; he wants a love so intense that he would do anything for it. The speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” wants a love which satisfies him both physically and mentally. The Cynara figure is never given much substance, except for her pre-Raphaelite **“pale lost lilies”** (line 15) complexion. Could this mean that he desires a submissive woman, a woman that doesn't stop him from acting as he pleases yet remains faithful to him and hangs around like a **“shadow”** (line 2)?

### 3. Truth and deception

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci” is **full of supernatural references**, especially concerning the **“faery’s child”** (line 14) which insinuates a certain amount of unworldly magic or influence over the knight. The woman is portrayed as deceptive; she appears **“full beautiful”** (line 14), implying an external beauty as well as a moral and internal purity, through the use of **“full”**. However, the knight appears to discover that she is not such a woman and he is ultimately **deceived by the visage of her feminine beauty and purity**. Firstly, he suggests that the woman was not pure; **“I saw pale kings and princes too... // they cried - “La Belle Dame Sans Merci/ Thee hath in thrall!”** (lines 37-40). This suggests that the woman has duped many men and is not the pure, idyllic woman a man of the time would see fit and desirable. Despite this, the knight still yearns for her which suggests to contemporaneous readers that her witchery and deception is so strong that the knight is helpless and unable to break free from whatever spell she has cast upon him. In a way, Keats **subverts the gender expectations of the time**, as the woman has the power and leaves the knight weak and helpless. We question whether Keats wanted to expose the weakness of man (his counterpart, the woman) and demonstrate a shocking female power or whether he wanted to **warn male readers of the deceptiveness of women**.

In “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, the deception is plainly exposed in the speaker’s reiterations of **“i have been faithful to thee, Cynara! In my fashion”** (line 6, 12, 18, 24). The poem is addressed to Cynara, the former lover of the speaker and that he blatantly tells her in his work of his sexual endeavours with other women; **“bought red mouth”** (line 9), demonstrates a different form of deception to that found in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. Where in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, the deception is presented at face-value, in the appearance and actions of the female, in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”; the speaker exposes himself as the deceptive partner. That he continues to try to persuade Cynara of his faithfulness exposes a level of **self-deception**; he convinces himself of his faithfulness through the explanation **“in my fashion”** when really it is clear he is unfaithful. In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” **the knight also engages in self-deception** as he remains in the clearing waiting for a woman that will never return



to him; **“I sojourn here,/ alone and palely loitering”** (lines 45-46). Both men engage in self-deception and this leads us to question the truthfulness of their female counterparts. Is the woman in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” real or **a figment of the knight’s imagination**? How truthful is the speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”? Was he really in love with Cynana or does he simply desire what he cannot have? Is this the same case for the knight? The voices in the poems are questionable, we are unsure, because of their narrow perspectives, how truthful they really are and it is apparent that both men want what they cannot have. Possibly this skews their judgement and the poems we read are **utterly untrustworthy**.

