

Edexcel English Literature IGCSE

Anthology Poetry

La Belle Dame Sans Merci - *John Keats*

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LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

John Keats

Brief Summary

An elegy almost for a knight, who like many others, has been seduced by the siren depicted in the title.

Synopsis

- Introduces a knight who is describing how he met an ethereal siren.
- He describes making the siren gifts and how she stole his heart.
- He spends all his time with her.
- The siren lulls him to sleep and when he dreams, he dreams of dead nobility who warn him.
- He wakes up and the siren is gone and he is alone on the side of a hill.



Context

John Keats (1795 - 1821)

Keats was one of the six key **romantic poets**. He died at the age of 25 from tuberculosis in Italy, but despite his premature death is very much one of the most celebrated poets of all time. He published the poem twice - once in 1819 and once in 1820 with a few changes - including opening with the changed line ***“Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight”***.

Romantic Movement

Romanticism stemmed from the enlightenment period, but the writers within it wanted to reject the cold unemotional rationalism of enlightenment culture which had a focus on objective science, logic and rationality. Instead they used a more **emotional and subjective view** of the romanticised world, looking to the beauty of nature and past life in order to protest against the industrial, changing face of the world.

The romantic writers would also follow enlightened values of **protesting institutions and sources of power** (church / monarch / army), and use their work to **comment on society** and



how it should be reformed. They tended to use **everyday language** to make poems **accessible** to all, and can be considered a reaction to the industrial revolution, as they'd express their dislike of urban life and embrace of nature. They'd also deal with loss primarily through writing poetry, and would often focus on larger, general themes of love, loss, and grief, rather than a specific focus on an individual.

The Siren

A **siren** is a type of **femme fatale**. These are prevalent in literature and, according to Greek mythology, are **mystical female forms** who seduce and ensnare their lovers. Sirens were dangerous beasts which would sit on rocks and enchant sailors by singing, causing them to sail too close to the shore and become shipwrecked. However, since this they've expanded into different literary genres, and are often seen as symbols of **deception** and **artificial love and enchantment**.



Alain Chartier: "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"

This poem alludes to 15th Century Poem with the same title by Alain Chartier. It is written in stanzas of eight and focuses on courtly love - framed by a speaker who has recently lost his wife.

Critical Views

- Laura Jordan states that Keats '**struggled to reconcile his boyish conception of women as goddesses with the mature notion of their 'realities'.**'
- Rachel Schulkins: '**Keats criticises the narcissistic love of his male protagonists who tend to objectify and idealise women into mere idols of beauty and admiration for their own personal gain.**'
- E. Gottlieb: '**A sexual union in paradisiac bowers and the awareness that this very moment entails separation, madness and death**'
- S. T. Joshi: **Keats presents 'supernatural female predators in La Belle Dame Sans Merci and Lamia'.**



La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Archaic language evokes a grandeur and fits with the antiquated chivalry Knights represent. Rhetorical question, (reminiscent of Sonnet 43) establishes the omniscient narrative voice.

“Paleness” was considered medical signs of sickness. Keats foreshadows the fate of the Knight in the beginning of the play. Tension and apprehension is immediately established through the description of being pale and alone.

Squirrels are busy preparing for winter but the knight is ‘loitering’.

He meets an ethereal siren.

The siren tricked the knight into thinking she loves him, demonstrating the deception of the siren.

O what can **ail thee, knight-at-arms,**
 Alone and **palely loitering?**
 The **sedg**e 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.

Plosive “l” sounds in the sound elongate the phrasing of the line. This creates the sense of “loitering”. The assonant “o” sounds aid the tempo of the line, being slowed down. This evokes a sense of apprehension.

“And no birds sing”, disrupts the iambic tetrameter of the place. This line is resounding and isolated like the “knight-at-arms”. The action of not singing is meta-poetic, as the line itself stops the melody of the piece- ballads were traditionally sung by bards

Storytelling from an anonymous point of view, shows despair, removes the speaker and gives distance.

‘on thy brow/ with anguish moist and fever-dew’ – he is feverish and ill images and trend of demonstrating sickness after war. ‘a fading rose’ – he, like the seasons, is changing, dying.

The poet is creating sexual suggestions surrounding the knight and the siren’s interactions. “Steed” - the horse is a masculine symbol.



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

There is a role reversal in terms of the power balance in the relationship - suggested by the transition of the pronouns from "I" to "she".

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.

Extreme ethereal beauty and fertility described around the siren: 'honey wild', 'manna-dew', (food of the gods) 'elfin grot.'

And there **she lullèd me asleep**,
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe
betide!—

The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the **cold** hill side.

Suggestion that this is non-consensual, but shows the siren's seductive nature.

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!'

Double meaning here - emotionally and physically cold as a result of being left by the siren.

Horrific imagery of death, in the 'gloom' like the hazy light in Gatsby.

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.

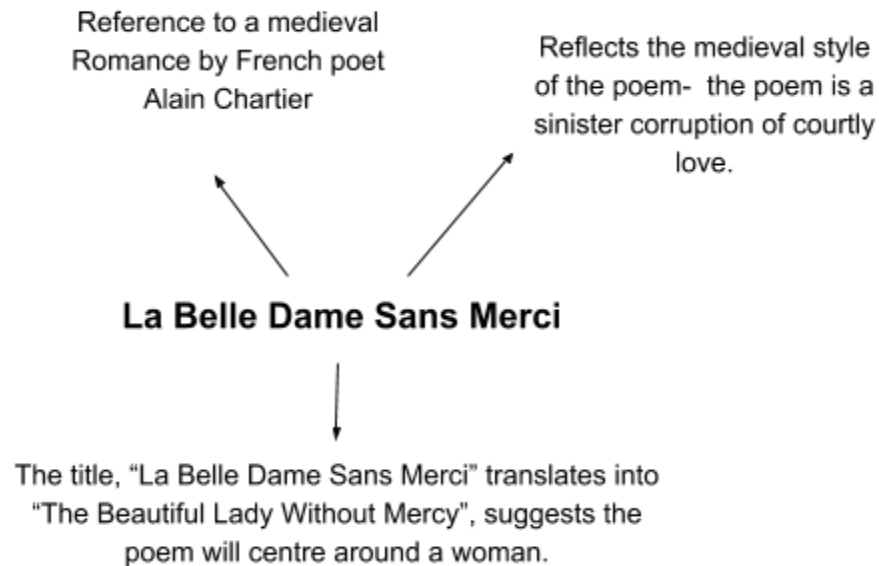
Repetition of pale to suggest the ghosts of those seduced before.

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

At end of first and last stanzas, denouement adds fear, cyclical structure - but also could be prophetic from the start.



The title “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”



Perspective

The poem is written from the perspective of a **young knight** who falls for a fantastical siren but ends up lost and alone on the side of a hill. It is written in a traditional **first-person narrative** to create an intimate and personal connection with the reader.

Structure

Ballad

The poem is written in the form of a **ballad**. A traditional ballad is written in **quatrains** and the rhythm is in **iambic tetrameter**. Ballads often have a narrow focus and originate from the oral tradition. It's a very impersonal form of poetry and poems are written from an **objective perspective**.

The effect of **ballad structure** suggests the poem tells a gothic archaic story, and also plays on **romantic tropes**. For “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, this has the effect of making the poem read like a haunting song.

Quatrains

The stable structure of the quatrains in the poem juxtaposes the **fantastical language** and situations explored in the content of the poem. This emphasises how unreal the knight's experience is, which is what he discovers when he awakes on the side of the hill at the end of the poem.



Cyclical structure

The line **“and no birds sing”** is repeated in both the first and last stanza. This **repetition** serves to ground the reader back into reality after the fantastical events which occur in the middle of the poem with the siren. It may also reflect how the knight is now dying as a result of the encounter, and therefore the **cyclical narrative** could reflect the stages of life - birth through to death.



Shortening

Keats shortens the last line of every stanza so that it has only two stresses and usually only four syllables. This creates the effect of the stanza being abruptly cut off, or something being absent / withheld. This may reflect the absence of actual love or a true relationship explored in the poem: the siren’s love for the knight is only an artificial trick.

Language

Repetition

Repetition is found in the **alliterative and assonant lines**: **‘Her hair was long, her foot was light’, ‘made sweet moans’, ‘wild wild eyes.’** This reflects the mistakes made by many men throughout literature in deciding to trust sirens despite knowing their dangerous reputation.

Semantic field of infertility

SEMANTIC FIELD | A writer uses words which are linked by a theme or topic throughout a text or passage.

By using **semantics of infertility**, alongside describing the despair that accompanies this, Keats is arguably foreshadowing the knight’s demise at the end of the poem.

- The **adjective “withered”** implies decay, whereas the phrases **“fading rose”** and **“the harvest’s done”** can imply infertility (being unable to have a child).
- This is in contrast to the description of extreme ethereal beauty and fertility which is referred to in conjunction with the siren: **‘honey wild’, ‘manna-dew’** (food of the gods) and **‘elfin grot.’**



Comparison

My Last Duchess & Belle Dame Sans Merci

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both the poets - Keats and Browning - choose to display a negative view of love with a focus on a one sided relationship, with the imbalanced power dynamic appearing to cause serious issues in the poem's respective relationships. • Both poems concern potentially ingenuine emotions and fickle love, rather than a true, positive love. • In Browning's poem, the Duchess is powerless - doesn't have a name and has imagery associated with her which makes her seem innocent. In Keats' poem, the Knight is similarly depicted as powerless - for example, the adjective 'alone' is repeated. • Both poems also are centred around a structure of question and answer in order to separate the love of the two characters involved in the poem's action.
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whereas the depiction of the Duchess and the Duke in 'Last Duchess' is a typical portrayal of patriarchal power, the depiction of the Knight in Keats' work is abnormal because the female creature is shown to be overpowering the Knight.

