

Revision Guide

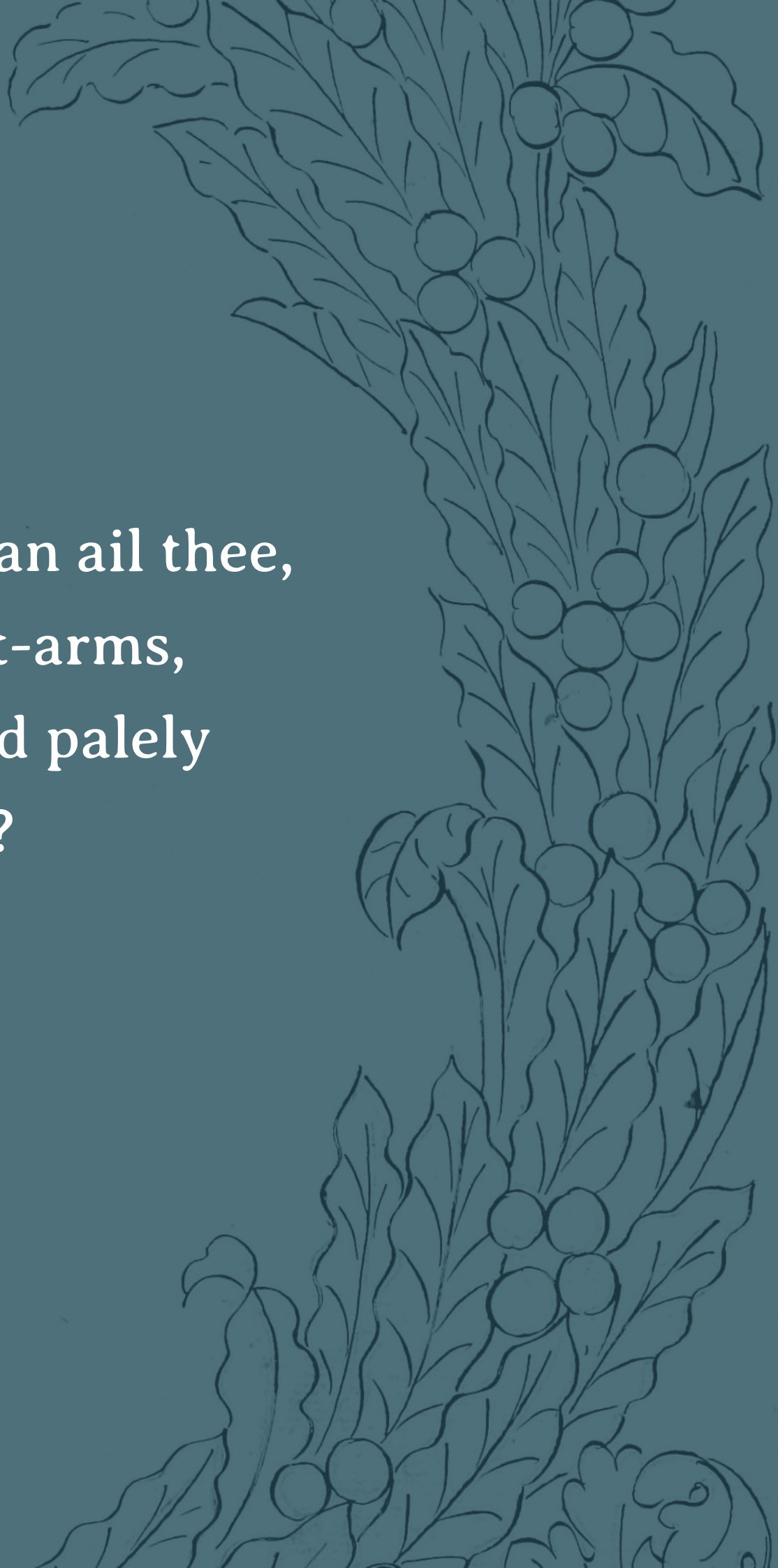
La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad

John Keats



Scrbblly

O what can ail thee,
knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely
loitering?



La Belle Dame Sans Merci: A Ballad

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'.



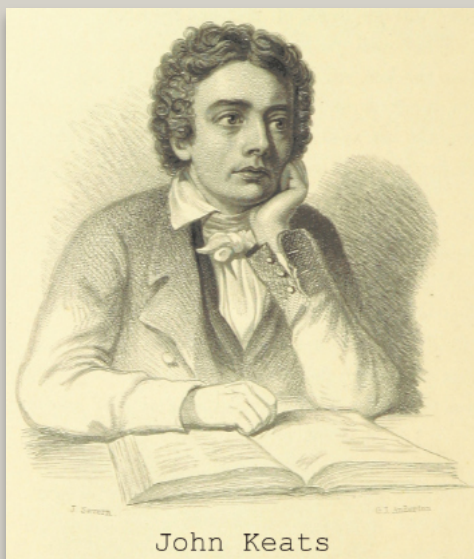
She took me to her Elfin grot,
And there she wept and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

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.



John Keats



VOCABULARY

La belle dame sans merci - This means '*the beautiful lady without mercy*' in French. The title would only be recognised by people who know French. Most readers don't realise she is dangerous and evil. 'Without mercy' means that she has no kindness and is pure ruthless evil.

Sedge - A type of grassy plant that grows by water.

Haggard - Dishevelled, rough looking and old or tired looking.

Grot - Also 'grotto', a cave where humans or animals live.

Manna-dew - The food or nectar of the gods. It is said to be delicious and edible.

In thrall - Under a spell, enthralled, captivated or under the power of. 'Thrall' has connotations of menace, evil, power, monstrosity. It is also an archaic term for a slave, servant or captive.

Sojourn - To stay or hang around. It can also refer to a leisurely and temporary stop during travel. It has connotations of a brief, leisurely stay - such as a trip or holiday.



STORY/SUMMARY

In the first three stanzas, there is a sad and lonely knight who is 'loitering' on a hillside. This knight is encountered by a traveller (the speaker) who asks him what is wrong. The knight is visibly sick, sweating and turning pale.

In the fourth stanza, the narrative voice switches to the lonely knight himself; he explains that he met a lively and wild-looking woman in a meadow. She behaved in an uncivilised, animalistic way. She had crazy eyes and loose, wild hair (which seems natural nowadays but would have been feared by readers at the time). The knight pities her because she seems to be in a distressed state and a knight's purpose is to protect vulnerable people (e.g. the idea of the heroic 'knight in shining armour').

In the fifth stanza he is captivated by and begins courting (romancing) the lady. She dresses the knight in jewellery made of wildflowers to mirror her wild character.

In the sixth stanza, the knight describes how he put her on his horse, and from that point on he can see only her because he is so focused on her and her singing; he becomes oblivious to his surroundings.

The seventh and eighth stanzas the narrator is further captivated by the lady. She takes him back to her 'elfin grot' (her fairy cave) where he stops thinking clearly because he is under her spell; he wakes up on the side of a hill (the same place that the narrator found him) and it seems as though he has dreamt it all.

In the ninth, tenth and eleventh stanzas

he sees the other victims of the lady—‘pale kings and princes’, ‘pale warriors’ like himself, all opening their mouths in pain, suffering and warning. They shout to him and tell him he’s been caught by ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ (‘The beautiful lady without mercy’).

The twelfth and final stanza is a repetition of the first stanza. The knight is trapped in a cyclical structure, where he is doomed to wander on the cold hill alone in a state like death, repeating his story to anyone who finds him.

SPEAKER/VOICE

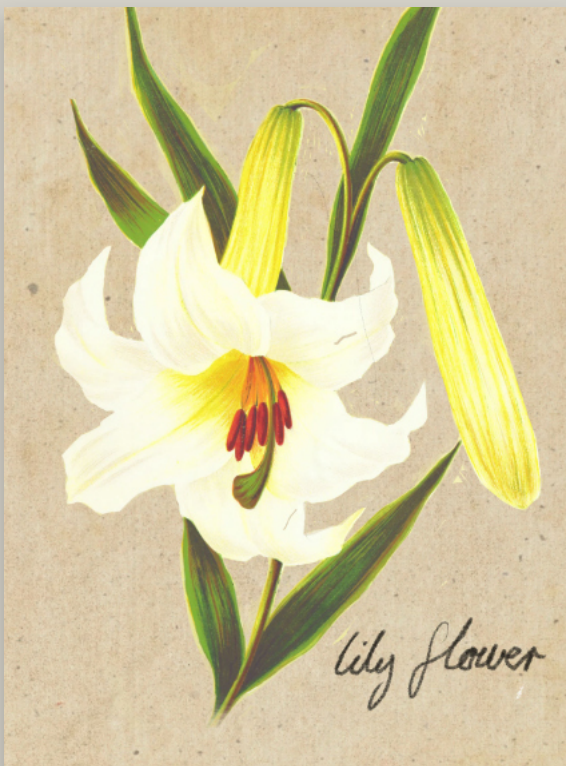
The speaker of the poem directly addresses the knight and asks in a concerned tone about his condition, perhaps suggesting that the speaker is a woman. The knight is a character who takes over telling the story, we call this a ‘frame narrative’.



LANGUAGE

- **Title:** The title is written in French and means 'the beautiful lady without mercy' in English.
- **Anaphora:** The first two stanzas are spoken in a voice different from the knight's and ask 'what can ail thee', emphasising the loneliness of the knight.
- **Pronoun shift:** Second person in the first two stanzas, then first person as the knight tells his tale .
- **Symbolism:**
 - It is stated that harvest is done, so the poem must be set in October or November when it is cold. The absence of birdsong represents a lack of joy and happiness. The setting is barren and cold.
 - The season skips from summer to winter, so plants that were in full bloom are now withered and dying. The time of year is symbolic because it shows his own changing spiritual beliefs and feelings (pathetic fallacy).
 - Lilies are a symbol of death, and the restored innocence of a person's soul after death. The symbol of a lily on his forehead or the reference to lilies shows that the knight is trapped in a ghost-like and deathly state.
 - Red cheeks ('fading rose') and a less pale complexion shows that someone had more life flowing through them.
 - The knight makes a 'garland' and 'bracelets' from the wild surroundings (presumably out of plants and flowers). This is an initiation of a courtship ritual, where gifts are

- There is a **Semantic Field** of sickness (perhaps lovesickness). The words 'haggard', 'pale', 'alone', 'sojourn', 'lulled', 'anguish' and 'moist' suggests that the knight is in a state of constant suffering, and that the other men before him are stuck in the same situation.
- **Imagery:** 'eyes were wild', 'kings', 'princes', 'pale warriors' and 'death pale' all suggest sickness (both mental and physical illness). There is also a continued imagery of suffering, 'starved lips'.
- **Tone:** Words and phrases like 'alone', 'no birds sing', 'the harvest's done', 'hair was long', 'foot was light', 'eyes were wild', 'I shut her wild wild eyes / With kisses four', 'pale warriors', 'death pale', 'starved lips' all reinforce the sad and tragic tone





STRUCTURE/FORM

- **Narrative Ballad:** This is a popular old form of poetry that tells a story or folk-tale in verse. Ballads have short stanzas with clear rhyming structures so that they can be easily remembered and spoken aloud. They have quite a musical quality to them.
- **Frame narrative:** The speaker at the beginning of the poem meets the knight, who then recounts his story to the speaker. This creates a 'story within a story'.
- **Volta:** Stanza 11 is a *volta* - a turning point in the poem. Until this moment, the knight's encounter with the lady has been enchantingly pleasant, but when he falls asleep his visions turn to images of horror and create a much darker mood and tone. This is the moment in the poem that we realise the lady was tricking him all along.
- **Cyclical Structure:** The circular structure of the poem shows that the cycle of what the lady does is never ending, and the knight feels trapped in his mind. He is not physically trapped but his soul is trapped because the lady stole his happiness. This represents an unsuccessful relationship.



Painting of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'
By Victorian artist Frank Dicksee
Bristol Museum Collection

- **Hypometric lines:** As the end of each stanza is shorter than it should be, it feels like it has been cut short. Perhaps this expresses the situation of the knight, as his life and happiness has been unnaturally cut short by his encounter with the 'faery's child'. The first three lines of each stanza are in *tetrameter* (four feet per line); the final line is only *trimeter* (three feet per line).
- **Caesura:** '—Ah! woe betide!' is an interruption that suggests the memory is so shocking that he has to pause before carrying on with the sad part of the story. This disruption in the flow of the narrative also amplifies suspense before the sad ending.
- **Foreshadowing:** 'her eyes were wild' and 'faery's child' in Stanza 4 suggest to us that there is something unusual and perhaps powerful about the lady that the knight meets. We are also introduced to him at a point where he is lonely and suffering, so we know that he has a tragic story.
- **Femme Fatale** - The 'faery's child' is a '*femme fatale*' figure, meaning that she is a very attractive woman who seems weak, beautiful, and fragile, but in fact she is very powerful and potentially dangerous and/or malicious. The knight, in contrast, is a typical 'hero' figure. He is honest, strong, and he has rules and principles that he follows; as evidenced by his attempt to help and protect the lady. His naivety leads him to assume that the woman he finds is a vulnerable fair maiden, and this weakness allows her to bewitch him.



This in turn leads to his eternal suffering. One message is that too much idealism about love and relationships can lead to suffering when confronted with reality. The poem suggests that sadness and suffering can be beautiful, but also that having perfect beliefs doesn't necessarily mean that a person will have a great life or a happy ending.

- **There's no clear ending** - We don't know if the knight will get better, die, or stay in his sickness forever. This is more frightening because it creates a sense of uncertainty.
- **'I set her on my pacing steed'** - At this point, the knight puts her on the horse. This places her physically higher than him, as she leans down to sing to him. This represents a shift in power from the knight to the lady being in control.



CONTEXT

- Keats is considered a 'Romantic poet', who dealt with themes common within that movement, such as nature, extremes of emotion, symbolism, god or religion as an extension of worshipping nature, love and death.
- Hair that was loose and not in a neat bun was a sign of wildness and/or insanity in Victorian society.
- *Ladies in Victorian/Romantic times had to tie their hair back and keep it very neat. In Victorian times it was fashionable to wear a bun. Loose hair was considered wild, crazy and maybe overly sexually provocative. So, the long hair of the lady the knight meets already shows to the audience that this woman is a bit strange and possibly dangerous.*
- The idea that appearance reflects people's inner personalities is called the 'Theory of Physiognomy' and it was a very popular concept in Victorian times.




- Chivalry was Medieval code of male politeness. Chivalrous men were expected to treat women well, honourably, and educate them etc.
- However, men were also considered superior to women because they worked and were educated, so they had a duty to look after women.
- The woman in the poem disrupts the idea of chivalry because she is smarter than the knight and tricks/manipulates him.
- Keats himself had very unlucky relationships. He was in love with a woman called Fanny Brawne, but he could never be with her because he viewed himself as too poor to honourably marry her. So, his life was spent in suffering as his love could not be realised. It was socially unacceptable for a man to not be able to support his wife. Keats thinks the idea of chivalry is outdated and inaccurate, and attempts to demonstrate that men can also be sensitive and are not always superior to, or stronger than women.
- The Medieval period is a historical time frame that lasted from 476 until the 1450s (when the poem is set).
- The Victorian period lasted from the 1830s until approximately 1900 (when the poem was written).
- In Victorian times, marriage was not first and foremost about love. It was primarily a social contract between two families used to preserve wealth and secure the future of those families (particularly among the middle and upper classes). Arranged marriages were common, and even if a marriage wasn't arranged and the two people loved each other, the families (especially fathers) had to fully consent to the relationship.
- Keats had a theory called 'negative capability', which came about because he had such a sad life so he learned to find beauty in suffering and sadness. Most of his poetry is about this kind of beauty.
 - Keats' belief in 'negative capability', that intense beauty and positivity can come from times or states of difficulty - the state "*when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason*" is an important central idea of many of Keats' poems, where he seeks to comment on the chaotic nature of the world and appreciate its beauty without trying to solve it or simplify it.

THEMES

- Enchantment and witchery
- Nature
- Love (particularly courtly love and unrequited love).
- Masculinity and femininity, as well as male versus female power.
- Sickness
- Hubris (which means excessive pride and/or arrogance).
- Power
- Suffering
- Loss
- Villains and victims
- Femme Fatales
- Tragic heroes
- Depression, dullness and numbness
- Ghosts
- War
- Romance
- Idealism



The background is a dark, textured painting. It features several large, pink flowers with visible brushstrokes, set against a dense background of dark green foliage. The overall mood is somber and melancholic, reflecting the text overlaid on the image.

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