

9. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" by John Keats

POET

John Keats (1795-1821)

John Keats was part of the Romantic movement in poetry. This was a reaction to the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment which sought to find beauty and wisdom in nature and emotion.

Keats was born to a lower middle class family; his father ran an Inn in London. He was sent to a school in Enfield where he developed a love of classics and history. When Keats was 8 his father died, and when he was 14 his mother died. In the same year as his mother's death, Keats was sent to become an apprentice to a doctor.

In 1815 he began studying medicine at Guy's Hospital. However, Keats just wanted to write poetry. Having qualified as a doctor, he encountered ill health and began to devote all his time to writing, relying on his siblings for money. In 1818 Keats fell in love with Fanny Brawne, an Inn keeper's daughter. At this time, he was also caring for his younger brother, Tom who was suffering from tuberculosis. Because Keats could not make enough money from his poetry, he was unable to marry Brawne.

In 1820 Keats fell gravely ill with tuberculosis. He was told to go to a warmer climate to help his lungs; he left for Rome, knowing he would probably not live to see Brawne again. He died in Rome five months later in 1821. When the news reached Brawne, she was distraught and stayed in mourning for 6 years.

BACKGROUND

The poem was written in 1819 when Keats was deeply in love with Brawne, but knew that he would never be financially-successful enough to marry her.

SUMMARY

The poem is a conversation. A speaker finds a knight weak and ill on a hillside. The speaker asks what is wrong with the Knight, and he explains that he met a beautiful woman who bewitched him. The woman took him to her magical cave where she put him to sleep. While asleep, the Knight dreamt of all the noble men enslaved and destroyed by love of a beautiful woman. When he woke, he found himself left on the hillside alone.

ANALYSIS

The title of the poem, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is French. It means - the beautiful lady without pity. This immediately tells the reader that the poem will involve a cruel woman who has no sympathy for others. The title is borrowed from a 15th century French poem by Alain Chartier. The original is written in Old French. This allusion sets the scene of the poem which takes place in medieval times where there are knights and fairies.

The poem is written in the ballad form. This was a medieval structure for poetry which was designed to be performed to listeners. It makes the poem like a sad song. The poem is divided into ballad stanzas. These are four line verses, or quatrains, with an iambic, or unstressed followed by a stressed syllable, rhythm. Interestingly, Keats makes the fourth line

of each stanza end on an unstressed rather than a stressed. This means every stanza ends on a dull note which makes the poem feel unresolved and sad.

The first stanza begins with an emotional exclamation – “O”. This shows us that there is something wrong which is alarming to the speaker of the poem. The poetic voice goes on to ask a question, “what can ail thee”. The word “ail” is a deliberately old fashioned one. Here Keats has selected archaic diction to create the impression that the story takes place in the medieval period. The question means what is making you sick. Therefore we know that someone is unwell at the start of the poem.

The character who is suffering is now introduced. He is a “knight-at-arms”. These knights were warriors of the medieval period who bore arms or swords and were usually involved in a noble mission to help someone vulnerable. However, here the knight is “Alone and palely loitering”. This means he is without company. Importantly, this suggests he is without his horse. This makes him symbolically unmanned. He has lost a vital part of his power. He looks sick as he is “palely loitering”. The word “loitering” means waiting without a purpose. This is something a knight should never do; he should always be involved in a mission to help others. These details show us something dreadful must have happened to the knight.

The speaker describes where they have found the knight – “The sedge has withered from the lake, And no birds sing”. The landscape depicted here is not just wintery – it is unnatural. Sedge is a plant which grows in boggy areas. However, it has died and the birds seem to have left the lake. This pathetic fallacy, or use of the setting to mirror the mood of the character, suggests that the knight has found himself in an unnatural and deadly environment.

The question the speaker asks in the first stanza is repeated in the second, but with varied words which emphasize the knight’s poor condition. The speaker asks again “what can ail thee”, but this time the knight is “haggard” or drained with suffering, and he is “woe-begone” or miserable in appearance. This reinforces the reader’s assumption that the knight has endured a horror.

The speaker continues to describe the season. It is winter because the squirrel has collected food, so his “granary is full” and the “harvest’s done”. The crops are harvested in autumn. The speaker then describes the knight’s appearance in more detail in stanza three. The knight has “a lily on thy brow”. This metaphor suggests the man’s forehead is as white as the flower, a lily. Lilies were associated with death, but they were also a symbol of the Virgin Mary. Therefore the image effeminizes the knight, making him seem womanly. His face is covered in sweat due to “anguish”. This means severe mental distress, and he seems to have a “fever”. The knight’s complexion is losing its pink colour as “a fading rose fast withereth too” on his cheek. This is another metaphor from the world of flowers. Roses are often used to symbolise love, but here the rose is dying, so the knight’s love must be abandoning him. Ironically, in a poem about a beautiful woman without pity, the speaker is kind, concerned and sympathetic. This becomes a stark contrast to the being who has bewitched, enslaved and abandoned the knight.

The rest of the poem is the knight’s answer to the speaker; his explanation of what has happened to him. In stanza five he says “I met a lady in the meads”. However, the woman he found in the meadows was not a human. Although she was “Full beautiful” or physically gorgeous, she was “a faery’s child”. This means she was a supernatural being or fairy. He

describes her attractions. She has long hair, a "light" or graceful step, and "her eyes were wild". This final detail is alarming. If the fairy's eyes are "wild" then she may be full of malice. She is a supernatural force.

The knight is immediately in love with her. We can tell this because he stops whatever mission he is on and devotes his time instead to making love tokens for her. He says he "made a garland for her head". This means he plaited together flowers to make a crown for her. He also makes "bracelets" from flowers. This is a feminine thing to do, and something which draws the knight away from the human world and into the realm of the natural. He even creates a "fragrant zone" for her. This is a belt of flowers to go round her waist. In response to his gestures, the fairy looks at him "as she did love". The key word is "as" here. It tells us that she just appears to love him; it is not real. The "sweet moan" that she makes suggests that the knight and fairy become sexually intimate.

Symbolically, the knight gives the fairy his manly power. This is shown when he puts her on "my pacing steed". A steed is a horse. By setting the fairy on his stallion, the knight has raised her above himself, given her the masculine power of a horse, and placed himself in the position of a servant or squire, walking beside her. He is obsessed and enslaved by her. This is underlined in the next line which explains "And nothing else saw all day long". She fills his world by leaning over him and singing "A Faery's song". The song could be a spell, bewitching the knight.

The fairy then takes control of the knight fully. She feeds him natural food. She gives him "roots of relish sweet and honey wild, and manna dew". The first two of these items are found in nature, but "manna" is a magical and holy food which is meant to come from heaven. The fairy speaks to him in a "language strange". This shows us that she is not part of the knight's normal world. She is clearly alien and foreign to him, yet he still understands her. This might suggest that the words of women are strange to men; that the genders speak in different languages when it comes to love. The fairy tells him "I love thee true". This is the only time we hear the fairy's voice; her speech is quoted by the knight. Because we are never able to hear what she thinks directly, the poem gives us a very one-sided, masculine view of love.

The fairy takes the knight to her "elfin grot". Elves are types of supernatural beings, like fairies. They are meant to live in caves or grottoes. Thus she takes the knight home and there "she wept and sighed full sore". The fairy's tears and exclamations may be parts of her terrible seduction. They might also imply that the knight does not really understand her true nature. Indeed, in response to her weeping he shuts her "wild wild eyes with kisses four". The repetition of the word "wild" suggests that he finds her so feral and intimidating that he has to close her eyes, so he does not have to look into them anymore.

In the cave, the fairy "lulled" the knight to sleep. It is as though she is taking him even more deeply away from the real world and plunging him into a frightening realm of love which takes away his manly power. Asleep, he dreams. The knight exclaims "Ah! woe betide!" This is an outpouring of emotion. The expression "woe betide" means sadness happened. The grief the knight feels arises from having to recollect the dream he had.

Stanzas ten and eleven describe the dream. He "saw pale kings and princes too, pale warriors". Therefore his dream is filled with noble, powerful men who have become pale or

sickly. The reason for their illness is explained because they “cried” to him, “La Belle Dame sans Merci Thee hath in thrall.” The fact they cry suggests they are distressed. It is startling and worrying to see such powerful figures in such a terrible state. Their explanation for their downfall is that the beautiful lady without pity has turned them into her slaves. This is the crux of the poem. It is a symbolic description of the way beautiful women can make otherwise powerful men their playthings through the devotion of love.

The knight looks at the consequences of love for these men. They have “starved lips” in the gloam” or gloomy light. This implies they have been left unnourished by the fairy. She has made them fall in love with her, only to abandon them to starvation. Their mouths “gaped wide” in “horrid warning”. The men are communicating with the knight and warning him not to let the fairy enslave him. The knight explains he woke from this dream to find himself “on the cold hill’s side”. He has returned to the conscious world, but without his lover he feels that winter has come and he has no purpose.

The final stanza sums up his situation. The knight explains “this is why I sojourn here”. A sojourn is a temporary stay. The knight can no longer find a permanent home because the fairy has taken him away from normal life. The end of the poem echoes the lines spoken by the anonymous speaker in the first stanza, but they answer the question. The story we have heard is why the knight is on his own and “loitering” even though the “sedge is withered” and “no birds sing”. Therefore we receive an answer, but it is not a resolution.

The poem ends with the knight unable to move on. He cannot seem to leave the hillside. He is stuck in a moment of obsessive love which he cannot escape. The fairy has made him a slave to love.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Piano” – provides comparisons with this poem because they are both about the power of a much-loved woman to control a man.

“Sonnet 116” – provides useful comparisons with this poem because they both offer different descriptions of what love is.

“The Tyger” – provides useful comparisons with this poem as they both depict a powerful and beautiful force which is beyond nature and our control.

“My Last Duchess” – provides useful comparisons because it offers a different view of gender relationships in which the man is the powerful one.