**La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad**

BY [JOHN KEATS](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)

Summary

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a ballad, a medieval genre revived by the romantic poets. Keats uses some of the old characteristics of Ballad such as the supernatural and the characters of Knights princes, and an enchantress.

Keats sets his simple story of love and death in a bleak wintry landscape that is appropriate to it.

"The sedge has wither'd from the lake

And no birds sing!"

The speaker meets a knight and asks what afflicts him, or what is ailing him. The knight is pale, haggard, and obviously dying.

 "And on thy cheeks a fading rose

 Fast withereth too — ."

 The knight answers that he met a beautiful lady, "a faery's child" who had looked at him as if she loved him. When he set her on his horse, she led him to her cave. She fed him sweet honey and wild roots from the forests and spent some lovely moments with him. Then she had sung him to sleep. In his sleep he had nightmarish dreams. Pale kings, princes, and warriors told him that he had been enslaved by a beautiful but cruel lady. When he awoke, the lady was gone and he was lying on a cold hillside.

In keeping with the ballad tradition, Keats does not identify his questioner, or the knight, or the destructively beautiful lady. What Keats does not include in his poem contributes as much to it in arousing the reader's imagination as what he puts into it. La belle dame sans merci, the beautiful lady without pity, is a *femme fatale,*a fairy-like figure who attracts lovers only to destroy them by her supernatural powers. She destroys because it is her nature to destroy. Keats could have found patterns for his "faery's child" in folk mythology, classical literature, Renaissance poetry, or the medieval ballad. With a few skillful touches, he creates a woman who is at once beautiful, erotically attractive, fascinating, and deadly. The belle dame playing a figure of love and fantasy and the agent of death and decay to the knight. There are often two ways of seeing this scene, as the knight quickly learns. The landscape is lush with meadows and spring, wild honey and manna dew, but the story quickly moves from idyllic to horrific, as the fairytale romp turns to imprisonment on a cold hillside. After he comes to his senses the knight finds himself in a kind of hell through the transportation of a dream. He is surrounded by all of the lady’s previous victims, who include kings and princes and warriors.  In their faces he sees the man he will become: someone deathly, starved, and captivated by memories of the Lady to the point of enslavement. Like them, he will wake up "death-pale," or, as the speaker first describes him, "Alone and palely loitering"—physically alive, yet condemned to replay his memory of an obsessive love for the rest of his days. The Lady is finally revealed to be La Belle Dame sans Merci—The Beautiful Lady without Mercy.

Strangely, the Lady’s merciless behavior actually consists of the love and joy she provides; her sudden disappearance is what makes the knight’s experience so painful exactly because she was previously so kind. The shape of the Lady’s cruelty suggests that anything one falls in love with or obsesses over can cause such pain, since anything can disappear in an instant. The poem thus cautions against such intense, obsessive love, arguing that it’s ultimately not worth the agony it can cause.

Some readers see the poem as Keats' personal rebellion against the pains of love. In his letters and in some of his poems, he reveals that he did experience the pains, as well as the pleasures, of love and that he resented the pains, particularly the loss of freedom that came with falling in love. Though it is a fantasy poem whose setting seems so distant from real time, the poem might very well express figuratively what Keats was experiencing in his love life and his health. The mix of literary and emotional forces influencing Keats at the time he wrote “La Belle Dame sans Merci” was nothing less than extreme. His mother had died of tuberculosis when he was 14; his brother, whom Keats nursed through his final months, died of the same disease in 1818. Even before his brother’s death, Keats too would begin to show signs of the disease, returning from his rigorous tour of Scotland and Ireland with a harsh cough and an ulcerated throat. That year he would also fall in love with Fanny Brawne and by the spring of 1819 would embark on what was to become one of the most important sequences of odes in our literature, all written in a single year. “La Belle Dame sans Merci” was written in the heat of his passion for Fanny, the fever of death hanging over him. He was on fire poetically, in love, growing ill, and suffering from depression. By the end of May 1819 Keats finished the poem. However, the ballad is a very objective form, and it may be best to read "La Belle Dame sans Merci" as pure story and no more.