



This is one of the most famous poems by the English Romantic poet John Keats. Read it two or three times, including once aloud.

La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad

By [John Keats](#)

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



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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.

On the face of it, this poem may seem very simple. It is written in a traditional ballad form, and seems to tell a straightforward story. However, if we look more closely we will see that it is anything but straightforward. Let us begin by attempting to make a prose summary, like this:

An unnamed voice addresses a knight who is alone by a lake, at the beginning of winter. The voice asks the knight what is the matter with him and describes his appearance as pale, feverish, thin and unhappy. The knight replies that he met a beautiful woman and together they went to her cave where he fell asleep and dreamed of pale knights and kings. These figures warned him that he was the captive of the “beautiful lady without pity” and the knight woke up in the spot where the unnamed narrator found him.

Once we have made our summary, it will be immediately obvious that the poem raises a great number of questions, for example:

- who is the first speaker?
- why is the knight's story not put in quotation marks, if it is direct speech?
- who is the seduced and who the seducer between the knight and the lady?
- How did the knight understand what the lady said if she was speaking in a foreign tongue?
- Why did the lady weep and sigh?
- What is the significance of the knight's dream?



In order to attempt to answer some of these questions we need to examine the language of the poem more closely.

The poem opens with a question addressed to a **knight-at-arms**. We are thus immediately plunged into an archaic world where knights would roam the land looking for dragons to fight and fair damsels to rescue. But this knight is **palely loitering**. To “loiter” means to stand or wait around idly, without any apparent reason, which alerts us to the possibility that this knight has been in some way robbed of his purpose in life. “Palely” introduces the idea of sickness and death, which is reinforced by the reference to the **withered** (dry and shrivelled) **sedge** (a grass-like plant). The eeriness of the scene is increased by the final line **And no birds sing** which for a modern reader conjures up scenes of desolation which might be caused, for example, by a nuclear holocaust.

The second stanza opens with a repetition of the first line, before adding two new adjectives to the description of the knight, **haggard** (looking exhausted and unwell, especially as a result of worry or suffering) and **woe-begone** (sad or miserable in appearance). But the stanza closes with references to the natural world (the **squirrel's granary**) and the **harvest** which serve as a reminder that winter is just one part of the seasonal cycle. There is perhaps a hint here that the knight's suffering is of his own making.

The next stanza includes a reference to two flowers, the **lily** and the **rose**, which are two of the most symbolically charged flowers in Western culture. The lily (in the form of the *fleur-de-lis*) is present in many heraldic coats-of-arms, but it is also associated with ideas of purity and chastity, particularly female virginity. Here the lily is used metaphorically as a way of depicting the pale, perspiring forehead (**brow**) of the knight. The rose is a symbol of love and beauty – here the **fading rose** in the knight's cheek is **fast withereth** like the sedge.

The next stanza seems to open with the knight's reply, though there is nothing in the punctuation to indicate this, which leaves open the possibility that this is not really a dialogue at all, but a delirious monologue. But assuming that it is the knight who replies, he tells the first speaker that he met a **lady** in the **mead** who is also a **faery's child**. **Mead** means “meadow, a field of grass” but it also has a second meaning which is “an alcoholic drink of fermented honey”, which will be echoed in a later stanza. The description of the woman as both a **lady** (high-born, in a position of command) and a **child** introduces an ambiguity into the figure of the “belle dame” - is she the seducer, or the victim? The lady's beauty is described by picking out three specific elements which also seem in some way to infantilise her – her long hair, her light foot (she could run fast) and her wild eyes. Taken together these seem to suggest that it was the knight who captured the lady, and this suspicion is strengthened by the descriptions of the **bracelets** and the **fragrant zone** (belt) which the knight puts around the girl. **She looked at me as she did love** could mean “She looked at me as if she loved me” or “She looked at me while we were making love”. The latter interpretation would seem to imply a seduction by the knight of the lady – the **moan** might be **sweet** to the knight, but it could also imply a forcible conquest.



The idea that the knight is the active partner in this seduction continues into the next stanza with the line **I set her on my pacing steed**. We then have the image of the knight who saw nothing else as they rode, because the lady's body kept getting in the way – a suggestion perhaps that she was looking for a way to escape.

By the next stanza the lady seems to have accepted her fate, at least momentarily, and is busy preparing a meal of **roots of relish sweet** and **honey wild** and **manna-dew**, which the knight, perhaps unwisely, eats. **Manna** has Biblical connotations which tie in with **wild** (manna was the food miraculously supplied to the Israelites in the wilderness). The final two lines of this stanza may show the knight trying to convince himself that the lady is complicit in her seduction, although her words were spoken in a **language strange**.

In the next stanza the lady seems to have become more dominant (**She took me to her elfin grot**) though her delight in being with the knight seems far from unmixed as she **wept and sighed full sore**. The knight and lady now seem to take turns in comforting one another until the knight falls asleep and dreams his horrific dream. The dream is of powerful men, **kings, princes, warriors** who, like the knight at the beginning of the poem are all **death-pale**. The awkward-seeming construction of the last line is interesting – it would seem more natural to say “Hath thee in thrall” (has made a slave or captive of you). Putting “Thee” first seems to indicate that the knight is at least as responsible for his predicament as the lady, he is not, in other words, a helpless victim of an enchantress. The description of the kings and princes is full of archaisms (**starved** here means suffering or dying of cold, **gloom** means dusk or twilight) but the poet successfully captures a feeling of horror. The nightmarish figures are giving the knight a **warning**, and it is for this reason **And this is why** he remains in the place where the first speaker came across him.

At the end of the poem we realise that we are really no further on in answering our initial questions. The “beautiful lady without pity” can perhaps be taken to represent any obsession which takes hold of an individual, to such an extent that the world becomes a **cold hill's side** but the precise dynamic of the relationship between the knight and the lady is open to a variety of interpretations. It is this very mysteriousness and ambiguity which gives the poem its undeniable power.