

A critical appreciation of "la belle dame sans merci"



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The cursory reading of this poem is that it is merely a story of a knight bewitched by beauty, who becomes abject slave to a fairy woman, and who falls asleep, waking up alone and dying on a hillside in the meadow. However it could be perceived as a Romantic vision pertaining to the importance of youth, beauty and emotion, and to the transience of these factors. The poem is written predominantly in the poetic form of a ballad, the subject matter is the communal tale of unrequited love and of a supernatural happening, themes common to the ballad; the stanza¹s are four lines long with an ABCB rhyme pattern and a memorable iambic tetrameter. However there are some deviations which lead the reader to realise the possibility that this is perhaps not so old a poem as the traditional form and archaic wording seem to suggest. This is most clearly evident in the final line of each stanza where the iambic tetrameter is broken and there is instead a monosyllabic trimeter. This confuses the lyrical rhythm of the poem which causes it to have a slightly disjointed tone. The abrupt cessation of the line also seems to echo the knight's sudden awakening to loneliness, and alerts the reader to the fact that his life's end is nigh. In a traditional ballad one would expect instead either a continuous meter or the trimeter to occur on the second and fourth lines rather than just on the fourth. The traditional melancholy tone of the poem is further evoked by the use of repetition that occurs throughout the poem, for example the word pale, which is repeated five times. This paleness seems to denote the plight of those "in thrall" of "la belle dame", their slavery has caused their deteriorations, it is not a slavery of the body but of the heart and mind. One of the underlying themes of this poem seems to be this sense that the loss of such an exquisite emotion as love is fatal, but that love by its nature is transient, and therefore to truly experience it one must

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forfeit the self entirely to it. It is not clear whether the lady herself is real or imagined, but the sense of intensity of emotion is not hindered by this. In fact, it is perhaps this idea of the intangibility of emotion which makes it so irresistible. Perhaps also why the cruel face of love is personified in a "faery's child", because fairies are mythical beings, intangible, iridescently beautiful creatures which can disappear quickly as a thought and are often described as mischievous, even malevolent beings. The female character is the predator, taking a sadistic pleasure in the men's pain, this could be said to be a very subversive view of women. This malevolent quality seems to be shown in the fact that the lady has no mercy, she has enslaved many men without remorse, however it could be seen that the poet is merely using the tale to illustrate the vulnerability of men to beauty, is he perhaps embodying a personal experience of helplessness, of feeling that he is bound to a woman? Could it even in wider terms represent the bindings of marriage? This could be possible if the garlands that the knight gives to the lady are symbolic, they could be representative of chains or of oaths that bind. The fact that they are made of flowers shows that beauty and nature can be deceptively powerful and dangerous. Nature in this instance seems to mimic the disintegration of the knight's health through the progression of the seasons, which indicate the brevity of life and emotion. The changing of the season is depicted in the lines, "The squirrels granary is full / And the harvest's done." and also in the absence of birdsong, which reflects the absence of love, when "no birds sing", it becomes winter in the soul. The migration of the birds also seems mimetic of the lady's moving on to the next man, of her desertion of the knight. The "sedge" is described as "withered" from the lake, as if it is aging, shrinking from the lake as if in fear.

Although it has withered it is not yet dead, like the knight who is "palely loitering", it is on the brink of death. This fatality is emphasised especially in the third stanza where the pallor of death is described. The "lily" has connotations of funereal flowers and the "fading rose" is surely love dying as roses are a traditional image of love. They describe the loss of colour from the cheeks and the deathly pale complexion of the knight whilst at the same time explaining it. The "fever-dew" is the perspiration brought on by sickness, it adds to the metaphor of the flowers with the word "dew" which also seems to represent the coldness of morning, which is fitting as the knight has just woken from the warmth of love to the coldness of reality and also because it causes the reader to imagine a cold sweat, such as that from a fever. It is also interesting because love has often been described as a sickness, people are said to be ~~be~~ love-sick¹, and the sweat is reminiscent perhaps of the nervous perspiration that often occurs upon meeting a new lover. It is demonstrative of an intensity of feeling, whether physical or emotional. The idea of pain seems to be implicit with that of love, even the portrayal of the woman's love is a "sweet moan", a moan being usually connected to pain. She is also described as crying "full sore", this creates an image of her eyes, red and swollen with tears, but it is unclear why she cries, and there also seems to be a sexual undertone which links to the idea of pain and pleasure being connected, she is a seductress and a temptress. The portrayal of love and women in the poem is distinctly pagan in contrast to Christian ideals of a chaste woman, unattainable till marriage and then subject to the will of man. This woman accepts kisses and sleeps by the knight, "lulling him to sleep". She has "wild wild eyes" and it seems that the idea of her as wild and untidy and free is more enticing than a traditional

woman. The poem seems to use pagan imagery such as that of nature and fairies in opposition to the courtly love of king and knights who are shown to be "pale warriors" in love. The knight seems to have been enchanted, common images of enchantment are used, such as singing, eating roots and a "strange language". The rhythmic, lyrical pattern of the poem is itself hypnotic, and seems to echo the "pacing steed" and "Faery's song". The title of the poem being in French also seems to echo the foreignness of the lady in comparison to what is known, and to show that she speaks another, softer language. It is as if the knight has been hypnotised, he imagines that she loves him, although he cannot understand her actual words and he describes seeing "nothing else all day long" as if he is totally transfixed by her image and the outside world has passed by without notice. The kings and Princes in his dream have "starved lips" which adds to the sense of time passing quickly around them, they are starving in the vacuum of the lady's presence. It is clear that much time has passed because the knight makes flower garlands for the lady, but it is Autumn or Winter when the poet finds him. We know that he will die because it is his "latest dream", this means that it is his last dream, it is ambiguous as to whether the knight has decided to die or whether he has been so drained by the experience that he has no choice. It is also unclear what the motives of the temptress are, she could be defending her fairy domain from the intrusion of man, the ever expanding city into the countryside, or it could be sheer caprice and malice that prompts her to lure the men to their death. It seems that the importance of the poem lies in intensity of experience, even if that experience is the hideous one of rotting away on a hillside, it seems that Keats believes that it is these poignant moments which define us as people, that distinguish us

and make us real, and love is the all intensifying experience to which all others pale in comparison. It also seems that nature and sexuality are intrinsically linked with poetic vision and dream visions which instruct the poet and the reader. It falls to the poet to convey the last words of the knight. The poem leaves us wondering what actually is the intention of the speaker, after all, the poem is encapsulated in the question, " What can ail thee, knight at arms, / Alone and palely loitering?" which is answered by the knight, but the poet seems to remain a voyeuristic figure as he makes no reply nor takes part in the action. He is quite an ominous figure, why is he watching the knight die and not helping him, why does he stop? Is the poet himself the next victim of the lady? Is the lady representative of something else, some drug or cult? Part of the essence of this poem is that it is largely inscrutable, it creates an atmosphere of pathos and mystery but does not appear to mean anything specific. Searching for a meaning in poem, Keats seems to be saying, is like searching for the meaning of life, the essence of life being in its inscrutability. Bibliography Keats, John, La Belle Dame Sans Merci in The new Penguin Book of English verse, ed. Keegan, Paul, (Penguin Books, 2001, England)