

An exploration of love and the supernatural



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Keats' exploration of the nature of love is enhanced through his utilisation of the imagination and the overtly supernatural settings which he creates. Both *Lamia*, which relates the mystical story of a beautiful serpent who strikes a deal with Hermes in order to restore herself to the form of a woman, and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which presents the story of a knight falling victim to a 'faery'-like woman, employ an hypnotic rhythm accompanied by mythical allusions which help to display the inner workings of Keats' highly imaginative mind. Critics have described some of the poetry of the Romantics as 'a semi-religious response to the natural world'; however, what can be detected from Keats' aforementioned poems is the sense of a semi-religious response to the supernatural world, which is portrayed with such sensory detail and artistry that it can seem almost unimaginable.

The entrancing hypnotic effect of both *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which is written in iambic tetrameter, and *Lamia*, consisting of heroic rhyming couplets which create a repetitive beat and continuous motion, perhaps reflect the supernatural nature of the stories and the potentially damaging power of their protagonists. This becomes apparent in the 'wild wild eyes' of the faery, which forcefully conveys the treachery of the female through the adoption of repetition and builds upon the foreboding tentativeness of the opening line 'O what can ail thee Knight at arms'. The cunning tone of the words suggests that we are later to discover that the conventionally strong and courageous soldier will succumb to some greater power, which in this case is the deceitful and threatening female. Her 'wild' eyes and ability to cause the Knight to be 'lulled' asleep establish an otherworldly aura about the woman, which could be interpreted as representing Keats' paradoxical

fascination with the lure of the opposite sex whilst also illustrating his wariness of the innate female essence, here depicted as manipulative and possibly lethal. The supernatural theme of the poem enhances this ambivalent perception along with the power of seduction, which can similarly be recognised in the character of Lamia. Keats' use of the oxymoronic declaration 'ah, bitter-sweet!' to describe her illustrates his perplexity at the ambiguity and uncertainty of the female. The serpent creature is described as having a mouth 'with all its pearls complete', which is suggestive of her inestimable worth whilst also having sexual connotation, and eyes that 'were born so fair', yet conversely as potentially 'the demon's self'. He appears ambivalent towards women; both fascinated with their beauty yet simultaneously presenting them as being phenomenally destructive, to the male in particular. The spiritual reference to the 'demon', with its connotations of malevolence and torment, emphasises this notion and causes us to question the stereotypical innocence and submissiveness of Keats' 19th century female counterparts.

Moreover, Keats' use of the spiritual emphasises the transient nature of earthly love, as discovered by the Knight of La Belle Dame Sans Merci, and the ease with which those in possession of mystical abilities can taint the nature of love. He is left 'alone and palely loitering' after we learn that 'La Belle Dame sans Merci/ Thee hath in thrall', illustrating the pitilessness of his enchanter, which is accentuated by the harsh sound of the consonance of 'th'. Her beauty and magical ability appears to have fooled and enslaved him, resulting in his isolation and ill-health. This is reinforced by the metaphoric 'lily on thy brow', which suggests a deathly paleness and seems to

foreshadow his passing due to the connotations of what is commonly recognised as a funeral flower. Similarly, Lamia has been described by David Perkins as being 'about the consequences of being a dreamer', reflecting Keats' belief in the greatness of the imagination and suggesting that human relationships should be allowed to flourish naturally in order to display their sublime nature. After the contract between Hermes and Lamia has been fulfilled, Lamia begins her transition towards becoming a woman again leaving 'nothing but pain and ugliness' after she 'convuls'd with scarlet pain'. This passage reveals the torturous sufferings she is forced to go through as a result of her desperation to be with her 'youth of Corinth'. The description of her pain as 'scarlet' is suggestive of blood and severe discomfort, which is underpinned by the sensory verb 'convuls'd', with its implications of violent sufferings and an inability to control oneself. It seems that she has shed all of her previous beauty and exoticism to become unsightly and uncomfortable, enforcing the negative consequences of unnatural powers.

Furthermore, a typically Romantic sense of defiance of the rationality and order of the 18th Century is tangible in both *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which are replete with imaginatively medieval and mythical allusions. The beginning of *Lamia*, in particular, which details the fairytale setting of the poem, is abundant in rich imagery of supernatural creatures. Keats references 'Dryads', which are tree nymphs, 'Fauns' and 'Tritons', building up a magical and somewhat extraordinary setting, which is complemented by the inclusion of Greek mythology. The opening is focused upon Hermes, the god of commerce, transitions and boundaries, heightening what could be

seen as the importance Keats places upon the imagination and the constantly changing nature of human beings. The resistance and rebelliousness that Hermes displays through 'amorous theft/From high Olympus' suggests that he gains a sense of enjoyment from causing trouble and defying the hierarchy of his social system, with Mount Olympus being the home of the gods in Greek mythology, again reflecting the beliefs of the Romantic poets. This exhibits a carefree and buoyant attitude, which is in contrast to the more serious tone of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which is arguably a poem warning us about the dangers of obsessive love. Whereas Hermes seems to draw some enjoyment out of neglecting his responsibilities, the Knight soon learns that becoming entranced by the 'Lady in the Meads' was a mistake. Described as 'a faery's child' and as using 'language strange', she also appears to be of medieval times, stressed by the use of quaint old English, which emphasises Keats' fascination with chivalric tales and even reminds us of the courtly love tradition. There is a sense of uncertainty surrounding the woman, which is suggestive of Keats' disapproval of the oppressive past, which she is a part of, and his desire for a future where the rights of the individual are valued. Thus, it could be argued that he is utilising various allusions to classical and supernatural beings as a form of escapism, in order to cause the reader to question the morality of political and social conventions.

Overall, Keats' exploration of the imagination and supernatural manifests itself in various forms in both *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. His typically Romantic perspective that the imagination should triumph over all else is clearly evident, whilst there is simultaneously a suggestion that the

contemporary conventions were damaging and inhibited the natural desires of the people of the time. The supernatural is also used to highlight what could be seen as Keats' wariness of the female and the dangers of their allure, as embodied by both Lamia and the 'faery's child', whilst accentuating the transience of love perhaps due to an acute awareness of his own mortality.