

A brilliant disguise –
john keats la belle
dame sans merci
essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

John Keats *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, consists of two separate points of view. One comes from the narrator, the other from the knight, who is under torment. The narrative is a fairly simple one; the knight encounters a beautiful lady that leaves him unable to get along with life, once she has left him. *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is a story that is representative of the real versus the ideal. The lady, who exists solely in the knight's imagination, represents, not only the ideal, but also the knight's refusal to accept the real world, which leads to the destruction of his own life.

The first two lines of stanzas I and II begin with the narrator, confused as to what could be wrong with the knight; "O what can ail thee, knight at arms." The second lines change however, giving the reader a description of the current physical state of the knight. The fact that Keats uses a knight as his main character is significant because a knight is supposed to be strong, both mentally and physically. However, in this poem it is the opposite. The knight is not strong, he is "Alone and palely loitering?" and has fallen victim to a most unusual predator; a woman.

Lines three and four of the first two stanzas also present opposing views of life. The first is a negative take on the current location of the knight, and the other, a more positive one. In the first stanza, the knight is loitering in an area where, "The sedge has wither'd from the lake, And no birds sing." This quotation gives one the impression that this is a lifeless and depressing place to be, and it reflects how the knight is feeling.

The third and fourth lines of the second stanza describe a positive place, where the squirrels have gathered their food for the winter, and the harvest

has been finished. These two lines present a situation that shows that not all life is dreadful, and there is an alternative, that the knight refuses to acknowledge. Much like the contradiction of a cowardly knight, there is a contradiction with the location that he finds himself in. It is a very somber place, and at the same time, full of life. Keats suggests that there are two sides to every story.

The knight is unable to realize that there is more to life than meets the eye, as well as alternatives. This is what eventually brings him to his destruction. The thought of what he believes to be the perfect lady takes over all of his rational thinking, and all he knows is that he cannot possess her.

The first two lines of stanzas IV thru VI all begin with the knight speaking in the first person, discussing his encounter with the lady. At a first glance, it appears that the knight is in control of the situation, because he is initiating everything that happens. What seems as the knight having control is actually, his submission to her.

In the first line of stanza V, the knight “ makes a garland for her hair”.

Although he did make the garland out of his own free will, it is representative of a crown that he places on her head. This makes her his queen, and in turn, the knight becomes the subject. The knight makes the same mistake in stanza VI, when he places the lady on his “ pacing steed”, elevating her to a position of dominance over him. The act seems innocent enough, however the knight is losing control. In each case, he is going out of his way to not only please her, but do what he can to win her over. However, he is being submissive to her, and at the same time, losing touch with reality.

The third and fourth lines of stanzas IV, V and VI, focus on the girl's appearance, as well as, giving the reader insight as to the dangerous state the knight has fallen into.

The knight ignores several warning signs that are presented to him throughout the poem. In stanza IV, Keats describes the lady's eyes as "wild," and then in stanza VIII, the knight proclaims "I shut her wild wild eyes". In Stanza VII, the lady finds the knight, "honey wild". The warning is quite clear because Keats drives his point across several times. The use of the word wild can be taken in two ways. The first would be the knight's attempt at taming a creature that is wild. This rarely happens, but when it does, it usually has grave consequences. Secondly, when one sees a wild creature, they are in fear of it, therefore, one would take precautions to protect oneself. This is something the knight refuses to do.

In Stanzas VII, VIII and IX, the knight loses all self control, and becomes completely enthralled with the girl. The first two lines of stanza VII begin with the lady turning the tables and taking control; "She found me roots of relish sweet" and "she wept, and sigh'd full sore." The difference between the knight and the lady is the fact that she is able to distinguish between the real and the ideal.

As the poem progresses, there are more warnings that the knight does not take seriously. In stanza VII, the lady tells the knight that she loves him, however she speaks to him in a language, he can't understand. "And sure in language strange she said – I love thee true." This is significant because,

although he doesn't understand her, he hears what he wants to hear, and believes it. He is accepting the ideal rather than the real.

In stanza IX, another warning is ignored after the lady takes the knight to her "elfin grot," where "she wept, and sigh't full sore". The fact that she begins to cry, should alarm the knight. However, he chooses to ignore her tears. He shuts her eyes and gives her four kisses. The reason why she is crying is because, she realizes what she has inadvertently done to the knight. Understanding that the girl is solely in the knight's imagination, it further proves that the knight has the ability to choose the real, but doesn't. He gives into the ideal situation.

In stanzas X and XI, Keats discusses the consequences the knight must now face. In stanza X, he dreams about "pale kings, and princes, too," who, much like himself, are men of importance that have fallen victim to the girl. They are "pale warriors, death-pale," very much like the knight, who is palely loitering. They also offer the knight a final warning about the dangers of the girl. In the final two lines of stanza X, they all cried "La belle dame sans merci Hath thee in thrall!" They are screaming out to him, but he doesn't hear them. In stanza XI, he sees "their starv'd lips in the gloam With horrid warning gaped wide". This time the knight acknowledges the warning, but he still doesn't do anything to protect himself.

The poem ends with the same stanza that it began with. However, the first line was changed. The first line of the last stanza reads, "And this is why I sojourn here". The use of sojourn means that he will be in this place for some

time dwelling on his current situation and leaves the reader wondering what will come of the knight.

Keats use of contradictory statements and symbolism, while discussing the various events that lead to the demise of the knight, prove extremely useful for his desired outcome. His selection of characters is also a very important factor. If he had choose a common man instead of a knight the poem would have lost much of its meaning.