

Mila University Center

Course: English Literature (Second Year BA)

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Analysis of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” by Nihad Laouar.

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI 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. → (iambic dimeter)

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. → (iambic and anapestic dimeter)

I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too. → (spondaic and anapestic dimeter)

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. → (Anapestic and iambic dimeter)

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
With kisses four.

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.

Structure: La Belle Dame Sans Merci falls in the category of the Ballad. The Ballad involves a recount of a story and is told in simplistic language. Ballads often tell stories that can be tragic and they also often contain supernatural elements. The simplistic language feature is especially important to the ballad form because ballads are traditionally told orally. This ballad, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, consists of twelve stanzas. Each stanza has three lines of iambic tetrameter and a fourth diametric line. This poem has a cyclical structure because it ends where it begins. It consists of two parts of uninterrupted dialogues between an unknown passer-by and a knight.

Rhyme Scheme and rythme: the rhyme scheme of this ballad is ABCB and its rhythm alternates between iambic tetrameter and Iambic dimeter. In some stanzas like

(2, 4, 9 and 11), the fourth line has combination of anapestic and Iambic dimeter.

However, stanza three a spondee foot followed by an anapest foot.

Analysing the title of the poem:

The title is taken from a medieval French courtly romance by Alain Chartier and it means the beautiful lady without mercy or pity. It suggests a connotation of the infamous literary figure of the *femme fatale* who attracts lovers only to destroy them by her supernatural powers. Keats creates a woman who is at once beautiful, erotically attractive, fascinating and at the same time deadly and threatening.

Analysis of Stanza One:

The speaker in this stanza is an anonymous passer-by who meets a knight by a woodland lake in late autumn. The man has been there for a long time, and is evidently dying. The passer-by questions him with a concerning tone on his physical outlook saying: "O, what can ail thee?", why are you standing there so lonely, pale and "loitering" which means purposeless. The setting is late autumn where the grasses (sedge), having already withered and the birds having departed on their winter migration. The bleak image of winter in the last two lines of the stanza might symbolise the deteriorated and bleak state of the knight. In other words, the desolation of the place mirrors the knight's emotional desolation.

Analysis of Stanza Two:

As can be seen from this stanza, there is a repetition of the first line. This suggests the extent to which this passer-by is startled by the grim condition of the knight whose current state contrasts the stereotypical image of the knight who is supposed to be brave and powerful. So the speaker asks again "why do you look so exhausted and in miserable?". The second two lines indicate a reference to harvests of Autumn indicating that the squirrel's winter storage is full and the harvest is completed. This confirms further that the setting is late Autumn and beginning of Winter. The setting here again might symbolise the knight's emotional desolation and despair.

Analysis of Stanza Three:

The pallor of the knight is described metaphorically in this stanza. There are two metaphors here, the first one is "lily" that symbolises death; hence, the first line implies

that the knight has a complexion of someone dying this is why he is compared to a “lily”. He also has a fever (drops of sweat like ‘dew’) on his face and his face is going pale. The second metaphor is “a fading rose” on his cheeks. “Fading rose” suggests the fading colour of a red rose that reflects the act of blood draining from his face leaving it pale. Added to this, the fact that it is fading tells us that he has not always been in such bleak condition. Perhaps, he was once full of life and passionate. The last line means that the rose is withering away in a quick manner and this implies that he is dying.

Analysis of Stanza Four:

This stanza marks a twist as the knight finally responds to the unknown passer-by. The knight replies to the speaker’s question, stating that he has met a beautiful, wild looking woman in the meadow. The wildness of eyes is not usually used to describe a lady. It seems that the lady has some mysterious power to charm men, especially by her wild eyes. The imagery of the wild eyes also symbolises that there is a dangerous aspect about this woman and can be said to foreshadow the calamity that would befall the knight.

Analysis of Stanza Five:

The knight in this stanza narrates that he has made her a garland (headband), a bracelet and a fragrant zone which means a belt made of flowers. While this act of giving her these gifts might seem as mere romantic gesture, it can also be interpreted as a means of entrapment. This is to say that the circular shape of the garland, the bracelet and the belt, perhaps, symbolise entrapment and that the knight treats this woman like a possession. The lady in this poem has not spoken but only looked at him as if she loved him. It is important to consider that the knight is an unreliable character, meaning that his point of view can be questioned. For instance, questions as such might arise: did this woman genuinely look at him as though she loved him? Or did he want to see that?, did he misinterpret it? Or perhaps she simply looked at him in this manner with the intention of misleading him. In addition, the last line of this stanza is ambiguous because it is not known whether she is moaning out of love or because she was protesting against his control.

Analysis of stanzas Six

The first line of the 6th stanza “I set her on my pacing steed” demonstrates further that the knight tends to claim possession of this mysterious woman. He has given her a horse to ride on and he has walked beside them. He saw nothing but her, because she leaned over and sang a mysterious song as though she put him under his spell and he was in trance. Again, there is a connotation here of possession and entrapment as it seems that he is monitoring her and that she is held captive. This idea becomes more meaningful when we associate it with previous images of the garland, the bracelet and the flower belt which he has offered her and which at the same time symbolise entrapment and possession.

Stanza Seven Analysis:

This stanza shows that this woman has given the knight some gifts in return, offering him foods from heaven “relish sweet, honey wild and manna-dew”. He also states that she has spoken a language that he could not understand and this leads to questioning the credibility of his words and whether she has really said she loved him for real. Perhaps, this is what he wanted to hear and believe. This reinforces the unreliability of the knight’s narrative.

Stanza Eight Analysis:

In this stanza, the knight continues to recount his experience with this uncanny woman. He states that she has taken him to her “Elfin grot” (literally a grotto for fairies) which seems to be her home where he she started weeping and he “shut her wild sad eyes” and kissed her. This image of the woman weeping can be interpreted in different ways. One way is that she is weeping out of concern because the knight is unwell and might die. Another way of interpreting her weeping is because she has been held captive and, therefore, hopes for her freedom. One point that can evidence this view is that the act of him shutting her eyes can be said to symbolise the knight suppressing her freedom.

Stanza Nine Analysis:

This stanza, however, shows that it is the mysterious woman who is now in control. This occurs in line one “and there she lulled me asleep” which suggests domination and control. The knight in this light takes the position of vulnerability. It is at this stage that he starts seeing haunting images in a dream. The last line indicates a

negative implication about this woman as she has taken him to “cold hill’s side”.

This line reminds us of the first lines that evoke loneliness and isolation. Also, the act of her putting to sleep might suggest that she has poisoned him and he is now under her spell, isolated “on a cold hill’s side”.

Analysis of Stanzas 10-11-12:

Stanza ten demonstrates the dream that he has seen while asleep. In this dream, he sees kings and princess who also look pale as death and they shout loudly to warn him about this lady. Hence, it is arguable that these men are previous lovers and victims of this woman. By warning him, these pale kings and princes seem to predict how dreadful and miserable the knight’s future would be, should he fall under her spell. The final stanza depicts the knight as he awakes from his dream only to find himself alone on the cold hillside loitering and waiting for this experience to return. After his fairy romance, the world is pale and devoid of charm. The word “sojourn” implies that he will be there temporarily, perhaps to re-live his experience with this mysterious lady.

Theme:

The theme of this ballad is unrequited love which implies the pain of the person who loves but is not loved in return which the knight of this ballad has suffered from. The unrequited love expressed in this ballad can be said to reflect John Keats’s own experience of unfulfilled love because he died at a young age.