

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

La belle dame sans merci

La Belle Dame sans Merci

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has wither'd 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 look'd 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 sigh'd full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

And there she lulled me asleep,
And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!—

**The latest dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill's side.**

**I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!'**

**I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gaped 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 wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.**

Summary of "La Belle Dame sans Merci":

The poem begins with a speaker addressing a knight who appears to be sickly, wandering alone in a barren landscape. The knight explains that he met a beautiful, mysterious woman who enchanted him with her beauty and affection. She is described as otherworldly, possibly a fairy or supernatural being. The knight recalls how they spent time together, how she gave him sweet foods, spoke in a strange language, and lulled him to sleep. In his sleep, he dreamed of pale kings, princes, and warriors who warned him that "La Belle Dame sans Merci" had enslaved them. Upon waking, the knight found himself alone on the cold hillside, abandoned and entranced, like the men in his dream, left to wander and suffer eternally.

Analysis:

1. The Knight's Condition:

The poem begins with the speaker encountering a "knight-at-arms," who looks forlorn and wasted. The desolation in the landscape reflects the knight's internal turmoil. The imagery of "withered sedge" and the absence of birds conveys a scene devoid of life, mirroring the knight's despair.

2. The Meeting with the Lady:

The knight recalls his encounter with a mysterious woman who is described as a "faery's child." She is ethereal, beautiful, and otherworldly, which suggests an association with the supernatural. Their interactions are intimate—he adorns her with garlands, she sings to him, and they share moments of tenderness.

3. Enchantment and Betrayal:

Despite their apparent closeness, there is an air of deception. The lady speaks in "language strange" and eventually lulls the knight into sleep. In his dream, he sees other men, "pale kings and princes," who have also been entrapped by this lady. The knight realizes he is not the first to fall victim to her charms, and the dream suggests that her affection is a deadly illusion.

4. The Supernatural Element:

Keats frequently incorporates supernatural or mythic elements into his poetry, and in "La Belle Dame sans Merci," the lady embodies the trope of the "femme fatale" who captivates men and brings about their ruin. The knight, once enthralled by her, is left "alone and palely loitering," as though his encounter has drained him of life.

5. Themes of Unrequited Love and Loss:

The knight's condition at the poem's end suggests that love, once promised, has been cruelly withdrawn. The beautiful lady, although loving in her actions, ultimately represents mercilessness—her affection is fleeting, and her victims are left in emotional and physical ruin.

6. The Role of Nature and Setting:

The setting plays a crucial role in illustrating the emotional atmosphere. The withering sedge, the lifeless lake, and the silence of nature contribute to the tone of abandonment and sorrow. Nature here does not serve as a source of vitality but rather reflects the despair of the knight.

Keats' Romanticism:

Keats, as a Romantic poet, often wrote about the connection between beauty, the natural world, and human emotion. In "La Belle Dame sans Merci," these elements are intertwined, yet beauty here is both alluring and dangerous. The supernatural lady, who initially appears as the embodiment of beauty, brings the knight to emotional and physical devastation. Keats explores the idea that beauty can be intoxicating, but also deceptive and deadly.

Conclusion: "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a haunting portrayal of love, desire, and the consequences of succumbing to an irresistible but treacherous force. It reflects the Romantic ideal of beauty intertwined with danger, and the transient nature of life and love. The knight's plight evokes sympathy, as he is left entranced and abandoned, a victim of his own longing and the mysterious power of the lady.

Grammatical Techniques:

1. Repetition:

- The phrase "O what can ail thee" is repeated in the first and second stanzas to emphasize the knight's pitiful state and create a sense of urgency.
- The refrain, "And no birds sing," is repeated in the first and last stanzas to reinforce the desolate atmosphere and mirror the knight's despair.

2. Inversion (Anastrophe):

- Keats frequently uses inversion for poetic effect. For example, in "And nothing else saw all day long," the typical subject-verb-object order is altered. This creates an archaic, almost otherworldly tone, aligning with the knight's dreamlike experience.

3. Questions:

- The poem opens with direct questions, "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms?" This interrogative approach immediately draws the reader into the mystery, engaging them in the knight's plight.

4. Exclamatory Sentences:

- Lines like "Ah! woe betide!" (line 36) employ exclamation to convey the emotional intensity of the knight's realization and regret.
5. **Simple Past and Past Perfect Tenses:**
- The majority of the poem is written in the simple past tense as the knight recounts his experience. However, there are moments where past perfect is used to highlight events that occurred before his current state of abandonment (e.g., "I dreamed...").
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Poetic Devices:

1. **Imagery:**
 - Keats uses vivid descriptions to create powerful images, such as "I see a lily on thy brow" and "the squirrel's granary is full." These descriptions evoke the cold, lifeless environment and the knight's deteriorating health.
 - The description of the lady as "Full beautiful—a faery's child," with "wild" eyes and "long" hair, invokes a sense of ethereal beauty and danger.
2. **Symbolism:**
 - The "lily" on the knight's brow is symbolic of death and sickness. In Victorian flower language, the lily often represents purity, but here it connotes the knight's imminent demise.
 - The "fading rose" on his cheeks symbolizes lost vitality, love, and passion that is quickly dying.
 - The lady herself symbolizes seduction and enchantment. As a "faery's child," she represents the supernatural and the unknown, acting as a metaphor for the elusive and destructive nature of love.
3. **Ballad Form:**
 - The poem follows a traditional **ballad structure**, which consists of four-line stanzas (quatrains) with a rhyme scheme of **ABCB**. This form contributes to the lyrical quality of the poem, while also giving it a simple, almost song-like rhythm.
4. **Refrain:**
 - The repeated phrase "And no birds sing" is an example of a **refrain**, a device used to emphasise the bleakness and desolation of both the landscape and the knight's emotional state.
5. **Alliteration:**
 - Keats employs alliteration throughout the poem to create a sense of musicality and emphasis. For example, "wild eyes" and "honey wild" repeat the "w" sound, which subtly enhances the otherworldliness of the woman.
6. **Assonance:**
 - There is noticeable **assonance** in lines like "pacing steed" where the repetition of vowel sounds ("ee") gives the line a smooth, flowing quality, mirroring the knight's infatuation.
7. **Metaphor:**
 - The knight's fading health and the withered landscape serve as metaphors for his emotional and spiritual emptiness after being abandoned by the lady. His "fading rose" is not only a literal description of his appearance but also a metaphor for his dying spirit and lost love.
8. **Mood and Tone:**

- Keats creates a sombre, melancholic mood throughout the poem. The tone is one of mystery and sorrow, particularly through the desolate imagery, the knight's illness, and the haunting nature of his encounter with the lady.
9. **Enjambment:**
- Keats makes use of **enjambment** to continue thoughts from one line to the next without punctuation, which contributes to the flowing, dreamlike quality of the narrative. For example:
 - "She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
"I love thee true."

Comparison with she walks in a beauty:

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" by John Keats, "She Walks in Beauty" by Lord Byron, and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot (often referred to as "The Love Song") all explore aspects of love, desire, and beauty, but they approach these themes in vastly different ways. Below is a comparative analysis, discussing their similarities, differences, and distinct approaches to love and beauty.

The theme of Love and Beauty

1. Romantic and Idealized Beauty (She Walks in Beauty by Lord Byron):

- "She Walks in Beauty" presents love in an idealised and ethereal way. Byron describes a woman whose physical beauty reflects her inner purity. The poem focuses on her grace, light and dark balance, and serenity.
- The tone is reverent and admiring, almost worshipful. The woman's beauty is harmonious and calm, representing the Romantic ideal of the fusion of external and internal beauty.

Key lines:

- "She walks in beauty, like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies."
- "The smiles that win, the tints that glow, / But tell of days in goodness spent."

2. Dangerous and Destructive Love (La Belle Dame sans Merci by John Keats):

- In "La Belle Dame sans Merci", love is portrayed as dangerous and destructive. The knight is enchanted and ultimately abandoned by a mysterious woman, symbolizing love as something that brings emotional and physical devastation. The woman's beauty and affection are deceptive, leading to a feeling of entrapment rather than fulfilment.
- The tone is melancholic, reflecting both the knight's desire and his subsequent despair. Keats' depiction of love is far from the idealized vision found in Byron's poem; it is instead transient, powerful, and damaging.

Key lines:

- "I met a lady in the meads, / Full beautiful—a faery's child."
- "She took me to her elfin grot, / And there she wept and sigh'd full sore."

3. Alienation and Anxiety in Love (The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T.S. Eliot):

- Eliot's "**The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**" deals with love in a modern, fragmented context. Prufrock is overwhelmed by insecurity, indecision, and alienation. He longs for a romantic connection, but his paralysis and fear of rejection prevent him from acting on these desires. Love, here, is not idealized but rather a source of anxiety and alienation.
- The tone is one of introspection, frustration, and self-doubt. Unlike Keats' portrayal of an external, powerful woman or Byron's idealized beauty, Prufrock's struggles are internal, focused on his own shortcomings and insecurities.

Key lines:

- "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?"
- "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo."

Representation of the Female Figure

1. Ethereal and Idealized Woman (She Walks in Beauty):

- The woman in "**She Walks in Beauty**" is a symbol of pure, serene beauty. Byron emphasizes the balance of physical and spiritual beauty, portraying her as angelic, almost divine. She is viewed from a distance, and the speaker focuses entirely on her aesthetic and moral qualities without any personal interaction or relationship.

2. Dangerous Femme Fatale (La Belle Dame sans Merci):

- The woman in "**La Belle Dame sans Merci**" is far from pure or serene; she is a **femme fatale** who ensnares men through her beauty and charm, only to abandon them in a state of despair. Her beauty is associated with danger and deception. Unlike Byron's woman, who radiates goodness, Keats' lady brings destruction.

3. Elusive and Unattainable Love (The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock):

- In "**Prufrock**", the female figure remains distant and elusive. Prufrock's interactions with women are imagined or fragmented, representing his inability to connect emotionally or romantically. Unlike the women in Byron's and Keats' poems, the women in Eliot's poem are part of an intellectual and superficial social world, where true emotional connection is missing.

Tone and Emotional Impact

1. Admiring and Reverent (*She Walks in Beauty*):

- The tone of "*She Walks in Beauty*" is gentle, admiring, and serene. There is no conflict, tension, or anxiety in the poem. It is a pure, uncomplicated admiration of beauty that seems almost transcendent.

2. Haunting and Melancholic (*La Belle Dame sans Merci*):

- "*La Belle Dame sans Merci*" has a haunting, melancholic tone. The poem is a lament of lost love and a reflection on the dangers of desire. The knight's encounter with the lady leaves him emotionally and physically ruined, and the imagery of the cold, lifeless landscape reinforces this despair.

3. Anxious and Self-Reflective (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*):

- Eliot's poem is characterized by a tone of anxiety, indecision, and self-reflection. Prufrock's internal monologue reveals his deep sense of inadequacy and his fear of rejection. There is no joy in love here, only paralysis and frustration.
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Structure and Poetic Devices

1. Traditional Romantic Ballad (*La Belle Dame sans Merci*):

- Keats' "*La Belle Dame sans Merci*" follows the structure of a traditional ballad, using quatrains with an **ABCB rhyme scheme**. The use of repetition, symbolism, and natural imagery connects it to the Romantic tradition, while the supernatural element adds to its mysterious and haunting mood.

2. Lyric Poem (*She Walks in Beauty*):

- "*She Walks in Beauty*" is a lyric poem, consisting of three stanzas of **iambic tetrameter**. The regular meter and rhyme scheme reflect the calm, balanced beauty of the woman. The use of contrast (light vs. dark) and metaphor enhances the theme of harmonious beauty.

3. Dramatic Monologue (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*):

- "*Prufrock*" is a dramatic monologue written in free verse, characterized by a fragmented, modernist structure. Eliot uses stream-of-consciousness, imagery, and allusion to capture the inner turmoil of the speaker. Unlike Keats and Byron, who focus on external beauty and interaction, Eliot's focus is on the internal psychological state of the speaker.
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Key Differences

1. Tone and Outcome:

- In "**She Walks in Beauty**", the tone is peaceful, and beauty is celebrated without conflict.
 - In "**La Belle Dame sans Merci**", love leads to devastation, and the knight is left ruined and abandoned.
 - In "**Prufrock**", love is elusive, marked by indecision and alienation, with no resolution.
2. **Role of the Female Figure:**
- Byron's woman represents idealized beauty.
 - Keats' woman is a symbol of destructive, dangerous love.
 - Eliot's women are distant and symbolic of the social and emotional barriers that Prufrock cannot overcome.
3. **View of Love:**
- **Byron:** Love and beauty are idealized and serene.
 - **Keats:** Love is enchanting but ultimately destructive.
 - **Eliot:** Love is fraught with anxiety, insecurity, and alienation.

Conclusion:

While all three poems explore love and beauty, they reflect different periods and approaches. **Byron** represents the Romantic idealization of beauty, where love is pure and transcendent. **Keats**, though still within the Romantic tradition, offers a darker, more tragic view of love, where beauty is alluring but fatal. **Eliot**, in contrast, presents love in a modernist context, marked by internal conflict, isolation, and frustration. The treatment of love and beauty evolves across these works, reflecting changing attitudes towards romance, human connection, and emotional experience.

Comparison and differences with The Last Dutchess

Comparison between "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "My Last Duchess"

1. Themes: Love, Power, and Control

- **Love and Power in "La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - In "**La Belle Dame sans Merci**," Keats explores the theme of love as something that is seductive yet ultimately destructive. The knight falls for the "faery's child," but she wields all the power in their brief relationship. The knight's pursuit of love leaves him abandoned and emotionally ruined. There is a sense of helplessness in the face of an overpowering, otherworldly love.
 - The power dynamic is subtle: the lady appears delicate and beautiful, yet she holds control over the knight, leading to his downfall. The poem suggests the dangers of falling for an idealized or unattainable love, where the one in pursuit becomes vulnerable and powerless.
- **Love, Jealousy, and Control in "My Last Duchess":**

- In "**My Last Duchess**," the theme of love is intertwined with control, jealousy, and possessiveness. The Duke, who is the speaker, narrates how his late wife's independence, kindness, and joy were seen as faults because they were not directed solely at him. The Duke's obsessive need to control his wife's behaviour and emotions ultimately leads him to have her killed.
- Power and dominance are central themes here. Unlike the knight in Keats' poem, who is rendered powerless, the Duke exerts absolute control over his wife's life and legacy, treating her like a possession rather than a human being. His control is not just over her in life, but in death, as he keeps her portrait hidden behind a curtain that only he can draw.

2. Portrayal of the Female Figure

- "**La Belle Dame sans Merci**":
 - The woman in Keats' poem is mysterious, ethereal, and supernatural. She is described as a "faery's child," embodying beauty, enchantment, and danger. Her affection for the knight is fleeting, and her true intentions remain ambiguous. She takes on the role of the **femme fatale**, a woman whose allure brings destruction to those who fall under her spell.
 - The female figure is not developed in terms of character but rather as a symbolic representation of unattainable love, one that ultimately leads to despair.
- "**My Last Duchess**":
 - The Duchess, in contrast, is presented through the eyes of the Duke, who criticizes her behaviour for being too open and joyful. She is not directly given a voice in the poem, but the Duke's description paints her as a gracious and warm-hearted woman who finds joy in life's simple pleasures. Her refusal to be confined to the role of the Duke's possession becomes the source of her downfall.
 - While the Duchess is also, in a sense, objectified (reduced to a portrait), her warmth, liveliness, and kindness contrast sharply with the distant, cold, and manipulative lady in Keats' poem. The Duchess is victimized because of her humanity, whereas the lady in "**La Belle Dame sans Merci**" victimizes the knight through her otherworldliness.

3. Tone and Atmosphere

- **Melancholic and Haunting in "La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - Keats' poem is steeped in melancholy and desolation. The setting is barren, with "no birds sing" and "the sedge has withered from the lake," reflecting the knight's emotional state after being abandoned. The tone is one of sorrow and mystery, with the knight recounting his tragic encounter as he remains trapped in a state of emotional paralysis.
 - The atmosphere is ethereal and dreamlike, giving the sense that the knight is caught in a world between reality and fantasy, unable to escape the haunting memory of the lady.
- **Sinister and Ominous in "My Last Duchess":**
 - Browning's poem has a tone of cold detachment and subtle menace. The Duke speaks in a calm, measured way, but beneath his words lies an undercurrent of jealousy, possessiveness, and cruelty. The sinister tone builds as the reader

realizes that the Duke has had his wife killed and now calmly shows off her portrait as if she were a mere object.

- The poem's setting, with its aristocratic art gallery, enhances the atmosphere of power, wealth, and control. The Duke's matter-of-fact recounting of his wife's fate adds to the chilling nature of the poem.

4. Structure and Poetic Form

- **Ballad Form in "La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - "**La Belle Dame sans Merci**" is structured as a ballad, consisting of quatrains with an **ABCB** rhyme scheme. The simple, rhythmic structure enhances the poem's haunting and mysterious tone, making it feel like a folk tale or legend. The repetition of certain phrases, such as "alone and palely loitering," adds to the sense of lingering sorrow.
 - The ballad form helps convey the story in a concise and narrative-driven manner, with a focus on the emotional impact of the knight's encounter with the lady.
- **Dramatic Monologue in "My Last Duchess":**
 - "**My Last Duchess**" is a dramatic monologue, meaning the entire poem is spoken by one character — the Duke — who indirectly reveals his thoughts and feelings. The **iambic pentameter** and **rhymed couplets** give the poem a controlled, formal structure, reflecting the Duke's composed and controlling nature.
 - The monologue format allows the reader to infer much about the Duke's personality and motivations, even though he never explicitly admits to his cruelty. The structure is key to understanding the tension between appearance and reality in the poem.

5. Outcome of the Relationship

- **Destruction of the Knight in "La Belle Dame sans Merci":**
 - The knight in Keats' poem is left in a state of desolation. His love for the lady brings him nothing but sorrow, as she abandons him after enchanting him. The outcome of their relationship is tragic for the knight, who is left emotionally broken and trapped in a lifeless world. His fate is uncertain, but his present state suggests he will continue to suffer, haunted by the memory of the lady.
- **Murder of the Duchess in "My Last Duchess":**
 - In contrast, the Duke in Browning's poem takes active steps to control the outcome of his relationship. When he perceives that his wife is not conforming to his standards of obedience and exclusivity, he has her killed. The Duchess's death solidifies the Duke's dominance, and he continues to control her even after her death, showcasing her portrait to visitors as if she were a trophy. The Duke is left unscathed, continuing with his life and already planning another marriage.

Differences between "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "My Last Duchess"

1. **Power and Control:**

- **"La Belle Dame sans Merci"** presents the female figure as the one in control, with the knight falling victim to her enchantment. The lady wields power through her beauty and supernatural allure, leaving the knight emotionally and physically ruined.
- **"My Last Duchess,"** on the other hand, portrays the male figure (the Duke) as the one in control. The Duke exerts power over his wife, both in life and death, and the poem highlights his obsessive need to control her actions and emotions.

2. Agency of the Female Figure:

- In **"La Belle Dame sans Merci,"** the lady has significant agency. She initiates the relationship, lures the knight into her world, and then abandons him. Her actions directly lead to the knight's downfall, and she remains a mysterious and powerful figure throughout the poem.
- In **"My Last Duchess,"** the Duchess is largely powerless. The Duke controls her fate and reduces her to a portrait that he can manipulate. Although she displays kindness and joy in life, she is ultimately a victim of the Duke's jealousy and desire for control. The Duchess's voice is absent from the poem, as we only hear about her through the Duke's biased perspective.

3. Tone and Atmosphere:

- The tone of **"La Belle Dame sans Merci"** is melancholic and dreamlike, with an atmosphere of mystery and emotional desolation. The knight's sorrow is central to the poem's mood, and the supernatural elements heighten the sense of otherworldly tragedy.
- In **"My Last Duchess,"** the tone is sinister and chilling, with the Duke's calm, detached narration masking the horror of his actions. The atmosphere is one of cold control and dominance, with the Duke's aristocratic setting emphasizing his power and wealth.

4. Outcome of the Male Character:

- The knight in **"La Belle Dame sans Merci"** is left in a state of emotional ruin. He is the victim of the lady's enchantment and is trapped in a barren, lifeless world, with no hope for redemption.
- The Duke in **"My Last Duchess"** emerges victorious in his quest for control. He suffers no consequences for his actions and is already planning to marry another woman.