

La Belle Dame Sans Merci—“The beautiful woman without mercy a poem by John Keats



“wight” means “person” and “sedge” is a grassy marsh plant. The speaker asks why the knight is loitering here in such a barren spot.

Autumn, the end of the year. Though barren, the squirrel’s granary is full—an alternative and better environment.

Fever dew is the sweat of sickness. If the red color is leaving the knight’s cheeks, then he’s going into shock and dying.

Lots of incongruity in the knight—pale, loitering. Lots of nature imagery

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
Alone and palely loitering;
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
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 cheek 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 set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long;
For sideways would she lean, and sing
A faery's song.

He's obsessed—sees nothing else, can't understand what she says, "A faery's song", imagines that she loves him and that she tells him she loves him.

Climax. Stanzas 4-7 describe the knight's meeting and involvement with the lady. The last four stanzas returns to where the poem started.

What kills him? The loss of his love, his obsessiveness, his inability to return to the mundane once he's experienced the sublime?

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.

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 gaz'd and sighed deep,
And there I shut her wild sad eyes--
So kiss'd to sleep.

And there we slumber'd on the moss,
And there I dream'd, ah woe betide,
The latest dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
Who cry'd--"La belle Dame sans merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill 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.