"La Belle Dame Sans Merci", by John Keats

O what can ail thee, knight at arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said-
I love thee true.

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.

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.

I see a lily on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

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

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.

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Notes

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" means "the beautiful woman without mercy." It's the title of an old French court poem by Alain Chartier. Keats probably knew a current translation which was supposed to be by Chaucer.

Sedge - a grassy marsh plant.
Fever dew - the sweat of sickness.
Medieval fairies were usually human-sized
A "fragrant zone" is a belt made of flowers
Elf (pl. elves) noun - fairy; elfin, adj. - belonging to the fairy world.
A "grot" = a grotto - cave or cavern, natural or artificial
Woe- unhappiness; Betide- happen, "Woe betide" can be used as a warning.
Gloam means gloom.
In thrall - in slavery or imprisonment
The Story
The speaker meets a knight by a woodland lake in late autumn. The man has been there for a long time, and is evidently dying. The knight says he met a beautiful, wild-looking woman in a meadow. He spent time with her, and decked her with flowers. She did not speak, but looked and sighed as if she loved him. He gave her his horse to ride, and he walked beside them. He saw nothing but her, because she leaned over in his face and sang a mysterious song. She spoke a language he could not understand, but he was confident she said she loved him. He kissed her to sleep, and fell asleep himself. He dreamed of kings, princes, and warriors, all pale as death. They shouted a terrible warning -- they were the woman's slaves. And now he was her slave, too. Awakening, the woman was gone, and the knight was left on the cold hillside.

The Poem's Inspiration
Keats wrote the poem in 1819. It appears in a letter to his brother George. At the time, Keats was very upset because his brother Tom had been deceived in a romantic liaison. He was also undecided about whether to enter into a relationship with Fanny Brawne, who he loved but whose friends disapproved of the possible match with Keats. Shortly before the poem was written, Keats recorded a dream in which he met a beautiful woman in a magic place which turned out to be filled with pallid, enslaved lovers. Just before the poem was written, Keats had read Spenser's Florimel, in which an enchantress impersonates a heroine to her boyfriend, and then vanishes. All these experiences probably went into the making of this powerful lyric.

Form and Style
"La belle dame sans merci" is a literary ballad (imitation of a folk ballad) in twelve short stanzas of four lines, with the second and fourth lines rhyming. It is structured like a dialogue between the knight and an unknown person.

Look at the meter of the poem. The short final lines of each stanza contain successive long/stressed syllables (e.g. "no birds sing") and so take as long to read as the other lines. (Compare with Burns, "My love is like a red, red rose") What effect does this produce?

The poem includes some words from old and middle English, which help achieve the exotic or mysterious tone.

Interpretation
"La Belle Dame sans Merci" seems easy to understand at the narrative level. It tells a story, gives few details about the characters, and makes no judgments. Some details are realistic and familiar, others are unearthly and strange. These are all typical features of the ballad. It is, however, not just a haunting story.

In his version of the medieval poem, "La Belle Dame sans Merci", Keats recreates the tale of fated love. He also presents love as the reason for living, and fuel of life. The only sounds in the poem are made by the lady, she "sing's fairy's songs," makes "sweet moans," and "sigh'd full sore." At the end, "no birds sing". Sight is used in the same way. With her wild eyes, "she looked at him as she did love," and he "nothing else saw all day long" when with her. The lady - or the experience of love - thus embody life itself.
Keats' exploration of the extremes of experience - both wonderful and painful - is typically Romantic. Keats lets the reader decide whether the wonder of the knight's experience was worth the suffering that accompanied it. Keats records no reply to the dying knight and leaves us with many questions and paradoxes.

For Discussion
What is the meaning of the knight's experience?
What is the meaning of the dream?
Was the knight deluded by his beloved or did he delude himself?
Why does the woman have no name?
What is the nature of La Belle Dame sans Merci?
Is the woman simply a wicked temptress?
Is the relationship impossible because the woman is from the "faery" world and the knight is human?
Who is the speaker and what will happen to him (or her)?
What happened to the knight's horse?

The Vale of Soul Making
In several of his private letters, Keats stated that he did not believe in Christianity, or in any of the other conventional religions of his era. As he faced death, it's clear that Keats did struggle to find meaning in life. And in the same letter that contains the original of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", Keats gives his answer.

Call the world, if you please, "the Vale of Soul Making". Then you will find out the use of the world....
There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions -- but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. Intelligences are atoms of perception -- they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God. How then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them -- so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence. How, but in the medium of a world like this?
This point I sincerely wish to consider, because I think it a grander system of salvation than the Christian religion -- or rather it is a system of Spirit Creation...
I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive -- and yet I think I perceive it -- that you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible. I will call the world a school instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read. I will call the human heart the hornbook used in that school. And I will call the child able to read, the soul made from that school and its hornbook.
Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways....
As various as the lives of men are -- so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, souls, identical souls of the sparks of his own essence.

Keats believed that we begin as identical bits of God, and acquire individuality only by life-defining emotional experiences. According to Keats' philosophy, any intense experience -- even if painful-- is precious. (Perhaps Keats, medically trained, was foreseeing his own death from TB -- he would have been pale and sweaty and unable to move easily.) Each of our experiences has the effect of making each of us a unique being.