Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



La Belle Dame Sans Merci

by John Keats

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5

Keats wrote the poem in April 1819. The French title means "The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy." It is a literary ballad in twelve four-line stanzas; the short fourth line of each stanza makes the poem feel as if it is fading. The first three stanzas are spoken by a stranger who questions the knight; the knight answers in the rest.

THE POEM

Oh what can ail thee Knight at arms
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the Lake
And no birds sing.

Oh 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 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 starv'd 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 withered from the Lake
And no birds sing.

VOCABULARY

ail — trouble, make sick

loitering — lingering, standing around with no purpose

sedge — a grass-like plant that grows near water

haggard — looking exhausted and unwell

granary — a storehouse for grain

meads — meadows

zone — here, a belt or sash

relish — a pleasant taste

grot — a cave or grotto

thrall — slavery, being under someone's power

sojourn — stay for a time

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What season is it, and how does the setting match the knight's condition?

2. How does the knight describe the lady when he first meets her?

3. What does the lady give the knight, and what happens in her "elfin grot"?

4. Who appears in the knight's dream, and what do they tell him?

5. Look at the last stanza. How does it echo the first? What does this suggest about the knight's future?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short ballad (4–6 stanzas of four lines) in which a stranger meets someone who has been changed by a mysterious encounter. Begin with a question.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci — Answer Key

1. Late autumn: “The Squirrel’s granary is full / And the harvest’s done,” and “no birds sing.” The dying, empty landscape matches the knight, who is “haggard,” pale and “woe begone.”
2. “Full beautiful, a faery’s child,” with long hair, a light foot and eyes that “were wild.”
3. She finds him “roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild and manna dew” and says “I love thee true.” In her grot she weeps, he shuts “her wild, wild eyes / With kisses four,” and she lulls him asleep.
4. “pale Kings, and Princes too, / Pale warriors.” They warn him: “La belle dame sans merci, / Thee hath in thrall,” meaning he is now her captive, as they were.
5. It repeats “Alone and palely loitering” and “no birds sing” from stanza 1. The circle suggests he is trapped, waiting on the cold hillside with no escape.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/la-belle-dame-sans-merci-john-keats/