

# La Belle Dame sans Merci



## POEM TEXT

1 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
 2 Alone and palely loitering?  
 3 The sedge has withered from the lake,  
 4 And no birds sing.

5 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
 6 So haggard and so woe-begone?  
 7 The squirrel's granary is full,  
 8 And the harvest's done.

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

13 I met a lady in the meads,  
 14 Full beautiful—a faery's child,  
 15 Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
 16 And her eyes were wild.

17 I made a garland for her head,  
 18 And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;  
 19 She looked at me as she did love,  
 20 And made sweet moan.

21 I set her on my pacing steed,  
 22 And nothing else saw all day long,  
 23 For sidelong would she bend, and sing  
 24 A faery's song.

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

29 She took me to her Elfin grot,  
 30 And there she wept and sighed full sore,  
 31 And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
 32 With kisses four.

33 And there she lullèd me asleep,  
 34 And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—

35 The latest dream I ever dreamt  
 36 On the cold hill side.

37 I saw pale kings and princes too,  
 38 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;  
 39 They cried—'La Belle Dame sans Merci  
 40 Thee hath in thrall!'

41 I saw their starved lips in the gloam,  
 42 With horrid warning gapèd wide,  
 43 And I awoke and found me here,  
 44 On the cold hill's side.

45 And this is why I sojourn here,  
 46 Alone and palely loitering,  
 47 Though the sedge is withered from the lake,  
 48 And no birds sing.



## SUMMARY

What's the matter, knight in shining armor, standing alone, looking rather ill? The plant life by the lakeside has shriveled up and the sound of birdsong is absent.

Again, tell me, what's the matter? You look extremely distressed and sad. The squirrels have gathered their provisions for winter, and we humans have harvested our fields.

Your forehead is pale like a lily and moist with the sweat of a painful fever. The color in your cheeks, once bright and lively as a rose, is fading extremely quickly.

I, the knight, met a woman in the meadows. She was so enchantingly beautiful I assumed she was the child of fairy. She had long hair, she moved so gracefully she seemed to hover over the earth, and she had a mysterious wildness in her eyes.

From flowers, stems, and leaves I wove a crown for her to wear. I also wove her bracelets, and a belt strong with the scent of the flowers I used to make it. Having received my gifts, she looked at me—it was the look of someone falling in love—and she moaned sweetly.

I sat her behind me on my trotting horse, yet that whole day I saw nothing but her—as we trotted along, she would lean forward and around me, singing a mysterious fairy song.

When we stopped, she dug up sweet, nutritious roots for me. She served me wild honey, and a substance so heavenly in taste it reminded me of manna, the food that kept the Israelites alive

on their journey out of Egypt. In a strange language that I nevertheless understood, she said, "I truly love you."

Next she took me to her enchanted cave, where, overwhelmed with emotion, she wept and sighed—something pained her. I shut those wild eyes of hers by kissing her four times in an attempt to soothe her.

Next, she lulled me to sleep, and I fell into a deep dream—it still fills me with sadness and despair to remember it! That was the last dream I ever had, in that cave, which was located on a cold hillside.

In it I saw pale kings, princes, and warriors gathered around me. I saw the color of death in all of their faces. They told me that La Belle Dame sans Merci—The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy—had taken me as her prisoner.

I saw their love-starved, life-starved lips in the dying light. These lips widened as they warned me about the trouble I'd gotten myself into. Then I woke up, and found myself here, on this cold hillside.

So that's the answer to your question—that's why I linger here alone, looking rather unhealthy, even though, as you say, the plant life by the lakeside has shriveled up and the sound of birdsong is absent.



## THEMES



### LOVE, OBSESSION, AND DEATH

In the poem, a knight tells the story of how he becomes obsessed with, and then gets abandoned by, a spirit known as *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, or "The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy." Though seemingly aware she's an illusion, the knight lingers in his memory of the Lady, and it's implied he will do so until he dies. In this relationship, the knight's love turns from enchantment into obsession.

Through his example, the poem expresses two linked warnings about the dangers of intense romantic love. First, obsession drains one's emotional energy. Second, when the object of obsession disappears, the lover left behind undergoes a spiritual death, losing the ability to appreciate beauty in anything but the memory of what is lost. These warnings suggest that love, though wonderful, can quickly shift into a kind of death if it becomes obsessive.

The knight first describes falling in love with the Lady as a kind of enchantment that consumes him completely. The Lady he finds in the meadow is "Full beautiful—a faery's child." The Lady's perfect beauty captures the knight's attention. By describing her as the child of a magical creature, he emphasizes that her ability to charm him is a supernatural force. Enchanted further by the mysterious wildness in her eyes, the knight begins serving the Lady and devoting all his emotional energy

to her. He weaves the Lady "bracelets" and "a garland," and in reward receives her "love" and "sweet moan."

However, the line between enchantment and obsession is dangerously thin. The Lady soon becomes the knight's single focus—seemingly his single source of life. Besides the Lady, the knight sees "nothing else ... all day." This may sound like hyperbole, but the knight means it: the Lady creates a private world for herself and the knight.

Soon, the knight sees her in everything—he is obsessed. The flowers transform into suitable material for the Lady to wear. The hillside cave, a feature of the natural landscape, becomes the Lady's "Elfin grot." As the knight's obsession deepens, he grows to depend on the Lady even for basic nutrition. The Lady feeds the knight "roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna-dew."

The [allusion](#) to manna, the supernaturally nutritious substance provided by God to the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt, implies that the Lady is literally responsible for the knight's survival. At this point the Lady says, "I love thee true." The knight's response is to give himself over fully to the Lady—he follows her home, soothes her, and makes himself vulnerable before her, allowing her to lull him to sleep.

Having devoted so much emotional energy to the Lady and put himself completely under her control, the knight undergoes a spiritual death when she disappears. In his dream the knight sees the Lady's former victims: "pale kings," "princes," and "warriors"—"death-pale were they all." In their faces he sees the man he will become: someone deathly, starved, and captivated by memories of the Lady to the point of enslavement. Like them, he will wake up "death-pale," or, as the speaker first describes him, "Alone and palely loitering"—physically alive, yet condemned to replay his memory of an obsessive love for the rest of his days. The Lady is finally revealed to be *La Belle Dame sans Merci*—literally, The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy.

Strangely, the Lady's merciless behavior actually consists of the love and joy she provides; her sudden disappearance is what makes the knight's experience so painful exactly *because* she was previously so kind. The shape of the Lady's cruelty suggests that anything one falls in love with or obsesses over can cause such pain, since anything can disappear in an instant. The poem thus cautions against such intense, obsessive love, arguing that it's ultimately not worth the agony it can cause.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 25-28

- Lines 29-32
- Lines 37-40
- Lines 41-42
- Lines 45-46
- Lines 47-48



## IMAGINATION VS. REALITY

In "La Belle Dame sans Merci," the speaker asks a medieval knight to explain why he's lingering in a clearly inhospitable area, where winter is setting in. The knight answers by telling a sort of fairy tale that sets up a colorful, imaginative world in opposition to the barren gray reality. By the end of the story, however, it is clear that the fairy-tale world is directly responsible for the knight's exhausted desperation. The poem suggests that the two worlds are bound together: the imagination can shape reality so profoundly that the two become indistinguishable.

The physical descriptions of the setting ground the first stanzas in the real world. Stanzas 1 and 2 evoke a specific time of year: late autumn. Plants have "withered," birdsong is absent, and the animals are preparing for winter. This somewhat harsh imagery will deepen the contrast between reality and the imagination when the knight begins his fantastic story.

That story, in turn, blurs the lines between fantasy and reality. The Lady the knight meets is "a faery's child" who sings a "faery's song" as she rides with the knight on his "pacing steed." She feeds him "manna-dew," then brings him to her "Elfin" cave. The story emphasizes these fanciful aspects of the knight's experience, but it is not entirely clear at first whether the knight is using terms like "faery's child" and "Elfin grot" *literally*. At this point in the poem, they could just as well be the knight's way of saying that the Lady was extremely, enchantingly beautiful.

Even the revelation that the Lady is a spirit being doesn't negate that. The knight describes what he saw and how it affected him—the result is the same no matter who the Lady actually is. This is why, at the end of the poem, he says quite somberly and seriously, "And this"—"this" being his experience—"is why I sojourn here."

As he dreams in the hillside cave, the knight learns from "pale kings and princes" (the Lady's previous lovers) that he is in the deadly grips of a spirit known as *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. The dream is a fantasy *within* the knight's story—a kind of double fantasy—but it's also here that the knight finds the actual future reflected. That is, at the deepest moment of his imaginative experience, the knight learns the truth about what has happened to him.

By the end of the poem, the knight's actual, lived reality becomes a fusion of the barren lakeside and the memory of his experience. The knight wakes from his dream "On the cold hill's

side" and surges back into the real world—that is, the world where the poem started. This moment raises the possibility that the knight was dreaming *all along*. However, given how closely bound the real and imaginative worlds have become for the knight, waking doesn't imply an escape from the memory of the Lady.

In the last stanza, the first stanza is repeated—but now the knight is speaking. The knight acknowledges his place, "Alone and palely loitering" by the lifeless lakeside, and the poem's final image is of a desperate man lingering in the memory of an experience that may not have even happened. Ultimately, however, it doesn't *matter* whether the Lady was ever really there. Unable to take his mind off this fantastical memory but also unable to return to it, the knight ends up trapped in the place where his imagination merges with his reality.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 25-26
- Line 29
- Line 33
- Lines 34-36
- Lines 37-38
- Lines 43-44
- Lines 45-46
- Lines 47-48



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing.*

The poem's first stanza introduces the poem's main problem and character, builds the setting, and establishes the form.

The poem starts on a tone of lament. In isolation, the opening "O" might just as easily look like the start of a meditation on nature's beauty, or love's glory, but quickly the word "ail" (i.e. "pains" or "afflicts") intervenes and clarifies one of the poem's main themes. This is a poem about pain, and the struggle to understand it. The "O," then, kicks off the inquiry of an empathetic observer. The archaic "thee" gives the reader an early hint about the time period of the poem's setting, one confirmed by the addressee's title in the next clause: "knight-at-arms." Most likely, this poem takes place in the [Middle Ages](#), when one wouldn't necessarily be surprised by the sudden

appearance of a knight.

The precise placement of "knight-at-arms" in the line reflects some of the poem's main themes. Knight-at-arms is the knight's formal title. It represents the honorable, [chivalrous](#) knight in shining armor. Even the hyphens, which augment the choppy rigidity of the [monosyllabic](#) words, contribute to this effect. In the sentence, "knight-at-arms" is isolated by a [caesura](#) on one side and an [end-stop](#) on the other. Visually and grammatically, the knight is separated from the rest of the action. This has two effects. One, it highlights the tension between the expected composure of an ideal knight and the wallowing of this particular knight, who is a real person with real emotions (the reader will soon learn that the knight is an emotional wreck). Two, it reflects the knight's alienation from his context. As the reader will learn, though the knight loiters by the lakeside, his mind is in a completely different place.

This alienation starts coming through in line 2, in which the knight is described as "Alone and palely loitering." Already the knight is out of context—he's not with other knights, or doing knightly things, but rather alone, seeming to do nothing at all. These words—"alone," "pale," and "loitering"—also hint at some of the poem's main themes. The knight is alone, but was once with someone he loved; he is pale, or reminiscent of death; and he loiters, literally incapable of moving on to the next thing.

The next two lines build on the theme of death, and further establish the setting. The "sedge," or grassy plant life, "has withered from the lake." By using the [perfect tense](#) in "has withered," the poem suggests that the withering, though complete, happened recently. The reader, then, might assume that the poem is somewhere between fall and winter. Along with the shriveling plant life, "no birds sing," another sign that winter is setting in. These tokens of death enhance the knight's deathly aspect, and the suggestion of seasonal change signals that the poem will deal with the concept of repeating cycles.

Finally, this jam-packed first stanza establishes the poem's meter. Like other English [ballads](#), Keats works in [quatrain](#)s, or four-line stanzas, but he adds some of his own touches. The first three lines of every stanza are in [iambic tetrameter](#) (each line has eight syllables), and the fourth line of each stanza has four to five syllables.

Stanza 1 follows the meter faithfully, as will the others. It begins,

O what | can ail | thee, knight | -at-arms?

The uniform beats of the unstressed-stressed iambs are appropriate for a ballad, a form that was originally accompanied by music and dance. In this line, the stress falls on the most important words. "What" in some ways prefigures the rest of the poem, as it forms the question the knight will answer; "ail" refers to the knight's pain; and "knight" and "arms" introduce the main character.

The meter in line 4 also serves a special purpose.

And no | birds sing.

This final line kills the rhythm of the three preceding lines. Its first stressed word is "no," giving defeated emphasis to the poem's description of death. As in the poem's other stanza-concluding lines, this one both freezes the preceding imagery with its clipped, terse sound, and, with its monosyllabic speed, propels the poem into the next stanza.

## LINES 5-8

*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.*

The second stanza deepens the impression left by the elements in the first stanza. It shares a first line and general structure with the first stanza, and confirms much of what that stanza says.

Line 5 repeats line 1 word for word. This nods to the traditional [balladic](#) form, in which such a [refrain](#) or [anaphora](#) might have been common, but it's especially notable because it gives the speaker a stronger presence in the poem. No longer just a disembodied voice, the speaker starts looking like an actual character. In his or her insistent and perhaps slightly worried curiosity, the speaker confirms him- or herself as someone capable of empathizing with the knight, or who is at least willing to give it a shot. Thus, as the image of the knight deepens—in line 6 he becomes "haggard" and "woe-begone" in addition to pale and alone—so does the personality of the speaker. Not only do these words describe the knight's appearance, but the speaker has *chosen* them specifically, perhaps indicative of the speaker's own inner state.

There's evidence the speaker has a deeper connection to these words than is obvious. When in stanza 1 the speaker says "The sedge has withered from the lake," the seasonal observation functions partly as the speaker's guess for what's causing the knight pain. By making this guess, the speaker is commiserating with the knight, saying that he or she feels a bit gloomy, too, and maybe even "haggard" or "woe-begone." Lines 7 and 8 depict what life is like for the speaker at the current moment. These lines contain clear references to fall. The "squirrel's granary," or storehouse of nuts and seeds for the winter, "is full," and humans, having completed the harvest, are also prepared for winter.

It's worth noting that line 8 has five syllables compared line 4's four syllables.

And the har | vest's done.

This represents the extent of the syllabic variation in the

stanza-concluding lines—all will have either four or five syllables.

## LINES 9-12

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

In stanza 3, the speaker describes the knight a bit more specifically. In doing so, he or she grasps the general features of the knight's problem. This stanza also contains some key images whose significance will crop up throughout the poem.

First of all, this stanza starts off with an "I." This is the poem's first use of that pronoun. If there was any lingering suspicion that the speaker was just the disembodied voice of the poem, this should mostly clear it up. Yes, a disembodied voice could refer to itself in the first person, but this "I" makes it sound as though the speaker is trying to make a personal connection with the knight; they are both part of the same physical world. The gist of the speaker's message is, "I'm worried about you." "I see a lily on thy brow, / With anguish moist and fever-dew," he or she says. The knight's brow is pale like a lily, and beaded with sweat in the same way that dew might bead the flower's petals.

The lily often [symbolizes](#) death in the poetry of this period, but it has a more particular [metaphorical](#) value in this poem. Why does the white lily, a healthy living thing, symbolize death? Here, the poem points to one of its main arguments: that death and the beauty of life are inseparable, that one can't exist without the other. The lily, growing, as it were, on the knight's deathly brow, seems to indicate a sort of reincarnation. In line 10, "fever-dew" emphasizes the lily's symbolic duality because of its echo later in the poem: in line 26, the knight receives similarly hyphenated "manna-dew" to eat, a substance that appears heavenly and nutritious, but ultimately poisons the knight's heart.

The appearance of the "fading rose" in line 11 complicates the lily metaphor. With the rose, the speaker describes how the color drains from the knight's cheeks (the reader can assume this rose is red, just as the lily is white). If the color is draining from the knight's cheeks, they will soon become white, like the lily. Here, the poem suggests that death is a process in which one form of delicate beauty—a rose—is substituted for another—a lily. Again, it underlines the inseparability of beauty and death.

The five-syllable line 12 moves just as quickly as the withering process it describes:

Fast **wi** | thereth **too**.

The three-syllable "withereth" speeds to completion over its unstressed second and third syllables, so quickly that it might be read as having only two syllables. In this way, line 12 is a

hybrid of the two end lines that come before it. "[T]oo," the line's extra syllable, provides a final stressed emphasis that gives the reader the sense that time is running out. The sped-up effect is further emphasized by the [enjambment](#) of line 11. Given the knight's deteriorating emotional and physical state, and the nasty weather in the forecast, the knight better get started with his story.

## LINES 13-16

*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.*

Stanza 4 marks the beginning of the knight's story. His response contains the first images of the Lady—*La Belle Dame sans Merci*—and paints an efficient portrait of his relationship with her.

Though it will take him a while to explain the actual reason for his dejected state, the knight answers the speaker's question right away. "I met a lady," he says. The knight's directness and matter-of-factness raise an interesting question: is the knight's story just the story of what can happen in any loving relationship? Or does the simplicity of his opening response belie the unique complexity of this relationship? In any case, this lady is the dominating image from which the rest of the story will develop. The knight's story will be one about love—and loss, which the reader already knows based on the fact that the knight is alone.

The rest of the details in the stanza suggest that the relationship between the knight and Lady had an overwhelming, obsessive quality. The knight meets her, or comes across her, "in the meads," or meadows. A meadow is a broad and pleasantly charming patch of land, typically between stretches of forest. Traveling through potentially unforgiving territory, a knight might very well see it as a sort of refuge. And given the meadow's openness, the presence of any other human in it would be obvious. Standing "in the meads," the Lady immediately becomes the knight's center of attention, and will stay that way until their emotionally violent separation near the end of the poem. So, from the first moment he sees her, the knight nurtures his obsession.

Because the knight responds out loud to the speaker, the reader can assume an extra self-consciousness in the knight's choice of words. He seems to want to emphasize the Lady's total control of his attention: she is "Full beautiful—a faery's child." With its fullness, the Lady's beauty seems to fill the meadow and her surroundings. As the following stanzas will demonstrate, the Lady becomes the center of the knight's reality, and therefore the thing to which all else refers. The [caesura](#) in the em-dash linking "Full beautiful" and "faery's child" represents a leap of expression. Unable to articulate the Lady's otherworldly beauty, the knight grasps for fantastic

imagery, making contact with "faery's child." The poem will refer a few other times to the Lady's magical heritage. Though the first mention may appear metaphorical, the others will deepen the knight's and reader's suspicion that the Lady comes from another zone entirely. The em-dash, then, represents an imaginative leap, a journey from the physical world to the imagination.

The rest of the poem will examine the often fluid boundary between these two worlds, and the rest of this stanza will highlight the Lady's enchanting aspects. "Her hair was long, her foot was light, / And her eyes were wild," says the knight. Aside from her beauty, the Lady's most prominent attributes are her hair, her feet, and her eyes. This description at once grounds her in the real world and emphasizes her fantastic appearance. Everything about the Lady is cranked up a notch. Her hair is longer than most women's hair, she moves with an astonishing lightness, and her eyes, the knight implies, conceal more than they reveal. Here, the knight compares her to a wild animal, mysterious and free, and in this sense she seems woven into the landscape. But she also stands apart from reality—at least the reality of the knight's experience. She is unlike anyone he has ever seen.

This mystery, embodied in the wild eyes, is what seems to lock the knight's obsession. With the stanza's conclusive, [monosyllabic](#), and by now characteristic final line, the knight begins his emotional journey.

### LINES 17-20

*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.*

Stanza 5 physically joins the knight with the Lady. Whereas before he was just admiring (and perhaps objectifying) her, he now engages with her. His type of engagement emphasizes the Lady's enchanting effect. It also contains some of the first hints that something is stirring under the surface of this pretty picture.

As a first step in his courtship of the Lady, the [chivalrous](#) knight devotes his creative energy to her. He fashions clothing for her, dressing her from head (with the "garland") to hip (with the "fragrant zone"). This description has a sensual quality; the reader might imagine the knight, in telling the story, trying to re-enter the moment, imagining each moment of contact with the Lady's body and basking in her fragrance and that of the flowers. By choosing what she wears, the knight chooses how the Lady appears—in this sense, he creates her. Certainly, he re-creates her in his memory. In the moment he describes, the knight's creative act may give him a feeling of control, one that he and the reader will soon learn is false. By accepting the knight's dotting advances, the Lady lulls him into a sense of security—and love. In line 19, the Knight uses that exact word:

"She looked at me as she did love." Unlike line 28, when the Lady actually uses the word "love" in reported dialogue, this love seems to be the knight's interpretation of the Lady's feeling. Perhaps emboldened by his creative control over the Lady's wardrobe, he imposes his interpretation of the relationship on her.

This stanza is also notable for its sexual current, particularly in the phrases "fragrant zone" and "made sweet moan." Though "fragrant zone," on its surface, refers to a band, maybe a belt, that the knight weaves for the Lady, it may also refer to the zone *below* her belt. The following action, which occurs "as she did love," and after which she makes "sweet moan," could easily be interpreted as the knight and the Lady taking each other to bed. Here, the knight may consummate his already obvious physical attraction to the Lady. And even if it doesn't suggest this specific reading, the poem certainly encourages the reader to ponder the phrase "fragrant zone." With a [caesura](#) on one end and the hard [end-stop](#) of a semicolon on the other, the phrase stands apart.

The phrase "sweet moan" also raises some questions that the reader will see throughout the poem. In particular, it connects with the phrase in line 27: "language strange." What sounds does the Lady make? How does she communicate? Does the knight understand her, or does he just assume he understands her? Also, a moan can be an expression of pleasure or pain. Like the lily, the Lady's response to the knight represents two things: pleasure, or an affirmation of the physical, living world; and pain, or a recognition of inevitable death.

### LINES 21-24

*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.*

In stanza 6, the knight's obsession with the Lady deepens. The Lady comes alive as a character, and the language grows more suggestive.

First, the knight wades deeper into his false sense of control. When he says "I set her on my pacing steed," he literally means that he picks the Lady up and places her on the back of his horse. He takes the experience into his own hands. *Steed*, which comes from the Old English word for "stallion"—a male horse in full possession of its sexual organs—ups the voltage of the already coursing sexual current. It also contributes to the knight's sense of control by enhancing his self-image as a strong, masculine "knight-at-arms"—a warrior contracted to defend nobility.

The meter, which is steady here and has remained so to this point, also contributes to this sense of control:

I set | her on | my pa|cing steed

As in most of the lines before it, line 21 stays faithful to the [iambic tetrameter](#). The horse is "pacing," so the steady, trotting iambs represent that action in the meter. The meter also gives the knight's experience an order that, when he later reveals its emotionally chaotic aftermath, turns out to be misleading.

In any case, the knight reveals his total vulnerability. His obsession reaches its deepest point yet: from the moment he mounts his horse with Lady, he sees "nothing else" but her "all day long." The Lady's physical movements are hypnotic and all-consuming. As the couple rides along, she leans forward and around the knight ("For sidelong would she bend") while singing a "faery's song," another example of her foreign and possibly indecipherable mode of communication. Like something both solid and vaporous, she manages to stay mounted on the horse while extending herself in all directions. The [polyptoton](#) of the word "sing" (the Lady *sings* a song) verbally imitates the knight's hypnosis. In the same way he gets trapped in the song, his words get stuck in a kind of loop.

This happens, says the knight, "all day long." Though "day" refers to the specific experience he recounts, it can also apply to the way the knight continues to relive that experience by the barren lakeside. That is, the knight's day with the Lady *never ends*, because he can't rid her from his mind.

## LINES 25-28

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

In stanza 7 the knight clinches the Lady's love (or so it seems) and the Lady seals the knight's fate. Here, the knight's dependence on the Lady reaches its most basic and vulnerable state.

Up to this point, the poem has depicted a sort of power game between the knight and Lady. In exchange for the garlands and bracelets, the Lady gives the knight an inarticulate expression of love. The knight, emboldened by this result, believes himself to be in control, and takes physical control by placing the Lady on his horse. Here, in stanza 7, the Lady makes her first move, and it's one the knight finds impossible to resist.

While in stanza 6 it was the knight who acted (he "set" the Lady on his horse), here the Lady acts: "She found me roots of relish sweet." The Lady digs up food for the knight, going out of her way to satisfy him. In the phrase "roots of relish sweet," the [alliteration](#) and [sibilance](#) convey the knight's pleasure at receiving this sumptuous offering. The /r/ sounds of "roots" and "relish" give the line an intimate, earthly, and tenderly rough quality. The word "relish," which as a verb refers to the act of enjoyment, extends the sense of pleasurable gorging with the fading sound of its second syllable, "[S]weet," which with its opening /s/ sound picks up where relish left off, lends finality to the meal with the hard /t/ of its ending.

However, the meal isn't over; the words that describe the following courses hint at the danger of the knight's situation. The knight next receives "honey wild, and manna-dew." The honey is notable for the adjective that modifies it: wild. Wildness is one of the Lady's main qualities. The wildness of her eyes hides her intents. It creates mystery. The knight, who is telling this story, and therefore, presumably, choosing his words carefully, must use "wild" with an understanding of what it has come to mean. By ingesting the "honey" wild, the knight accepts something of dubious and potentially dangerous origin. Though possibly aware of this, he lets his obsession over and lust for the Lady override any instinct to save himself. By eating her food, the knight incorporates the Lady's wildness into his body. She becomes part of him. This is one of the senses in which he won't be able to escape the Lady.

The [allusion](#) to manna, the substance that God feeds the Israelites on their 40-year journey from Egypt to Canaan, also reflects the knight's faith in accepting these mysterious provisions from the Lady. In Exodus, manna is evidence of God's protection of the Israelites. It keeps them alive. Here, the knight accepts the Lady's food as a heavenly substance he needs to survive. Yet Manna also appears in the New Testament, in the Gospel of John. There, Jesus reminds the Jews that though the Israelites fed off the manna, they eventually died. In contrast, if they accept Jesus's bread—faith in his divinity and word—they will receive everlasting life. Here, the poem implies that even the deepest pleasures and most revitalizing forces run out and end in death. As the rest of the poem shows, a deeper pleasure results in a more painful downfall.

In its immediate effects, however, the manna-dew deludes the knight. In line 27, the lady speaks "in language strange" but "sure." The phrase "language strange" implies that the knight can't fully understand the Lady, but "sure" implies the opposite. Does the knight understand the Lady? He clearly has no idea of her motives or his fate, yet for the moment he seems to float in a world of blissful understanding. This line ends with the [end-stop](#) of an em-dash, which perhaps represents the knight's giddy prediction of what the Lady is going to say, or his ambivalence about the contradiction between "sure" and "language strange." In any case, the Lady's words—"I love thee true"—wipe all doubt from the knight's mind. He takes the words "love" and "true" at face value, and surrenders himself fully to the Lady.

## LINES 29-32

*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.*

In stanza 8, the Lady distracts the knight from signs of mounting danger by behaving in a way that convinces him of

her love, once again deluding him into a false sense of control.

When the Lady brings the knight to her "Elfin grot," or cave, she's taking their relationship to the next level: she shows the knight her home. By inviting him into her life, the Lady puts an action behind her profession of love, which otherwise might appear hollow. Now, the Lady controls the situation. "She took me," the knight says. This moment contrasts with an earlier moment in line 21, when it is the knight who "set[s] her" on his horse. The term "Elfin grot" falls in line with previous phrases ("faery's child" and "faery's song," for example), but the strange earthiness of its sound and the dank drippiness evoked by "grot" represent a transformation of the story's fantastic element. Like the stalactites that may spike the ceiling of the Lady's cave, her fantastic attributes are hardening into something fascinating yet potentially deadly.

The knight, however, is too entranced to notice. A sudden and seemingly unprovoked burst of emotion from the Lady captures his full attention: "And there she wept and sighed full sore." Given the vagueness of similar phrases earlier in the poem, such as the Lady's "sweet moan," it's unclear what the Lady is feeling. It's also unclear if even the knight knows. Perhaps he interprets it as the Lady opening up to him in the safety and comfort of her home. Whatever the case, the knight can think of nothing else but the Lady's pain. If the Lady's beauty dominates her appearance in stanza 4, in which she's "Full beautiful," then in stanza 8 her pain dominates her appearance—she is "full sore." And while in stanza 4 the knight's object is to capture the Lady's beauty, in stanza 8 his object is to ease her pain.

And he does, but in doing so he releases himself fully to the Lady's influence. By shutting the Lady's "wild wild eyes," the knight blocks that reminder of the Lady's essential mystery, and of the possibility that he is in danger. If he hadn't done it already, this is the moment the knight condemns himself to his deathly, anguished fate. Though it represents self-deception for the knight, however, the [epizeuxis](#) in "wild wild eyes" draws attention to the Lady's wildness and danger for the reader. The poem's use of [enjambment](#) in line 31 further augments the sense of the Lady's wildness. In this moment of [dramatic irony](#), the reader understands something the knight doesn't: that the knight's in deep trouble. The use of [anaphora](#) in lines 30 and 31 with the phrase, "And there," which continues into the next stanza, serves as an introduction to the nightmare state the knight is about to enter.

The "kisses four" of the stanza's final line are fairly perplexing. Why four? The answer isn't clear, but the choice encourages the reader to brainstorm. At the very least, there's a nice harmony in the number: there are four lines in the stanza, four syllables in the line, and four feet in each of the preceding three lines.

## LINES 33-36

*And there she lullèd me asleep,  
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—  
The latest dream I ever dreamt  
On the cold hill side.*

In stanza 9 the knight's whole world turns upside down. The deathly knight from the beginning of the poem returns to the page, and the line between fantasy and reality blurs.

The knight's entire day with the Lady has been a sort of lulling. Here it happens literally and completely: "And there she lullèd me asleep." (The accent in "lullèd" signals that that the word should be pronounced as two syllables: "lull - ed.") The knight loses consciousness and becomes fully vulnerable before the Lady. This might come as a surprise; the reader might have expected that the knight, comforting the weeping Lady, would have lulled *her* to sleep. But such is the Lady's influence over the knight: she leads him to believe he's in control, then flips the dynamic. In lines 33 and 34, the phrase, "And there," starts things off, marking the third and fourth repetitions of this phrase. This [anaphora](#) has a few effects. In sound, it imitates the knight's mounting horror. It also crystallizes the knight's memory of the cave as the site of his trauma. Furthermore, it calls into question the meaning of "there." Where is the knight, really? "There" refers to the cave, but it also, in line 31, refers to the moment of the knight's emotional connection with the Lady. And in line 34 it refers to the knight's dream world. In the same way that "there," one word, can refer to multiple places and states, the knight's reality occupies physical zones like the lakeside or the cave, and imaginary ones like his dream (and possibly his entire experience with the Lady).

The leap from the Lady's fairy world to the nightmare is nicely represented with the combination of a [caesura](#) and an [end-stop](#) in line 34. Two em-dashes skewer the knight's plaintive shout, "Ah! woe betide!" Like the phrase and its appearance in the line, the knight goes rigid with fear. But he can't escape the memory of his nightmare. In the poem's second case of [polyptoton](#), the knight swirls around in his dream. "And there I dreamed," he says, "The latest dream I ever dreamt." The dream replaces the Lady as the sole object of the knight's attention, because in that dream he learns the truth about the Lady (one component of which is that her previous statement, "I love thee true," was false).

Nevertheless, though the dream traps the knight, he maintains his awareness that this all happens "On the cold hill side." Line 35 is [enjambéd](#), flowing unpunctuated into line 36. The line of the dream is separated from the line of physical reality, but without punctuation, the lines are also connected. Again, the poem signals that, at least for the knight, there is little difference between his fantasies and his physical reality.

## LINES 37-40

*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!"*

In stanza 10, the poem justifies the connection between the deathly knight of the first few stanzas and the vigorous, passionate knight of the story.

The knight wastes no time in describing his dream. "I saw pale kings and princes too," he says. The first word that jumps out is "pale," and it will do so again in line 38, where it's repeated twice. This word delivers the reader back to the first stanza, in which the speaker describes the knight as "palely loitering," as well as "Alone." Here, in lines 37 and 38, the knight is not alone, though he might want to be. He lies surrounded by "pale kings and princes too, / Pale warriors, death-pale were they all." He's in the company of the Lady's former victims, who range from kings to warriors like himself. The double stress of "pale kings" emphasizes the density of this crowd. Additionally, the word "Warriors" gives the stanza an extra two syllables (or one, depending on how it's read). It also indicates the timelessness of the Lady's trap. The poem's knight is a warrior in the Middle Ages, but if he sees an infinite line of warriors in his dream, chances are they stretch at least as far back as the Greeks (and maybe they even stretch forward, into the future). This trap, in other words—this intense love followed by bitter despair—is timeless.

The poem's meter further emphasizes this timelessness. Line 38 has an extra stress (five instead of four), as well as an extra syllable in the word "warriors":

Pale war | riors, death | -pale were | they all.

The line becomes elongated, emphasizing the un-ending nature of the knight's experience. And the outcome of such experience is always the same. By using [diacope](#) to emphasize the word "pale," line 38 identifies the victims' corpse-like appearance as their dominant feature. Again, this connects with the knight's appearance in the opening stanza. In these dreamlike, yet all too real figures, the knight sees himself reflected.

In lines 39 and 40, the knight learns the Lady's true identity. "They cried—"La Belle Dame sans Merci / Thee hath in thrall!" The em-dash [caesura](#) recalls the em-dash in the previous stanza that isolates the knight's pained cry. Here, the sharp leap emphasizes the Lady's formal title: The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy. The woman who offered so much to the knight is revealed as merciless, though not necessarily as evil. It could even be argued that the knight deserves the blame for his state. The lady's mercilessness consists in her absence—she shows the knight true joy and pleasure, then disappears. Maybe the knight should have realized that the Lady's love, like any kind of

love, could disappear in an instant. According to this reading, when the Lady says, "I love thee true," she's speaking sincerely, and it's her sincerity that causes the knight to fall into despair at her absence.

Whatever the motives of the Lady, she "hath" the knight "in thrall," meaning he is her captive. The setting of the once-cozy, now-suffocating cave enhances the image of the prisoner. Though, of course, the knight's imprisonment isn't bound to one place—he takes it with him wherever he goes.

The sound and meter of line 40 also enhances its drama:

Thee hath | in thrall!

The [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) among "Thee," "hath," and "thrall" makes the line hiss, like a snake. That creature, given its role in the story of Adam and Eve, represents love, lust, terror, and emotional collapse, all of which are present in this poem. The sharp iambs emphasize "hath," or the Lady's possession of the knight, and "thrall," the knight's captivity. "Thrall" is an appropriate word to end on, as it describes the knight's whole obsessive day perfectly.

## LINES 41-44

*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.*

In stanza 11 the knight transitions from the dream world back to reality, but nevertheless takes much of the dream with him. This stanza contains a few suggestive phrases that alter the way the reader might imagine the knight's final emotional state.

Before surging back to reality, the knight considers the Lady's victims once more. "I saw their starved lips in the gloam, / With horrid warning gapèd wide." In the image they create, these lines raise the knight's horror to another pitch entirely. With words like "gloom" and "gapèd," the knight gets the disorienting sense of his world simultaneously opening and closing. In the gloaming, or at dusk, the light fades, and the visible surroundings diminish into darkness. At the same time, however, this darkness is unlimited—the victims' gaping mouths represent its infinite depth, like the gates of Hell. The phrase "horrid warning" gives the line a roaring, fiery [consonance](#). In "starved lips," which again uses two stressed syllables ("starved lips") to emphasize its horrific imagery, the victims are reduced to a body part, helpless flaps of flesh.

But in what sense are those lips "starved"? And what exactly is the victims' "warning"? Starved has multiple meanings. It could refer to the literal hunger of the dead, or to the victims' love-starved state. The poem doesn't specify, and thus asks the reader to consider all the options. As for the content of the "horrid warning," the reader already knows the gist: that the Lady has the knight "in thrall." But how can that warning be

generalized? Are the victims making a statement about the inevitable despair in any loving relationship? "Warning" is a curious word, too, because it's very much too late. The knight can't benefit from it. So maybe the knight is, indirectly, warning the speaker about falling into a similar trap.

When the knight suddenly wakes, he finds himself "On the cold hill's side"—the dream leads directly to a physical reality that the Lady has nothing to do with. The comma that [end-stops](#) line 43 forces the reader's attention to linger over the word "here." Without the context of the next line, "here" would refer to the dream. Yet line 44 defines that "here" as "the cold hill's side," even though its precise placement in the line and sentence suggests that it refers to both—and, therefore, that both the dream world and the physical world are part of the knight's reality.

That line, "The cold hill's side," repeats line 36, but with a slight modification. Here, the knight is on the "hill's side," not the "hill side." Now that "hill" possesses "side," its coldness has spread. In other words, now it's not just the side of the hill that's cold, but the whole hill itself.

## LINES 45-48

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

In the final stanza, the knight repeats the speaker's opening language, confirming that he's fated to cycle through his memory of the Lady until he withers away like the sedge and rose.

In his first words outside the story, the knight repeats the language the speaker used to describe him in stanza 1—though with some big modifications. "And this is why I sojourn here," for example, is the knight's invention. The keyword is "sojourn," which means a temporary journey or passing-through. From one perspective, the knight's loitering doesn't seem temporary at all. He lingers by the lakeside, seemingly unperturbed by the oncoming winter. "This," which opens the line, signals the knight's painful closeness to that experience. He does not use "that," which implies distance, but the immediate "this," as if to imply that the experience still surrounds him, and will forever. But from another perspective, sojourn might describe a sort of limbo. The knight, emotionally dead as a result of his experience with the Lady, is merely awaiting the sweet, lily-white blankness of death. Before it comes he can only repeat his experience—as he has just done, in telling his story, and as he does now, in parroting the speaker's language.

He uses the speaker's words to describe himself: "Alone and palely loitering." In this repetition the knight admits two kinds of defeat. One, he admits that this experience has destroyed his soul. And two, by borrowing the speaker's language, he admits exhaustion. He only has words for the Lady. The physical world

is hardly real to him, and as such, he'll leave its description to others.

The final two lines are also repeated ("Though" is the knight's one addition). They may feel stale in the knight's mouth, but over the course of the poem these lines, which describe withering decay, have picked up fresh meaning. "Though the sedge is withered from the lake," the reader and the knight keep in mind the the vivid imagery from the knight's story. The "fragrant zone" and "manna-dew," for example, are images of plant life that endure, despite the destruction they lead to. While "no birds sing," the knight and the reader have the memory of the Lady's "faery song." Once more, the poem reminds the reader of its central problem: that beauty and death are inseparably bound together. It doesn't offer any suggestions for how to navigate that difficulty. In fact, it suggests that such difficulty is inescapable.

Within a few months, Keats would write his famous ode "[To Autumn](#)," in which he celebrates the season of decay. Perhaps in this poem he suggests that, unlike the knight, who must always return to the past, one can find beauty even in a physical setting as deathly as the lakeside.



## SYMBOLS



### FLOWERS

In stanza 3, the speaker observes that the knight's brow is pale like a "lily," and that the color in his cheeks is draining quickly, like "a fading rose." In poetry from this time period (the early 19th century), the lily symbolized death, while the rose symbolized love and beauty. In this particular poem, the lily and the rose, beautiful on the surface, symbolize the inherent danger in beauty, which can be so delicate that it withers in an instant, leaving its admirers lost and disillusioned.

In stanza 3 the speaker compares the knight's brow to a lily, some types of which are white. On one hand, this comparison to a pale lily suggests the trace of death in the knight's face. On the other hand, a white lily is a live, healthy lily. In connection with the knight, this seems to imply that he still has some life left in him. The red rose supports this reading. Yes, the rose withers quickly, but it's *not dead yet*. Only after it does die will the knight's cheek be white like his brow, like the lily. Here, the poem identifies the beauty of a kind of life-in-death, while also demonstrating how "fast" beauty can fade to death.

This understanding of the flowers influences the other plant life that appears in the poem. In stanza 5, the knight uses flowers to weave a garland and bracelets for the Lady. At the peak of their vitality and fragrance, these flowers are used to accentuate the Lady's beauty. In retrospect, after the Lady has been revealed for what she is, this beauty will appear evil. In

stanza 7, the Lady feeds the knight “honey wild” and “manna-dew.” In the moment, this plant life appears nutritious and invigorating, though the knight’s fate suggests that it acts more like a poison. The reader will notice that “manna-dew” echoes “fever-dew” from stanza 3, the cold sweat that appears on the knight’s brow like morning dew on the lily petals. Here, the poem identifies the manna-dew as one cause of the knight’s deathly, feverish state. Again, plant life paradoxically embodies both life and death.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** “I see a lily on thy brow, / With anguish moist and fever-dew, / And on thy cheeks a fading rose / Fast withereth too.”
- **Lines 17-18:** “I made a garland for her head, / And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;”
- **Lines 25-26:** “She found me roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna-dew;”



## POETIC DEVICES

### DIALOGUE

The entire poem can be thought of as a [dialogue](#). It begins with an anonymous speaker. That speaker addresses the knight and asks him a question (stanzas 1-3). The knight answers, and speaks for the rest of the poem (4-12). The poem ends with knight restating his answer to the speaker's question. Though this dialogue is limited (the knight doesn't give the speaker a chance to ask follow-up questions), it complicates the poem by giving it two perspectives.

Dialogue is one of the main tools that fiction writers use to deepen and enrich their characters. It works similarly in this poem. In the case of the knight, it gives him the space to explain himself. As for the speaker who questions the knight, by engaging in a dialogue this speaker comes across as curious, empathetic, observant, and perhaps slightly worried. With the repeated question (“O what can ail thee”), the speaker expresses his or her desire to understand what afflicts the knight. With comments on the knight’s appearance (he is alone, pale, and anguished), the speaker empathizes with the knight, perhaps conveying a similar state of despair.

The dialogue also serves a technical purpose by providing context and depicting the appearance of the knight. In other words, the first speaker’s presence adds a concrete quality to this world. Without the speaker, there would be no way to contextualize the knight in the world around him. It wouldn’t be very believable if the knight, whose mind revolves around the memory of the Lady, described the autumnal present with the same specificity as the speaker, nor would it be elegant if he introduced himself, saying, “Hello, I am a knight-at-arms. I am

lovesick and slowly dying.” Instead, the speaker describes the bleakness of the “real” world, while the knight focuses on his own fantastical memories.

#### Where Dialogue appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms;”
- **Line 5:** “O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms;”
- **Line 9:** “I see a lily on thy brow;”
- **Line 13:** “I met a lady in the meads;”
- **Line 45:** “And this is why I sojourn here;”

### ANAPHORA

The poem employs two instances of [anaphora](#). The first instance occurs in lines 1 and 5, and the second instance in lines 30, 31, 33, and 34.

First, in lines 1 and 5, the speaker addresses the knight and asks what is the matter with him: “O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms...?” Repeating the question serves two main ends. It introduces one of the poem’s main themes and gives the reader information about the speaker. This use of anaphora might also be thought of as a [refrain](#). The poem thus begins with an earnest question, asked because the speaker wants to understand the knight’s emotional state. By repeating that question at the top of the second stanza, the poem highlights its importance. This question may have many answers, and those answers may be hard to put into words. Yet just because the knight answers it at length does not mean he’s answered completely, nor that the reader should drop the challenge of answering it for him or herself.

The challenge of understanding the emotions of another person is one of the poem’s central themes. The speaker introduces it here, and it repeats throughout. In the knight’s story, for example, the “wild wild eyes” of the Lady seem to prevent him from understanding her motives. When the knight dreams, the Lady’s former victims struggle to articulate the essence of their warning (here, they face the challenge of *conveying* emotional experience). The poem’s anaphora first plants the idea of this challenge in the reader’s head.

In the second instance of anaphora, in lines 30, 31, 33, and 34, the knight repeats, “And there,” to start the clauses that introduce his nightmare. This focus on the physical site of his dream emphasizes the knight’s fear and contrasts with the dream world he’s about to enter. Referring to the location of the knight’s dream forces the reader to question the repeated phrase’s meaning. At first, “there” refers to the Lady’s “Elfin grot,” but as it repeats, its meaning alters. For example, when the knight says “And there she lullèd me asleep,” he may be saying that *at that point in time* the Lady lulled him to sleep, in which case “there” evolves from talking about space to talking about time. The fourth “there” might have yet another meaning, referring to the world of the dream. So, in just a few lines,

"there" comes to stand for space, time, and fantasy. The layered meaning of the adverb "there" points to one of the poem's central questions: in the knight's reality, to what extent are dream, fantasy, and the real world unified?

#### Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,"
- **Line 5:** "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,"
- **Line 30:** " And there"
- **Line 31:** "And there"
- **Line 33:** "And there"
- **Line 34:** "And there"

## METAPHOR

In lines 9 and 11, the poem uses the [metaphors](#) of a lily and a rose to describe the knight's appearance. Both the lily and rose were frequently used in English literature during and before the Romantic period, which Keats was a part of. The rose stands for life, and the lily for death. In this poem, the "lily on thy brow" refers to the knight's paleness. The "fading rose" describes the color in the knight's cheek, a sign of life that is quickly drying up. By using beautiful flowers to depict the knight's emotional and physical weakening, the poem emphasizes the inseparability of beauty and death—though each flower works a bit differently.

The rose represents the knight's emotional state. Once beautiful and full of life (a red rose is the color of healthy blood), the rose now withers. The knight is the same. He's a man capable of euphoric highs: when he rides on his horse with the lady, he sees "nothing else [...] all day long." But he also reaches anguished lows: this is the state the speaker finds him in, "So haggard and so woe-begone." The metaphor of the rose helps the reader understand that the knight, like the rose, is doomed to wither. Because of the intensity of his experience with the lady, he will feel that downfall all the more deeply.

The lily is a bit more complicated, because, unlike the rose, it seems to be in pretty good shape. If it weren't, it wouldn't maintain its pale color; it would turn brown like the rose. Here, the poem suggests that life and death can live side by side. In fact, the poem depicts a type of life that feeds off death. In the same way that dew might hydrate an actual lily, the "fever-dew" upon the knight's brow feeds the fantasy that both consumes and sustains him. There is a painful beauty in death, the poem seems to be saying. In fact, the poem is a product of that beauty.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "I see a lily on thy brow, / With anguish moist and fever-dew, / And on thy cheeks a fading rose / Fast withereth too."

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) occurs throughout the poem. In general, it prompts the reader to linger over words that convey enchantment or horror.

For instance, in stanza 3, "fever-dew," "fading," and "fast" heighten the pain and swiftness of the knight's decay. Because they repeat each other's starting sounds, each word stands out. Like the sweat upon the knight's brow, "fever-dew" lifts off the page. So does "fading," a word whose second syllable, "ing," makes it a [participle](#), indicating an action in progress. This embodies the real-time, dragging quality of the knight's draining vitality. Finally, the word "Fast," which is unstressed, monosyllabic, and almost hissed with its /f/ and /s/ sounds, flies like an arrow to the knight's weakened heart, sealing his fate with the hard /t/.

In lines 19-20 and 25, alliteration conveys the sensuousness of the knight's experience with the Lady. The alliteration connects the knight ("me") with the response of the lady ("made sweet moan"). In the same way that the repeated sounds focus the reader's attention on the poem, the Lady's behavior focuses the knight's attention on her. In this way, the reader takes part in the knight's experience, sharing his sensations. This happens again in line 25, when the Lady digs up "roots of relish sweet." On its own, the word "roots" implies something basic, essential, life-giving, and intertwined. The word "relish" adds flavor to that raw material. Together, the roots and relish convey a complete experience that involves the knight's hunger, work (to woo the Lady), and reward.

In lines 41-42, the "gapèd" warning in the "gloom" deepens the horror of the knight's vision. The /g/ sounds are lethargic and grotesque, and the words themselves are fairly unsettling. As opposed to the pretty-sounding "twilight," the poem opts for the word "gloom," which conveys an inescapable gloominess. And "gapèd," which might be used to describe the abyss of Hell, presents a yawning, depthless pit in which all is lost.

Throughout the poem, alliteration alternates between these two effects, evoking either the sensuousness of the knight's enchantment, or the horror of his decay.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 2:** "A"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 6:** "S," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s"
- **Line 10:** "f"
- **Line 11:** "f"
- **Line 12:** "F"
- **Line 13:** "m," "m"
- **Line 14:** "F," "f"
- **Line 15:** "H," "h," "l," "h," "f," "l"

- **Line 16:** “w,” “w”
- **Line 17:** “h,” “h”
- **Line 19:** “l,” “m,” “l”
- **Line 20:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 21:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 22:** “s”
- **Line 23:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 24:** “s”
- **Line 25:** “r,” “r”
- **Line 27:** “s,” “s,” “sh,” “s”
- **Line 30:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 31:** “w,” “w”
- **Line 32:** “W”
- **Line 34:** “d”
- **Line 35:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 37:** “p,” “p”
- **Line 38:** “P,” “p”
- **Line 40:** “Th,” “th”
- **Line 41:** “s,” “s,” “g”
- **Line 42:** “W,” “w,” “g,” “w”
- **Line 43:** “A,” “a”

## END-STOPPED LINE

Counting the lines that end with a comma, all but five in the poem are [end-stopped](#). In general, this consistent punctuation keeps a song-like beat that’s appropriate for the form, since [ballads](#) were traditionally sung and accompanied by music and dance. Otherwise, the end-stops serve a few different purposes, emphasizing images and reflecting the knight’s emotion. The periods or exclamation marks that end each stanza draw particular attention to each stanza’s final lines.

In lines 1, 5, 18, 26, and 42, the end-stops highlight some of the poem’s strongest and most perplexing or important images. For example, “knight-at-arms” stands out because knight is the poem’s main character. The comma asks the reader to pause briefly at the end of the line to consider his formal title, which implies bravery and chivalry, and how it contrasts with his “haggard” and “woe-begone” appearance.

In line 18, “fragrant zone” runs up against a semicolon. The harder stop of the semicolon encourages the reader to puzzle over this image for even longer. Though “fragrant zone” may literally refer to a band of woven flowers, much like the garland from the previous line, it unmistakably suggests that the knight has ventured below the Lady’s belt. Stalling on this image raises the question of whether the knight and the Lady have sex. If they do, the knight’s emotional high and low can be interpreted in terms of the male orgasm.

The end-stops in lines 26 and 42 similarly ask the reader to focus on strong imagery: the manna-dew the Lady feeds the knight, and the mouths of the Lady’s previous victims opened in warning. In lines 27 and 34, the end-stops imitate the knight’s

feelings. Line 27 ends with the cliffhanger of an em-dash: “she said—.” What did she say? The reader may be just as hungry to know as the knight, who after a fattening meal of “relish sweet” and “manna-dew” needs just one more thing to satisfy his cravings: the Lady’s profession of love. In line 34, the em-dash has an opposite effect. “Ah! woe betide!” starts and ends with an em-dash. Rather than reflecting the knight’s eager apprehension, this em-dash represents the knight going rigid with fear. As if having the dream for the first time, he’s terrified to see what lies around the corner, or on the next line.

At the end of every stanza, a period or exclamation mark end-stops the line. This uniform sentence formation draws attention to the stanzas’ final lines, which already stand out for their relative shortness. If the reader read only these final lines, he or she would get a surprisingly good idea of the poem’s narrative and emotional development. From these lines, the reader learns that winter is near (“the harvest’s done”) and that something is dying (“Fast withereth too”); that a relationship develops, going from words of love to an alarmed state of being “in thrall”; and that, by the end, the poem returns to the cold, lonely place where it began.

## Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 2:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ?
- **Line 3:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 4:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> .
- **Line 5:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 6:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ?
- **Line 7:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 8:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> .
- **Line 9:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 10:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 12:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> .
- **Line 13:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 14:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 15:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 16:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> .
- **Line 17:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 18:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ;
- **Line 19:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 21:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 22:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 24:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> .
- **Line 25:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 26:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 27:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> “ — ”
- **Line 28:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> .
- **Line 29:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 30:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,
- **Line 32:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> .
- **Line 33:** <sup>(*o*)</sup> ,

- **Line 34:** “—”
- **Line 36:** “,”
- **Line 37:** “,”
- **Line 38:** “,”
- **Line 40:** “!”
- **Line 41:** “,”
- **Line 42:** “,”
- **Line 43:** “,”
- **Line 44:** “.”
- **Line 45:** “,”
- **Line 46:** “,”
- **Line 47:** “,”

## CAESURA

[Caesura](#) occurs throughout the poem, and it serves three main purposes. It isolates the main characters, forms connections between key lines, and lingers over images of the Lady.

In lines 1, 5, and 14, caesura clearly identifies the poem’s characters. Lines 1 and 5 use a comma to set apart “knight-at-arms.” Doing so signals that this character is important. It also emphasizes the difference between the stereotype of a strong and brave “knight-at-arms,” which is a rather formal term, and the knight as he actually appears, “haggard” and “woe-begone.” In line 14, an em-dash leaps between “Full beautiful” and “faery’s child” in order to present the knight’s first image of the Lady. Sonically, the hard stop reflects the knight’s frantic excitement. Visually, it represents the gap between the Lady’s beauty and the knight’s ability to express it. It may even represent the trap the knight falls into here, a gaping pit (kind of like the warning mouths of the Lady’s victims in stanza 12).

The caesura in line 14 connects to the caesuras in lines 34 and 39, which are the only others that use an em-dash. The “woe betide” in 34 represents a big change from the knight’s enchantment with fairy child’s full beauty in line 14. And in line 39, the reader gets another name for the fairy child: *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, “The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy.” These em-dashes track the evolution of the knight’s vision and understanding.

Other caesuras linger over the Lady, imitating the knight’s cyclical “loitering” in the memory of his experience. In line 15, a comma separates the knight’s description of the Lady. “Her hair was long,” and “her foot was light,” are parallel structures, giving the knight’s words the appearance of a chant, as if he’s praying the Lady’s initially lovely appearance back into reality. A comma gives line 18 the same incantatory quality: “And bracelets too, and fragrant zone.” And in line 23, a comma puts a breath between the Lady’s actions (she would “bend, and sing”), as if the knight is holding onto the words of the lady’s strange song.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “,”
- **Line 5:** “,”
- **Line 14:** “—”
- **Line 15:** “,”
- **Line 18:** “,”
- **Line 23:** “,”
- **Line 26:** “,”
- **Line 34:** “—”
- **Line 38:** “,”
- **Line 39:** “—”

## ALLUSION

Line 26 contains an [allusion](#) to manna. Manna is the nutritious substance provided by God and distributed by Moses to the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt. It is what they survived on for the 40 years between Egypt and Canaan. In Book 16 of [Exodus](#), in the [Old Testament](#), the Israelites complain to Moses of not having enough food. Later, God tells Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.” The next morning, once the dew has evaporated, the Israelites see “a small round thing” on the ground. Because they do not recognize it, they call it “manna,” and Moses tells them, “This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.”

According to its original context, then, manna is supernatural (it comes from God) and life-giving (without it the Israelites would perish). But the word itself signifies something unknown—the Israelites use it as a filler, a made-up word. In the poem, manna means all these things. It has the illusion of being the heavenly sustenance of the Israelites, since it plunges the knight deeper into his love. But what it actually is—and how it will actually affect the knight—is a mystery. The knight gobbles it down without question.

Manna is also mentioned in the [New Testament](#), in the Gospel of John. Jesus tells the Jews, “Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.” The bread that he offers, however, which is faith in his divinity, will grant eternal life: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” According to this reading, the Lady’s manna-dew might provide a jolt of life, but nothing eternal. Keats was surely aware of all these readings, thus creating many layers of ambiguity in this allusion.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 26:** “manna-dew”

## EPIZEUXIS

Line 31 contains an instance of [epizeuxis](#). The knight describes the Lady as having “wild wild eyes.” This immediate repetition, without any punctuation to separate the words, emphasizes the

word “wild” in perhaps the most blatant way possible. In doing so, it mimics the knight’s perception of the Lady and questions the meaning of the word.

The word “wild,” with its round beginning flowing to a relatively soft stop, evokes a sort of spiraling, especially when it’s repeated. The knight is fully under the lady’s spell. As the knight stares into the physical axis of the Lady’s essential mystery—her eyes—his surroundings seem to melt. Like a hypnotist’s patient, the knight is lulled into obsessive focus by the repeated word (which also describes the Lady’s eyes in line 16). This repetition also reflects how the knight feels during his retelling: it conveys his mounting horror.

Repetition also encourages the reader to consider the word’s meaning. “Wild” might mean savage and civilized. It could mean pure and free. As a noun, it could refer either to a place of adventure, or a howling, punishing wilderness. Over the course of his experience, the knight seems to experience the word in every sense.

#### Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** “wild wild”

## REFRAIN

The poem makes a [refrain](#) out of line 36, “On the cold hill side,” by repeating it (with a slight modification) in line 44.

The basic purpose of repeating the phrase is to reveal the connection between the fairy-tale land of the knight’s romp with the Lady and the cold, withered setting of the poem. The cold hillside of line 36 follows “The latest dream I ever dreamt,” suggesting that there’s a thin line between dream and reality. Line 44, “On the cold hill’s side,” drives this point home, appearing at the moment the knight wakes from his dream.

The slight difference between the two phrases (“hill side” vs. “hill’s side”), however, encourages the reader to consider the images separately. Line 36 can be read as a metaphorical hillside that represents that knight’s state of despair. This dream, the knight says, is “The latest dream I ever dreamt / On the cold hill side.” These lines are [enjambéd](#). If a comma separated them, they would mean something like: “That was my latest dream, and it happened on the cold hill side.” Without a comma, however, the lines can be read as saying, “Of all the dreams I ever dreamt on the cold hill side, this was the latest.” But of course the knight is seeing the Lady’s cave for the first time, so this reading has to be taken metaphorically. In this metaphorical reading, the “cold hill side” refers to a state of despair that the knight has been dealing with for quite some time, even before these events took place.

On the other hand, “the cold hill’s side” of line 44, with its possessive apostrophe-s, stands for the real physical hill side. It connects directly with “here” from the previous stanza. And

however the reader chooses to parse these two phrases, this modification suggests that the cold has spread. Whereas a “cold hill side” refers to the cold side of a hill, “cold hill’s side” refers to an entire cold hill, one side of which the knight is on. This subtle development of coldness mimics the gradual decay of the knight’s emotional state.

#### Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 36:** “On the cold hill side.”
- **Line 44:** “On the cold hill’s side.”

## DIACOPE

In line 38, the poem uses [diacope](#) in its repetition of “pale.” Like many other literary devices, this repetition emphasizes the word in question. “Pale,” the poem argues, is the dominant feature of the knight’s dreams and the Lady’s victims.

In the same way that the [epizeuxis](#) of “wild wild” in line 31 has a hypnotic effect, the repeated use of “pale” in line 38 conveys the knight’s imprisonment. In his dream, the victims of the Lady surround the knight. He cannot escape them, nor can he escape their dominant feature: their paleness. Everywhere he looks, he’s stricken by their horrible, corpselike aspect. When the knight repeats the word “pale,” he demonstrates the breakdown of language, the impossibility of putting into words the horror that he witnesses. This overload reminds the knight, the listener, and the reader that this experience can only end in one thing: the all-consuming blankness of death.

The word “pale” also links to the first and last stanzas, in which the knight is “palely loitering” by the lakeside. His forehead is as white as a lily. Here, the figments of the knight’s dream become flesh—he’s become the very thing he dreamed about.

Lastly, the paleness, which is a lack of color, contrasts with knight’s vivid experiences earlier in the poem, sharpening the line between the euphoria and despair. For example, previous images of “garlands,” “roots of relish sweet,” and “Elfin grot” fit within a colorful, fantastic world, making for a precipitous drop into the cold, pale world of the dream.

#### Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 38:** “Pale,” “pale”

## ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains 5 cases of [enjambment](#), at lines 11, 23, 31, 35, and 39. Each case has a pretty specific effect.

Between lines 11 and 12, and 39 and 40, enjambment emphasizes the knight’s lack of control. “And on thy cheek a fading rose / fast withereth too,” says the speaker to the knight. Without any pause or barrier, the still-living rose plummets toward its fast-withering fate. There is nothing in the way of punctuation to delay the inevitable, which suggests that there’s

nothing the knight can do either. In lines 39 and 40, the pale kings and princes warn the knight: “La Belle Dame sans Merci / Thee hath in thrall!” Here, the knight’s fate—his thralldom, or imprisonment, to the Lady, or at least to her memory—cannot be reversed or delayed.

Between lines 23 and 24, enjambment comments on the knight’s experience with the Lady: “For sidelong would she bend, and sing / a faery’s song.” Here, the lack of punctuation doesn’t make the line spill into the next, but creates the sort of pause that’s full of promise—the Lady’s beautiful singing gives the knight wings, reflecting his unlimited hopefulness at the beginning of his day with the Lady.

In lines 35 to 36, the enjambment hits at one of the poem’s major themes by blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. This is where the knight has “The latest dream [he] ever dreamt / On the cold hill side.” Without punctuation, there is hardly any barrier between the terrifying fantasy of the dream and the cold hill side, which the knight will later identify, in stanza 11, as “here.” The deepest moment of the knight’s fantasy (the dream is a fantasy within his remembered experience) flows effortlessly into the real world. As a result, the knight, though standing by the lakeside, will replay the memory again and again until death.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** “rose”
- **Line 12:** “Fast”
- **Line 23:** “sing”
- **Line 24:** “A”
- **Line 31:** “eyes”
- **Line 32:** “With”
- **Line 35:** “dreamt”
- **Line 36:** “On”
- **Line 39:** “Merci”
- **Line 40:** “Thee”

## CONSONANCE

The poem uses [consonance](#) several times throughout in order to emphasize some of the poem’s most meaningful and perplexing phrases.

In lines 1 and 2, “ail,” “Alone,” and “palely” all use /l/ sounds. The simple sonic repetition lifts words from the page that give crucial information about the knight. He is alone, implying that there might have been a time when he wasn’t; he is pale, and therefore terrified, ill, or exhausted (or all three); and he is loitering, hanging around without aim, indecisive and pathetic. The liquid /l/ sound itself also reflects the knight’s mournful state, suggesting the sound of a prolonged wail.

In line 6, consonance between “haggard” and “woe-begone” (and later, in line 10, “anguish”) serves a similar purpose. The repeated /g/ sound solidifies the shape of the knight’s pain, as if

the words shook from lakeside mud at the end of a tectonic shudder.

The consonance in lines 27 and 42 highlight some of the poem’s most debatable language. What is the “language strange” of line 27? Is the Lady’s “I love thee true” the knight’s translation of what she said in her fairy tongue? If so, how did the knight understand it? Was he just guessing that’s what she said, based on tone? The phrase’s /n/ and soft /g/ sounds make it a swamp that prompts this swirl of questions.

In line 42, the /r/ sounds in “horrid warning” give the phrase a throaty, roaring quality that drives the dream’s imagery into another echelon of terror. Like “language strange,” “horrid warning” spawns a series of questions. The knight receives the warning’s factual core, that he has been duped by La Belle Dame sans Merci. But what does this imply? What more do the previous victims tell him? With this single phrase, the poem points beyond the spoken, towards what cannot be expressed.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “l”
- **Line 2:** “l,” “l,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 6:** “S,” “gg,” “s,” “g”
- **Line 7:** “rr,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 8:** “r”
- **Line 9:** “l,” “l”
- **Line 10:** “g,” “f,” “d”
- **Line 11:** “f,” “d”
- **Line 12:** “F”
- **Line 13:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 14:** “F,” “ll,” “l,” “f,” “l”
- **Line 15:** “H,” “h,” “l,” “h,” “f,” “l”
- **Line 16:** “w,” “w,” “l”
- **Line 17:** “d,” “l,” “d,” “h,” “h,” “d”
- **Line 18:** “l”
- **Line 19:** “l,” “m,” “l”
- **Line 20:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 21:** “s,” “c,” “s”
- **Line 22:** “l,” “s,” “s,” “ll,” “l”
- **Line 23:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 24:** “s”
- **Line 25:** “r,” “r”
- **Line 26:** “d,” “n,” “w,” “d,” “d,” “nn,” “d,” “w”
- **Line 27:** “s,” “ge,” “s,” “n,” “ge,” “sh,” “s”
- **Line 30:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 31:** “w,” “ld,” “w,” “ld”
- **Line 32:** “W”
- **Line 33:** “l,” “ll,” “l”
- **Line 34:** “dr”
- **Line 35:** “d,” “m,” “dr,” “m”
- **Line 37:** “p,” “l,” “p”
- **Line 38:** “P,” “l,” “p,” “l,” “ll”
- **Line 39:** “ll,” “m,” “M”

- **Line 40:** "Th," "th," "th," "ll"
- **Line 41:** "s," "s," "g"
- **Line 42:** "W," "r," "w," "r," "g," "w"
- **Line 46:** "l," "l," "l," "l"

## POLYPTOTON

The poem uses [polyptoton](#) twice, in lines 23 and 24, and in 34 and 35. Both cases emphasize the knight's imprisonment, though in different ways.

In lines 23 and 24, when the knight hears the Lady "sing / A faery's song," he doesn't yet consider himself a prisoner. From his perspective, *enchanted* would probably more accurately describe him. Nevertheless, the permutations of "sing" signal the Lady's hypnotic influence over the knight. As she sings, he becomes trapped in her song, exploring it from many angles. He will do the same by the barren lakeside when he endlessly repeats his memory of the Lady.

In Lines 34 and 35, the knight becomes trapped within the word "dream." "And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!— / The latest dream I ever dreamt." Here, he's fully aware of his imprisonment, even breaking line 34 with an interjection of pained acknowledgment. The development of "dream" imitates the structure of the poem: "dreamed" and "dreamt," as forms of "dream," are nested in it. The poem, itself a representation of reality, starts with the perspective of the speaker, deepens into the perspective of the knight, and falls yet again into the knight's dream. According to this reading, "dream" may be one of the poem's most important words. As the base of the knight's experience, he can't get around his dream, he can only repeat it.

### Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "sing"
- **Line 24:** "song"
- **Line 34:** "dreamed"
- **Line 35:** "dream," "dreamt"



## VOCABULARY

**Ail** (Line 1) - *Ail* is a verb that means "to trouble, pain, or afflict." Its noun form, *ailment*, usually refers to an injury or illness. In the poem, the knight suffers from an emotional ailment, though it certainly seems to have physical ramifications. *Ail* comes from the Old English word *egle*, which means "troublesome." The knight's pain is troublesome in that it lingers and won't leave him alone.

**Knight-at-arms** (Line 1, Line 5) - A *knight-at-arms* is a medieval European soldier—basically, a knight in shining armor. Arms refers to his weapon, probably a sword, but the reader can imagine him with a shield, breastplate, and helmet as well.

Typically a knight rode a horse, as does the knight in this poem. Knights are associated with chivalry, a code of conduct that governed knights' treatment of women during the Middle Ages.

**Sedge** (Line 3, Line 47) - *Sedge* is a grassy, stemmy plant that typically grows in wet ground in cold and temperate areas. In the poem, the lakeside sedge is "withered," meaning that what remains this late into autumn is a rather unattractive thicket.

**Haggard** (Line 6) - *Haggard* is an adjective that means "unwell" and "physically wasted." *Haggard* works with other words in the poem—such as "ail," "palely," "woe-begone," and "anguish"—to depict the knight's suffering in both physical and emotional terms. The word comes from the French *hagard*, which means "haggard and crazed," and is related to the word *hag* in English, which means "witch."

**Woe-begone** (Line 6) - *Woe-begone* means "afflicted with woe, or sadness." Like *haggard*, it refers to both appearance and emotional state. In the poem, the knight appears woe-begone (he is pale and weak-looking) and also suffers internally (he is afflicted with "anguish"). *Woe* means "grief." In Middle English, *begone* means "surrounded."

**Granary** (Line 7) - A *granary* is a storehouse for grain, though it can refer to any sort of storage unit for any kind of food. In the poem, the granary belongs to squirrels, though it implies that humans are also stocking their granaries. With the word, the poem hints at what time of year it is: late autumn. The squirrels are hoarding their food for the winter.

**Fever-dew** (Line 10) - *Fever-dew* refers to the perspiration upon the knight's pale forehead. It emphasizes his emotional sickness. As though suffering from a fever, he is breaking out in a cold sweat. This word is reflected in the poem's 7th stanza, in which the lady feeds the knight "manna-dew." By linking manna-dew with fever-dew, the poem suggests that the lady's offerings act upon the knight like a poison.

**Withereth** (Line 12) - *Withereth* means "withers," or "shrivels and dries up." The "fading rose," a metaphor for the lively color in the knight's cheeks, "fast withereth," or quickly shrivels away. The *-eth* suffix is archaic, and would likely have been used in the medieval setting in which the poem takes place.

**Meads** (Line 13) - *Mead* means "meadow," a pleasant grassy field. In such a flat, open area, another person would be impossible to miss. The poem uses the noun's plural form, *meads*. The knight, therefore, may be referring not to a specific meadow, but an area containing many meadows, such as a forest interspersed with many grassy clearings.

**Fragrant Zone** (Line 18) - *Fragrant zone* has a few possible meanings in the poem. The primary meaning is a band of flowers, maybe a belt. *Fragrant* refers to the scent of the flowers, and *zone*, which comes from the Latin word for "girdle," or "belt," refers to the band. But *fragrant zone* can also refer to the area below the Lady's belt. At the very least, it underlines

the sexual energy in the couple's relationship.

**Steed** (Line 21) - *Steed* means "horse"—specifically, a horse that is meant to be ridden. *Steed* comes from the Old English word for "stallion," a male horse that has not been [castrated](#). Like "fragrant zone," the word *steed* is another marker of the lustful, sexual nature of the knight and lady's relationship.

**Manna-dew** (Line 26) - *Manna-dew* refers to *manna*, the substance that God provided to the Israelites for sustenance as Moses led them out of Egypt. Linking manna with dew, however, seems to be Keats's invention. *Dew*, the light condensation of morning, modifies manna such that what the knight actually eats are delicate droplets of the heavenly substance. Manna-dew also recalls "fever-dew" from stanza 3, suggesting that the manna-dew caused the knight's fever.

**Grot** (Line 29) - *Grot* means "grotto," or "cave," a space in the earth large enough for a human (or two) to fit snugly. The word comes from the Greek word *krupte*, which means "vault" or "crypt." This root gives the word a deathly quality, coloring the grot as a prison where one dies.

**Woe Betide** (Line 34) - *Woe betide* literally means "sadness happens." *Woe* means "sadness," or "grief," and *betide* means "to happen." *Woe betides* the knight at the moment of his nightmare. The rather formal sound of the word lends gravity to the knight's exclamation.

**Latest** (Line 35) - *Latest*, which refers to the knight's dream, has a several meanings in the poem. It can refer to the duration of the dream, which is long and intense. It can mean this was the last dream the knight has had. It can refer to the fact that the warning from the lady's previous victims is too late. And it can also refer to the dream's content: *late* can be another word for "dead," or "passed-away." The knight's dream is the latest because death is its dominant theme.

**La Belle Dame sans Merci** (Line 39) - *La Belle Dame sans Merci* is a French phrase that translates to "The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy." This is the title the Lady's victims use to refer to her. The title comes from a 15th-century French poem by Alain Chartier that tells a similar story.

**Thrall** (Line 40) - To be *in thrall* is to be someone or something's captive or victim. It has the same meaning as *enthralled*. One can be enthralled by a prison master, an extremely entertaining movie, or, in the case of the poem, by love. As a noun, *thrall* means "slave" or "captive," and comes from the Old English word for "slave."

**Gloam** (Line 41) - *Gloam* comes from *gloaming*, a literary word for "dusk." Dusk is the fading of the day. In the poem, it's appropriate that it describes the setting of the lady's victims, who have a colorless, deathly air to them. Also, with one fewer syllable than *gloaming* or *twilight*, the line maintains its eight-syllable length. Supposedly, Keats coined this shortened version of *gloaming*.

**Gapèd** (Line 42) - *Gapèd* means "open," "wide," and "yawning." The word is related to *gap*, and often refers to an open mouth, as it does in the poem. The victims' gaping mouths imply a terrifying depth. The word appears with an accent over the *e* so that it's pronounced as two syllables instead of one, giving the line the eight syllables it needs to adhere to the poem's [iambic tetrameter](#).

**Sojourn** (Line 45) - *Sojourn* is both a noun and a verb. The noun means "a brief stay," and the verb means "to stay briefly." In the poem, it's used as a verb. By saying that he sojourns, the knight implies that he will soon be moving on. The barren lakeside, then, appears like a sort of limbo, a place the knight will wait awhile before death.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a [ballad](#), a longer, typically narrative poem derived from the French form *chanson balladée*, a type of rhyming verse that was set to music for dancing. The poem involves a dialogue between the speaker and the knight, a sort of call-and-response appropriate given the form's dance-hall origins. The poem's content also nods towards the context that produced the form—ballads were first popular in the later medieval period, right around the time the sight of a "knight-at-arms" on a "pacing steed" would have been commonplace.

The poem is divided into 12 quatrains, or four-line stanzas. A strong meter ([iambic pentameter](#)), one that might pair well with music, drives it forward. The first three lines of each stanza are in this meter, while each stanza's ending line is shortened to two feet of four to five syllables (and some deviation from pure iambic). This creates a start-and-stop rhythm to the stanzas (further discussed in the meter section of this guide) that relates to the poem's interest in the tensions between life and death.

### METER

The poem is written in [iambic tetrameter](#) in the first three lines of every [quatrain](#), or four-line stanza. The final line of every stanza, however, has only 4 or 5 syllables. Those with 4 syllables can be described as following iambic [dimeter](#), though sometimes they downplay their stressed syllables. A likely model for this ballad, "[The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#)" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was written in alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter—lines with 8 syllables followed by lines with 6. Keats's choice to fit three lines of each quatrain into tetrameter and the final line into something a bit more speedy is an example of him making something new out of an old form.

To understand the meter of this poem, it's worth looking at examples of how Keats follows the rules, breaks them, and

includes lines in which the meter is debatable.

The first stanza provides a few examples. In line 1, the poem follows its meter.

O what | can ail | thee, knight- | -at-arms,

This line is iambic through and through. As a result, the line's keywords are emphasized: "what" invokes the poem's central question, "ail" depicts the knight's emotional state, "knight" introduces the poem's main character, and "arms" solidifies the image of that character—a knight in shining armor, the type that might appear in a fairy tale. This meter also establishes the trotting rhythm that will carry this rather fast-moving poem from beginning to end. That rhythm is most evident in a line like line 21, since it mimics the horse's pacing motion:

I set | her on | my pac | ing steed

In the second line, the meter depends on how it's read.

Alone | and pale- | ly loi- | tering.

Specifically, the three-syllable word "loitering" can almost be read as having only two. As two syllables, the word is a [trochee](#), a metrical foot that contains a **stressed**-unstressed syllable pair. The last two syllables of "loitering" might also be read as unstressed (i.e. "loi- | tering"), in which case the ending foot would be a [pyrrhic](#). In any case, even if the final syllable is stressed, the stress is light.

A similar case is line 38:

Pale war- | riors, death- | pale were | they all.

"Warriors" is the keyword here, because it can be read as containing either two or three syllables (i.e. "war - riors" or "war - ri - ors"). With three syllables, this line becomes one of the poem's longest. It's a fitting moment, as the knight elongates the horror of his dream. This line also starts with a spondee, a foot with two stressed syllables, and as a result the knight's description sounds like a frightful shout.

The poem's only other long line is its second to last.

Though the sedge | is with- | ered from | the lake,

Because the knight has added "Though" to the speaker's opening observation, this line now has 9 syllables. Again, this elongation is fitting: it emphasizes the knight's loitering.

The poem also occasionally rearranges stress for emphasis, particularly during the nightmare scene, in lines 37 and 41. Here, stressed syllables bunch up to emphasize how the nightmare seems to slow down time and disturb the knight:

I saw | pale kings | and prin- | ces too

And again:

I saw | their starved | lips in | the gloam

In each case, the poem's characteristically smooth meter gets bent out of shape to reflect the knight's inner turmoil.

The lines that end the stanzas see some variation, but all are either 4 or 5 syllables. Take the end of stanza 1.

And no | birds sing.

This could be read as an example of iambic dimeter, though the poem's somber tone might deemphasize the stressed syllables. For the most part, these stanza-ending lines contain words with just one syllable. In lines like 20 and 28, "And made sweet moan," and, "I love thee true," these monosyllables accelerate the poem, moving the knight closer to his doom. In the other lines with 5 syllables, the image persists a bit longer. In line 16, "And her eyes were wild," for example, emphasizes the sense of enchantment. In line 36, "On the cold hill side" emphasizes the fact that the knight is trapped in a limbo between love and death.

## RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a rhyme scheme that's typical of [ballads](#) written in English. Each [quatrain](#) (four-line stanza) of the poem rhymes like this:

ABCB

Only the even-numbered lines rhyme, and these rhymes are nearly perfect. In this way, the poem honors not only the structure of the ballad, but also its traditional purpose, which was to accompany a song and dance—clear rhymes would have contributed to a clearly structured rhythm. The one moment of [slant rhyme](#) is in stanza 2, between "begone" in line 6 and "done" in line 8. An English speaker from the United States, however, might notice more of a difference than Keats would have, due to differences in accent.

The poem also contains a few cases of [internal rhyme](#). For example, in the first stanza, "ail thee" in line 1 rhymes with "palely" in line 2. In stanza 4, "faery's" in line 14 rhymes internally—and as a slant rhyme, since it isn't perfect—with "her eyes" in line 16. These are subtle cases. The rhymed words draw attention to certain feelings in the lines without drawing attention to themselves. Take stanza 1: "ail thee" and "palely" sound like slowly drawn-out cries (or *wails*, to keep the rhyme going), a proper imitation of the knight's emotional state. And in the stanza 4, the connection between "faery's" and "her eyes" emphasizes how the Lady's physical body has enchanted the knight.



## SPEAKER

The poem has two speakers. The first is the anonymous, genderless, and generally unidentified voice that opens the poem and continues through stanza 3. The second is the knight, who speaks through the rest of the poem. The two speakers engage in a dialogue. The first speaker asks a question in line 1—"O what can ail thee"—and the knight responds with his tale of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*.

Since the poem shows the knight loitering by a barren lakeside in the country, the reader might imagine the speaker as a traveler, someone passing through the area who comes across the knight unexpectedly (a dim reflection of the way the knight "met a lady in the meads" in line 13). This speaker is characterized by his or her concern for the knight. The knight is obviously distraught, and the speaker is curious to know why.

After stanza 3, the first speaker becomes a listener and hands things over to the knight. The knight is a medieval warrior, equipped with armor and a horse. On a trip through the countryside (the area seems unpopulated, and it's not clear what the knight is doing there), he comes across a beautiful lady. In his telling of the story, the knight is passionate, lustful, obsessed, and drunkenly in love. The lady's beauty is absolute (she's described as "Full beautiful" in line 14), and the knight devotes himself to her. He weaves her garlands, treats her to a ride on his horse, and in lines 31-32 "shut[s] her wild wild eyes / With kisses four" when she brings him to her cave and weeps. When the lady vanishes, the result of the knight's passion is a spiritual death. He pours his heart into the lady, and now she's gone. "And this is why," the knight somberly explains in line 45, he lingers by the lake, a shell of his once-vigorous self.



## SETTING

The poem takes place in the countryside during the [Middle Ages](#), a period in Europe that lasted between the 5th and 15th centuries. The time period can be specified somewhat if the reader considers the knight's chivalric treatment of the lady: the informal [chivalric code](#) was developed after the 11th century. The country can be described as generically European, though Keats's England or the France of Alain Chartier, the poet whose 15th-century poem this one is based on, are good guesses.

The season is late autumn. Plant life has "withered" from the lake in line 3, and in line 8 "the harvest's done"—everyone and everything is preparing for winter. The specific place is the zone between a lake and "the cold hill side" of line 36, where the knight wakes from his dream. In the knight's story, he and the lady ride his horse through the surrounding area. They meet in a meadow, dig up roots from the soil, and embrace in a cave.

The knight's dream can also be considered part of the setting.

It's a place populated by the "pale kings and princes" of line 37, and reflected in the cold hill side and withered lakeshore.



## CONTEXT

## LITERARY CONTEXT

*Lyrical Ballads*, a collaborative book written by poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, shifted the English Romantic movement into high gear. It was published in 1798. At that point, John Keats was just a toddler. In his 20s (he wouldn't live past 25) Keats would meet both Wordsworth and Coleridge. He admired them, but was critical as well. He was particularly wary of Wordsworth's egotism; he aspired in his own work to create a poetry that sought truth in the imagination without getting muddled by any rigid belief systems. (In an 1817 letter to his brothers Tom and George, Keats introduced a concept called "negative capability," which refers to the poet's ability to follow inspiration without letting prejudice get in the way—basically, to take an idea and run with it.) That said, Coleridge's poem, "[The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#)," was one of the major influences on Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci."

The poets Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley were just a few years older than Keats. They recognized his talent and encouraged his work, though they also contributed to some misconceptions about the young poet's life. After Keats died of tuberculosis in 1821, Shelley wrote a long poem called [Adonais](#) that blamed "wretched" critics, including "a most base and unprincipled calumniator," for Keats's physical breakdown. In his book length poem [Don Juan](#), Byron perpetuates the same idea, alluding to Keats with the lines, "Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article." Keats did receive more than his fair share of ruthless criticism in his lifetime, but he responded to it with more poise than his contemporaries gave him credit for. What killed him was tuberculosis, which at the time didn't have a specific treatment because it hadn't been identified as a disease with a specific cause.

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" was written in April 1819. It draws on a 15th century poem by the French poet Alain Chartier, which tells a similar story and can be read [here](#) in an English translation. Additionally, Keats draws on flower imagery that was frequently used in English literature during and before the Romantic period. The rose and lily often appeared together, as in William Cowper's 1782 poem "[The Lily and the Rose](#)," in which the flowers vie for England's admiration.

Keats's poem was published in May 1820 in the journal *Indicator*, which was edited by Leigh Hunt, an influential progressive writer and publisher who was a friend of and early influence on Keats. This year, just two before his death, was the most productive of Keats's literary career. After writing this

poem, he would go on to compose his odes (for example, "[To Autumn](#)," "[Ode to a Nightingale](#)," and "[Ode on a Grecian Urn](#)"), which are considered among the most famous poems in the English language. By 1848, when the first biography of Keats was published, Keats's prominent place in the English canon was solidified.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" was written in 1819—surely an interesting time to be alive. Four years earlier, Napoleon's army had fallen at the Battle of Waterloo, and England, having financed much of the dictator's opposition, was enjoying at least some of the spoils. George, Prince of Wales ruled England as a proxy for his father, King George III, whose mental illness crippled his ability to lead, and who would be ridiculed by Percy Shelley as "old, mad, blind, despised, and dying" in his sonnet "[England in 1819](#)" (which actually wouldn't be published till 1839). In the British cities, industrialization raised factories and forged a working class that would increasingly agitate for reforms to factory conditions and their political rights. Queen Victoria was born this year, on May 24; the society that flourished during her rule would elevate Keats's work to the high place it holds today in the English canon.

In Keats's personal history, this was a time of love and loss. In December 1818, his brother Tom had died of tuberculosis. Keats, trained as a surgeon, had acted as Tom's nurse. Keats would die of the same disease two years later, and some biographers suggest that he first became infected while nursing his brother. The spring of 1819 was also the peak of Keats's fiery, though perhaps unconsummated, relationship with Fanny Brawne, the neighbor and eventual fiancée (though they would never marry) to whom he dedicated his sonnet, "[Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art](#)." Their relationship was the inspiration for the 2009 John Keats biopic *Bright Star*.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [John Keats Biography](#) — An in-depth biography that tracks Keats's career, personal relationships, and the evolution of his poetical thinking. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats>)

- [Keats's Letter about Negative Capability](#) — The 1817 letter from Keats to his brothers, George and Thomas, in which he describes his famous poetic concept of "negative capability." (<http://mason.gmu.edu/~rnanian/Keats-NegativeCapability.html>)
- [Keats's Letter About the "Mansion of Many Apartments"](#) — A short analysis of another famous concept expressed in Keats's letters, the "Mansion of Many Apartments." (<https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/05/03/the-mansion-of-many-apartments-john-keats/>)
- [Actor Ben Whishaw Reads "La Belle Dame sans Merci"](#) — Ben Whishaw, who played John Keats in the 2009 biopic *Bright Star*, reads the poem. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qL-L8ExX3kQ>)
- [A Painting of "La Belle Dame sans Merci"](#) — Artist John William Waterhouse's interpretation of Keats's poem, painted in 1893. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Belle\\_Dame\\_sans\\_Merci#/media/File:John\\_William\\_Waterhouse\\_-\\_La\\_Belle\\_Dame\\_sans\\_Merci\\_\(1893\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Belle_Dame_sans_Merci#/media/File:John_William_Waterhouse_-_La_Belle_Dame_sans_Merci_(1893).jpg))

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- [Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art](#)
- [Ode on a Grecian Urn](#)
- [Ode on Melancholy](#)
- [Ode to a Nightingale](#)
- [On First Looking into Chapman's Homer](#)
- [To Autumn](#)
- [When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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