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## KEATS' LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI AS A ROMANTIC POEM

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### ABSTRACT

**K**eats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1819) is cast in ballad form and is beautifully arranged in lyrical stanzas. The title of the poem means "The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy" and points to the poignant tale of love in the poet's personal life. It is a well-known fact that Keats' long-cherished desire of getting united in love with his dream girl, Fanny Brawne, could not be realised because of his fatal disease resulting in great despair for him. Speaking of this despair, John Middleton Murry has aptly remarked: "Death and poverty—either of these might deprive him of the possession of his live.... So..... Keats passed



through the ecstasy of love to the ecstasy of despair, a despair deeper than any he had felt before, a despair as deep as any that man can feel."<sup>1</sup> The dreaded disease---consumption---had already taken away the precious life of his brother Thomas in December, 1818, and he was also in its inescapable grip, sensing his imminent death and dissolution. The poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* brings to the fore Keats' longing for love and life in an indirect manner.

**KEY WORDS:** *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, Romantic Poem, lyrical stanzas.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Keat's deep despair caused by an unrequired romance colours many of his poems. He composed them as though directly looking into the face of Death. Thus, in the *Ode to a Nightingale* he writes.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath,  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.  
And again, in one of his famous sonnets he said  
When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain....  
And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance.

In these poems Keats is keenly aware of the obnoxious design of Death waiting furtively for him. The very thought of sinking into non-entity and nothingness rendered him lonely and frustrated. In the Ode to a Nightingale (which was written a few weeks after *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*), Keats speaks of the human world in a mood of dejection and depression---- "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow" and "Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,/ Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow". And in a sonnet Keats writes.

.....then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness sink.

The use of the term 'nothingness' immediately reminds us of *Endymion* (1818) where a contrasted situation is brought into sharp focus :

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever :  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness....

Since Keats the poet was a worshipper of Beauty and truth, he exulted in describing them wherever the occasion demanded. In the Ode on a Grecian Urn (May 1819), for example, he writes :

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', --- that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

But the overpowering mood in Keats' poetry remains dejection and dispiritedness caused primarily by his ill-health and loss of love. This trait of dejection and depression happens to be one of the well-known traits of the entire Romantic poetry, and it is clearly visible in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. In the opinion of G. Wilson Knight, "Melancholy is with him (Keats) from the beginning both sincerely felt and luxuriantly enjoyed."<sup>2</sup> This trait is also profusely found in the poetry of Shelley (e.g. la "Stanzas Written in Dejection", "Lines to an Indian Air", and even "Ode to the West Wind"). *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* portrays the sad and pitiable tale of a lonely and pale knight-at-arms who has been deceived in love by the merciless fairy.

The preponderance of the note of melancholy and dejection in the poem naturally leads us to a consideration of certain other salient features of Romanticism in it. These salient features of Romanticism include the treatment of unrequited love, the presence of the supernatural element, the predominance of the medieval note, the touching lyrical impulse and intensity, and the 'depth and energy of Imagination', as Coleridge would put it.

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci* has for its subject-matter, as said earlier, an unrequited and even cheated love between the knight-at-arms and the heartless lady. the poem is structured in the question-answer form, and the questioner wants to know the cause of the knight's pathetic condition. The knight is found 'alone and palely loitering' and looks 'so haggard and woebegone': he appears as withered as 'a fading rose' and is perspiring with sorrow and anguish. After the first three stanza—that he met a very beautiful lady in the meads, who was 'a faery's child' and had long hair, light foot and wild eyes. He made a garland for her head, and bracelets and fragrant belt too. She showed gestures of love towards the knight and moaned sweetly before he set her on his 'pacing steed'. She then took him to her 'elfin grot' where she offered him sweet roots, wild honey and manna dew and where she said, "I love thee true". He also responded to her love positively and shut her wild eyes with 'kisses four'. Then she lulled him to sleep and left him to his fate. In a horrid dream, he saw 'pale kings and princes' and 'pale warriors' who were all 'death-pale' and who cried out to him—"La Belle Dame Sans Merci/Hath thee in thrall!" They were issuing a stern warning to the knight. At this point, his dream broke and he awoke with a sudden jerk on 'the cold hill's side'. In respect of mood and temper, the love-lorn story of the knight coincides with the birds. The theme is, thus, unmistakably romantic, and as Wilson Knight suggests, the poem

highlights "an objective sense of potential hell within physical love."<sup>3</sup>

Supernaturalism has been an accepted element of Romantic poetry, and Coleridge amongst the Romantics was its best exponent. Keats has his own share of supernaturalism in some of his poems, particularly in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *Lamia* (1919). The presence of the faery and her guileful ways lends the poem a supernatural touch. The expression like 'a faery's child', 'elfin grot', 'pale warriors, death-pale' reinforce this supernatural touch in the poem. A weird atmosphere, like the one in Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*, pervades the poem, Significantly Walter H. Evert has examined this poem under the caption "My Demon Poesy" and has characterised it as "maddeningly simple."<sup>4</sup>

The medieval note is quite discernible in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. In the Middle Ages, the knights-at-arms used to go out in hunt of love and adventure. Keats' poem takes us back to the times when the lovely fairies came down to earth and made love to human beings. The story of Merlin and Vivian is one such story from the Middle Ages. In Keats' *Endymion*, we come across the moon-goddess Cynthia making love to the 'brain-sick shepherd-prince', Endymion. The similarity between *Endymion* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* has been noticed by Walter H. Evert in his illuminating work on the poetry of Keats.<sup>5</sup> The fairies of the medieval ages used to befool high-spirited youths in love, often leaving them in the lurch. After that, these love-lorn, disappointed youths used to languish in love for the remainder of their lives. The same sort of love-scene is dramatically enacted in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, where the knight is squarely tricked by a lovely fairy, who takes him to her magic cave and befools him badly. That is why the knight looks so pale, haggard and anguished. The medieval note in this poem makes it a tragic romance. The well-known historian, Edward Albert has rightly remarked that Keats "has none of the satirical bent of Byron, and little of the prophetic vein of Shelley; rather is he the poet of legend and myth, of romance and chivalric tale."<sup>6</sup>

One of the typical features of Romantic poetry is its lyrical impulse and sweep of verses. The lyrical impulse is well-pronounced in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Though a celebrated Keatsian scholar, M.R. Ridley excluded this poem from his consideration in his *Keats' Craftsmanship* (1933), he conceded the truth that this poem is at least one of Keats' "most notable achievements."<sup>7</sup> The poem is notable because it has a remarkable lyrical intensity and musical texture. The following stanza may be taken as an illustration:

'I made a garland for her head,  
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;  
She look'd at me as she did love,  
And made sweet moan.'

Here the first line is a beautiful instance of internal rhyme, while the third line rhymes well in 'look'd and 'did love' and the fourth in 'made..... moan'. The overall impression created by this stanza is one of lyrical charm and musical feast. According to Evert, the poem as a whole has 'childlike, sing-song rhythms' which do not sometimes correspond with "the rich and eerie implications of the poem's multitudinous images"<sup>8</sup>.

If Keats' artistic growth is "from poetic adolescence to poetic maturity"<sup>9</sup> in a brief period of three and a half years of his creative life, then *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* definitely stands to gain, for it is a by product of Keats' mature mind. In this poem, Keats' imagination is at its full pay: he visualizes and appropriate situation steeped in love and romance and his 'fine frenzy' is seen rolling here and unfurling the coloured carpet of 'the starlit dome'. According to C.M. Bowra, "If we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it."<sup>10</sup> He further opines that it is the depth and energy of imagination that rouses a Romantic poet "from the deadening routine of custom to a consciousness of immeasurable distances and unfathomable depths."<sup>11</sup> In *La Belle*, it is Keats' power of imagination that enables him to create a situation parallel to the one found in medieval romances, and it is this power that prompts him to discover parallelism between the knight's love for a cruel and unkind lady and his own unfortunate love for Fanny Brawne.

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is thus unmistakably a Romantic poem par excellence; it is entirely soaked in

love and life. Using expressions from Wordsworth's poem "The Solitary Reaper", we can say that in Keats' poem the knight-at-arms narrates his sad, unhappy tale of love in 'plaintive numbers' and recounts his harrowing experience of a 'natural sorrow, loss, or pain'. Such a love-experience has always been there in the world and will be repeated even in the foreseeable future. Hence the poem's universal appeal. In dealing with such an experience in a grim, sombre mood, Keats the consummate craftsman as he is, has turned La Belle Dame Sans Merci into a truly romantic poem of skilful execution.

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