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

Amy Davis on John Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’

Introduction

‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, written in 1819 and published in 1820, is one of John Keats’s best-known poems. It draws on the romance tradition Keats would have encountered in his reading of Dante and Spenser. It also draws on traditional ballads.

Using ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ as its main focus, this resource provides activities to prompt an in-depth analysis of Keats’s poetic techniques, as well as broader exploration of his literary allusions and afterlife in art, and possible creative responses for students and teachers to attempt.

The following activities can be used to introduce ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ or extend learning you have already done in class. They can be used as a progression over several lessons, or used discretely.

John Keats, 1795–1821

John Keats, now regarded as one of the greatest of the Romantic poets, was born in London in October 1795. He was the eldest of four children, and a devoted brother to George, Thomas and Frances throughout his short life. His letters to them, as well as to his circle of literary and artistic friends, and his great love Fanny Brawne, provide an intimate insight into the philosophy of life, art and beauty which he explores in his poems.

Keats trained as a surgeon-apothecary but did not practise upon qualifying; he preferred to dedicate his life to poetry. His work was harshly criticised in his lifetime and he died believing “I have left no immortal work behind me”, but Keats’ reputation grew steadily after his death.

Keats died of tuberculosis in Rome, on 23 February 1821, aged just 25. He had asked for his tombstone to bear no name, only the line “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.”
Poetic voice

One key element to notice in poems is the poetic voice. Discuss as a class: what makes the voice of a poem distinct?

Use the following to prompt discussion of voice:
• Who seems to be speaking? Are they involved in the action of the poem, or more detached?
• What ‘person’ is the poem in? First (I), second (you), or third (he/she/it)? Perhaps a combination is used. Why might that be?
• How does the poetic voice reveal information? Is it unreliable and mysterious, or perhaps frank and forthcoming?
• How does the poetic voice relate to the reader? Do you feel you are being directly addressed? Perhaps you feel you are being persuaded to believe a certain thing.

Students can use a table like the one below to make some of their own observations of the poetic voice of the first lines of some of Keats’s most famous poems. In the classroom, you could divide this up between the class and work on it in pairs.

Extension activity: start to make comparisons between the voices in the different poems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First lines</th>
<th>Comment on voice</th>
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| St. Agnes’ Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!  
   The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;                                                                 | Example: the voice speaks as if he/she experienced the events of this poem. There is an anecdotal, rather informal tone in ‘ah, bitter chill it was!’ as if the voice is reminiscing. |
| – ‘The Eve of St Agnes’                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                  |
| Upon a time, before the faery broods  
   Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods,                                                          |                                                                                                                                                  |
| – ‘Lamia’                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                  |
| Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!  
   Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love’s eye!  
   They could not in the self-same mansion dwell  
   Without some stir of heart, some malady;  
   ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’  
   – ‘Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil’  
|                                                                                                                                                                  |
| When I have fears that I may cease to be  
   Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain,                                                             |                                                                                                                                                  |
| – ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’  
|                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                  |
| Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,  
   And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
   – ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’  
|                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                  |
| O what can ail thee knight-at-arms  
   Alone and palely loitering?  
|                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                  |
| – ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’  
|                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                  |
The voice of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’

First, you should read the poem aloud while students listen. On the second reading, ask students to pay close attention to who seems to be speaking and make brief notes on their impressions of the voice. Discuss as a class.

Possible areas to explore with students:
• The question and response structure
• The circularity of the narrative
• Who is the invisible listener prompting and hearing the knight’s story?
• The effect of the archaic diction in ‘knight at arms’, the pronoun ‘thee’ etc
• Inventive uses of language such as the adverb ‘palely’ in ‘palely loitering’
• How does the knight tell his own story? What does his vocabulary tell us about him?
• What is the effect of the use of direct speech in stanza 10?
• What is the effect of the changes of tense in the poem?

Extension activity: ask students to explore the poetic voice in ‘Ozymandias’ by Shelley, comparing how different voices are integrated into this poem.

Contrast in the poem

Students should now take two highlighters in hand and highlight words and phrases that suggest
a) death and decay (e.g. ‘withered’)
b) pleasure and beauty (e.g. ‘sweet moan’)

Ask students to discuss the following with a partner:
• What is the effect of the contrasting imagery?
• Does the coloured highlighting reveal something about the poem’s structure?
• What do the results of this activity suggest about Keats’s preoccupations when writing the poem?

References to the context of its writing may be illuminating here. When Keats wrote ‘La Belle Dame’, he was ill with tuberculosis (which he had already witnessed kill his mother and brother) and had fallen in love with Fanny Brawne, his neighbour at his house, Wentworth Place, in London. Also, in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats in 1819, he mentions a conversation with Mr Green, a demonstrator at Guy’s Hospital, and the poet Coleridge. ‘Nightingales, poetry – on poetical sensation – metaphysics – different genera and species of dreams – nightmare – a dream accompanied by a sense of touch’ were among the topics mentioned.

Then give the following writing task to students:
In his 1923 poem, Robert Frost asserts that ‘Nothing gold can stay’. To what extent does ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ echo this view?

Students should write an analytical paragraph explaining their interpretation. Their previous discussion of contrasting imagery and Keats’s context will help them.

The following list of vocabulary could be used to support students’ analytical writing:
• juxtaposition
• sensory imagery
• semantic field
• transient
• corruption
The form of the poem

Independent work
Analysing the form of the poem can be illuminating in displaying how its construction creates different effects for the reader.

Rhyme
Ask students to consider the use of rhyme in the poem. To comment effectively on rhyme, they should avoid generalised comments on the overall rhyme pattern, aiming rather to ‘zoom in’ on specific pairs or sets of words that rhyme. Rhyme will be used to either link these words or to contrast them for effect.

Task: students should choose a particular pair of rhymed words/phrases and explain the effect of the rhyme choice. For example, ‘a faery’s child’ and ‘eyes were wild’ draws attention to the contradictory nature of the Lady. She seems idealised, a fairy tale figure, but also untamed and potentially dangerous.

Meter
Now ask students to count the syllables in each line of the poem and see if they can establish a pattern. What does the poem’s rhythm feel like as they read it aloud? They could try clicking their fingers when they hear a stressed syllable. These stresses will often fall on an important word that the poet wants to stand out.

Keats uses a pattern of tetrameter followed by dimeter in each stanza. Discuss with students what effect the shorter final line of each stanza creates.

Task: students should choose a particular stressed word/syllable of a word and explain the effect of it being stressed. For example, in the very first line, ‘ail’ is stressed, drawing attention to the knight’s woeful predicament immediately.

The Lady

Independent work / could be a homework task
Ask students to note down answers to the following questions. This can then lead into a class discussion.

a) What is the significance of the title of the poem?
b) What characterises the encounter between the knight and the lady? Read the poem again, adding annotations and considering how Keats mingle erotic suggestions with feverish depictions of loss of control.
c) Now research a variety of artistic interpretations of the poem and compare how they depict the lady and the knight. Look carefully at who seems to have power in the paintings, and which particular image from the poem is depicted in each.

The website of the NGV Australia contains a useful collection of images. You could also direct students to the National Gallery (London) website to support their exploration of the paintings.


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Activity 6

Critical views of the poem

Group work

Divide the following critical quotations among the class. Each group should work on annotating the quotation with the following three foci:

a) Summarise what the critic is arguing.
b) Do they agree or disagree? Why?
c) Can they suggest some of their own evidence to build upon this quotation? Perhaps they can make a link with another of Keats’s poems, or with the context of his life.

- “The knight’s tale concludes with the beautiful lady disappearing, their encounter having been finite, the repast of his heart and mind, infinite.” (Colin Fleming, 2019)
- “‘La Belle Dame’ suggests that Keats is haunted not just by the fact of his own mortality or the threat death poses to poetry but by the suspicion that his life and his poetry are inextricably bound to death.” (Brendan Corcoran, 2009)
- The language of all his poems, and in particular the great odes and narrative poems of his final (1820) volume, have a delicious velvety weight: they ‘load every rift with ore’, to use one of his own phrases.’ (Andrew Motion, 2014)
- ‘Whether they emerge as rich and full or come forward as hollow and empty vessels, the selves in Keats’s poetry always reach beyond their own identities. They stand for or are more than themselves.’ (Magdalena Ostas, 2011)

Activity 7

Medieval allusions in Keats’s poetry

Independent work

Stella Bottai writes about the connections between Keats’s work and the Pre-Raphaelite’s paintings:

‘In “The Gothic looks solemn” (1817) Keats revealed his love for intense medieval colours, a quality that fascinated Rossetti, who thought Keats was a “glorious fellow”. Stained-glass windows, hidden vaults over lonely alleys, magnificent spurs, and sinister woods provide the background for sad knights and frightened ladies.’

Ask students to explore how Keats creates a rich medieval setting for ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ and ‘The Eve of St Agnes’, and why they think he chose this time period as a setting.

When reading the poems, students could look out for:
- Descriptions of architecture
- Traditional chivalric roles of men and women
- Vocabulary relating to heraldry (e.g. ‘gules’ in ‘The Eve of St Agnes’)

Extension task: ask students to think about historical fiction they have read and how it presents the historical time period vividly. For example, they could consider Wolf Hall by Hilary Mantel, set during the Tudor period, or The Pillars of the Earth by Ken Follett, set in the 12th century. Why do they think authors and poets are drawn to writing about historical characters and settings?
Write a new poem inspired by ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’

First, students should make some planning notes. They may be inspired by one of the following elements, or something else that they found striking when reading the poem:

- The question and answer structure
- Dreams turning into nightmares
- Chivalric ideals
- Natural imagery

For more general poetry-writing tips, encourage students to explore The Poetry Society’s Young Poets Network at ypn.poetrysociety.org.uk

After writing the poems, encourage students to reflect on what they included. Does their poem seem optimistic or pessimistic? Is the natural imagery beautiful and comforting, or decaying and threatening?

About this resource

Amy Davis studied English Language and Literature at Merton College, Oxford, then trained to be an English teacher. She currently teaches at Wycombe Abbey School, Buckinghamshire, and was nominated as one of the Poetry Society’s Teacher Trailblazers. Outside the classroom she enjoys writing poetry and fiction for pleasure.

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Keats Listening to the Nightingale on Hampstead Heath by Joseph Severn. Oil painting, 1849. Image courtesy of Keats House, City of London.