**Summary**

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci* seems to be easy to understand at the narrative level. An unidentified passerby asks the knight what is wrong with him (stanzas I-III). The knight answers that he has been in love with a beautiful lady who has abandoned him and left him alone in the meadows (stanzas IV-XII).

The poem creates a sense of mystery because some details are realistic and familiar, others are unearthly and strange. Here Keats imitates the folk ballad, uses simple language, focuses on an event, provides minimal details about the characters, and makes no judgments at the end. He leaves the result to the discretion of the readers. There are several question raised in the minds of the readers, so it puzzles the readers. The questions like:

- What does the poem mean?
- What is the nature of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*?
- What is the meaning of the knight's experience?
- Why has the knight, one of Keats's dreamers, been ravaged by the visionary or dream experience?
- What is the meaning of the dream?
• Was the knight deluded by his beloved or did he delude himself?

Likewise there are several questions which arise in the minds of the reader and baffles them.

John Keats based the title of his literary ballad on the title of a long French poem with a different story. The title of the latter poem, written in 1424 by Alain Chartier (1392-1433), is “La Belle Dame Sans Mercy.” (Notice the different spelling of the last word.) As a feminine noun, the French word merci means pity or mercy. As a masculine noun, it means thanks. The translation of the title is “The Beautiful Woman without Mercy.” The time indicated in the ballad is late autumn. The place is England during the Age of Chivalry. A lovesick knight tells an unidentified person about a beautiful “faery's child” who met him in a meadow and deceived him by deserting for ever all alone in the meadows.

“La Belle Dame sans Merci" or "The Beautiful Lady without Pity" is the title of an early fifteenth-century French poem by Alain Chartier which belongs to the tradition of courtly love. Keats appropriates this phrase for a ballad which has been generally read as the story of a seductive and treacherous woman who tempts men away from the real world and then leaves them, their dreams unfulfilled and their lives blighted. For all the beguiling simplicity of the surfaces of this literary
ballad, it is one of the most difficult of Keats's poems to explain, and open to many interpretations. It has been alternately suggested, for example, that it is about the wasting power of sexual love and/or the poet's infatuation with his muse. This particular analysis will examine the *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* as a poem which offers a feminist interpretation of the ballad. A woman conventionally tempts man with her beauty and ultimately causes his destruction. There are many such figures in traditional supernatural ballads concerned with a faery's seduction of a human.

The knight-at-arms in this poem has been enchanted, entralled, and is immediately suggested by his wandering in a desolate wasteland where the plant life has withered and no birds sing. He himself is in a decline; he is pale and the rose in his cheeks, like the sedge, is withering. In trying to explain his state to his questioner, he makes us highly suspicious of the lady whom he encountered. The narrator of the poem portrays the lady as a negative character.

To start with, he identifies her as a supernatural being, a 'faery's child' with 'wild wild eyes' suggestive perhaps of madness. She speaks a strange language, and in her elfin grotto she lulls him to sleep. There may be a suggestion here that she is potentially treacherous since 'lull' can denote an attempt to calm someone's fears or suspicions by deception. The lady's responsibility for his condition
seems to be confirmed in the dream he has of the death of pale kings, princes, and warriors who claim 'La Belle Dame sans Merci / Hath thee in thrall!' `And this is why I sojourn here' he tells his questioner, apparently referring back to this 'horrid warning' of the dream. He stays because he is in thrall to the merciless beautiful lady.

We are, in fact, given very little information about anything. We know nothing about the speaker who interrogates and describes the knight. We know very little about the lady, only what the knight tells us; we are offered no interpretation of his experience; indeed, the knight's story opens up more questions than it answers. We are clueless about the lady's being merciless by keeping the kings, knights and princes in thrall.

The ballad narrates the perspective of the knight only. The other probable version the lady is no where presented. The knight is a helpless victim. He loves her so much and always courts her, and creates garlands, bracelets and belts that can be seen not only to decorate but also to bind and enclose her. He claims possession of her `I set her on my pacing steed'. As soon as they reach her `elfin grot', we are given the perplexing and unexplained suggestion that she herself is now unhappy. 'she wept, and sigh'd full sore'. In this poem, the beautiful lady has been defined as a cruel, merciless enchantress, but nothing is described in the ballad about her cruelty and
mercilessness. The poet has not given any clues of her cruelness. The knight says that she speaks in `language strange', then how can he be sure she said "I love thee true". It is contradictory on the part of the knight himself. It is possible that he has translated what she said into what he wanted to hear. This argument can be justified by the knight's expression - 'She looked at me as she did love, / And made sweet moan'. A feminist approach to the ballad might point to these ambiguities, contradictions in the text which offers a counter argument that the lady is a victim.

Keats has adopted patriarchal perspective. It is the knight who tells the story and describes the lady and his experiences. The knight and the kings, princes and warriors who appear in his dream, belong to the masculine world of conflict and action. These kings, princes and warriors have been attracted to the lady who captured them in her "elfin grot"; they have luxuriated in the pleasures she has provided for the time being but later realised they were enthralled. The knight continues to share his story and says that the lady has provided him with sweet foods and lulls him to sleep.

In the perspectives of the lady, the interpretation of the ballad may deviate us for her description by the knight. Here one can take the extremely ambiguous nature of the word 'lulled' into consideration. Indeed it means to calm someone's fears or suspicions by deception.
However, it can also more innocently mean to soothe with soft sounds and motions, as a mother might soothe a child to sleep. We can assume that the pale kings and warriors with `starved lips' have had a similar experience to the knight. In the lady's world they regress in an almost infantile manner.

Then, recognising the power and stability of the male dominated world, urge to withdraw, the kings, warriors, and princes have placed the blame squarely upon the woman who is defined as the temptress who has the knight in thrall. And the knight seems to authorise this definition: `And this is why I sojourn here', he tells his questioner. Wandering in this barren landscape, he is neither in the masculine world of conflict and action nor the feminine world of the bower. In succumbing to his desire to withdraw from the duties and responsibilities of the former into the luxurious pleasures of the latter, he has undermined the definitions and assigned roles of male and female. Now nothing is open to him; he is in limbo. A reading such as given above would fit well with Keats's general ambivalence concerning romance and the bower.