

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

- JOHN KEATS

Keats was inspired to write "La belle Dame Sans Merci" by reading a Provencal poem of the same title. At that time he was in love with Fanny Browne and waiting for death. The poem was "an allegorical expression of his agonized struggle to conquer" Love and Death". It had all the simplicity and directness of the best old ballad poetry of English. It was a masterpiece of narrative art. In it Keats showed the joys of romantic love as well as its tragedy. In a short space he told a complete story showing what romantic love truly was. Thus we consider this poem to be one of the finest productions of the poet.

Keats was a sensuous poet. He created the atmosphere of winter with light, definite touches.

"The sedge has wither'd from the lake.

And no birds sing."

"The squairrel's granary is full.

And the harvest's done.

It was not the time for anyone to stir abroad. So the poet was surprised to find the knight was wild, pale and sad. His forehead was as white as a lily, it was moist with anguish and fever. His rosy cheeks were losing their color. So the poet had the curiosity to know what his trouble was.

The knight told his story very briefly, but it was complete. He met a lady in the meadows. She was so beautiful that she seemed to be a fairy's child.

"Her hair was long, her foot was light.

And her eyes were wild."

The joy of romantic love were presented in every detail. The Knight made her a garland, bracelets and a girdle. She moaned sweetly. He placed her on his horse. She bent sideways and sang a fairy's song. The Knight gazed at her all day long. She gave him sweet roots, wild honey and manna. In a strange language she told him that she loved him truly. She took him to her cave. There she swept and sighed. He shut her wild eyes with four kisses. Then she lulled him asleep. This was the beginning of the tragedy. In his sleep he had a dream. He dreamt of pale kings, princes and warriors. They opened their lips and warned him horridly saying that la belle dame sans merci had enslaved him. He woke up and found himself alone on the cold hill's side. The beautiful lady had vanished. He was left with the memory of that lady. So he was a tragic figure.

Thus by employing the technique of a ballad, that of conversation, the poet revealed all the joys of romantic love and the tragic outcome of that love. The moral was implicit. In poems like

“Endymion” and “Lamia” Keats made much of the joys of romantic love, but in this short narrative poem he could present a balanced attitude. The haggard knight loitering about in the bleak fields in winter contrasted with the knight riding with the beautiful lady with a garland of flowers round her head, bracelets and a girdle of flowers. Keats presented concrete details with his usual sensuousness. His felicity of expression was remarkable. We cannot forget the knight who was “haggard and woe begone”. We cannot also forget the knight shutting the lady’s “wild eyes with kisses four”. The fairy’s child was described in two lines but we cannot forget her.

“Her hair was long, her foot was light.

And her eyes were wild”.

Keats was a great craftsman. He knew how to produce the right effect. He had economy and precision.