La Belle Dame sans Merci Study Guide

La Belle Dame sans Merci by John Keats

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Introduction

"La Belle Dame sans Merci," written in 1819 and published the next year in a form slightly different from the one here, depicts a knight-at-arms who has been seduced and abandoned by a capricious fairy. Told in the form of a dialogue, the poem recounts the experience of loving dangerously and fully, of remaining loyal to that love despite warnings to the contrary, and of suffering the living death of one who has glimpsed immortality. At the beginning and end of the poem, the knight remains on "a cold hill's side," a world devoid of happiness or beauty, waiting for his love to return. Some readers maintain that the poem is really about Keats's confused feelings for Fanny Brawne, his fiancée, to whom Keats could not commit fully. Others claim the story is symbolic of the plight of the artist, who, having "fallen in love" with beauty, can never fully accept the mundane. Either way, the conclusion is the same: however self-destructive intense love may be, the lover has little choice in the matter. Further, the more one entertains feelings of beauty and love, the more desolate and more painful the world becomes.

Author Biography

Born in 1795, Keats, the son of a stablekeeper, was raised in Moorfields, London, and attended the Clarke School in Enfield. After Keats's mother's death in 1810, Richard Abbey took care of Keats and his three younger siblings. Although Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary (pharmacist), he soon realized that writing was his true talent, and he decided to become a poet. Forced to hide his ambition from Abbey, who would not have sanctioned it, Keats instead entered Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospitals in London, becoming an apothecary in 1816 and continuing his studies to become a surgeon. When he reached the age of twenty-one, Keats was free of Abbey's jurisdiction. Supported by his small inheritance, he devoted himself to writing. Keats also began associating with artists and writers, among them Leigh Hunt, who published Keats's first poems in his journal, the *Examiner*. But, within a few years, the poet experienced the first symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his mother and brother. He continued writing and reading the great works of literature. He also fell in love with Fanny Brawne, a neighbor's daughter, though his poor health and financial difficulties made marriage impossible. He published a final work, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, which included his famous odes and the unfinished narrative, *Hyperion: A Fragment*. Keats traveled to Italy in 1820 in an effort to improve his health but died in Rome the following year at the age of 26.

Poem Text

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

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woebegone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew;
And on thy cheek a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

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.

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.

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.

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

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore;
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

And there she lullèd me asleep,
And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dream'd

On the cold hill's side.

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!"

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.

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

Plot Summary

Lines 1-12

The ballad consists of two parts of dialogue, each uninterrupted by the other and each uncouched by the normal story-telling mechanisms for identifying speakers ("I said," "he said," etc.). Because of this, the identity of the first speaker, whose part is completed in the first twelve lines, remains cryptic. Though he (or, it could equally be argued, she) reveals the identity of the other (the "knight-at-arms"), the first speaker says nothing, at least directly, about himself. He does, however, give plenty of information about the situation of the poem. The time is late autumn, the annual grasses having already "wither'd" and the birds having departed on their winter migration. The place, one can infer, is not always as forbidding as it seems to be now□its desolation is simply due to the time of year. There has been a "harvest," but it has ended. There is latent life present around the two characters: "the squirrel's granary is full." Therefore, if the setting symbolizes the knight's emotional desolation, one must understand it as a function of an individualized circumstance: of a very specific but not necessarily permanent condition. Come spring, after all, the cycle of the harvest will begin again. Yet, this seems little consolation to the knight the speaker describes. He is "alone and palely loitering," "so haggard and so woebegone." His pallor is described metaphorically in terms of a "lily" on his brow and a "fading rose" on his cheek. Further, he appears physically ill, "moist" from the "fever" of some "anguish." Though through these observations the speaker has already foreshadowed the reasons for the knight's grim condition, the form's rhetoric demands the question be asked: "O what can ail thee?" A knowledge of chivalric lore should prompt the correct guess. Of a knight's three profound allegiances□to his God, his lord, and his lady□only the last would be described in terms of lily-pallor and a faded rose.

Lines 13-24

The story's twist occurs in the first stanza of the knight's speech. Though a "lady" was bound to figure into the poem, that she is a "faery's child" changes the expectations of the tale's outcome and causes readers to reinterpret the nature of the knight's desolation. Literature and myth are filled with examples of humans who fall in love with gods, and with little exception, such relationships bode disastrously for the mortal party. Particularly in that area of mythology dealing with fairies or fairy-like creatures, humans who become enamored of fairies, elves, pixies, and the like generally suffer extreme emotional consequences once their affairs with the capricious beings have ended. Having loved an immortal, these hapless humans discover that mere mortal beauty□which can include not only human lovers but also life itself□will no longer do. Based on thse conventions, readers understand immediately that this is the knight's fate, and through his descriptions of his fairy-love's beauty, readers see the caprice that brings on his doom. In keeping with fairies' quick and unpredictable behavior, "her foot was light." Her long hair suggests the sensual nature of such creatures, who in lore are

given to continual pleasures, and "her eyes were wild." The knight confesses he was taken in by his lady's fairy-penchant for "seeming:" She looked at him "as she did love." In the terms of chivalric belief-systems, earthly love is a mortally serious concept: it is at once an all-consuming renunciation of and at the same time the earthly manifestation of heavenly love. As such, it is considered by the knight to be eternal. Yet for the lady, who as a fairy has no such ideas about heaven or about chivalry, love is a purely earthly proposition. To her, it is merely an expression of her fairyembodiment of nature, which begins and ends with the erotic. Thus, she makes a "sweet moan," which readers have no reason to believe is falsely manufactured. Thus, as well, she responds favorably to his gifts, which all represent natural or sensual pleasure: a "garland," "bracelets," a "fragrant zone." Her hold over the knight becomes complete when she sings to him her "faery's song," the type known to hopelessly enchant mortals' souls.

Lines 25-36

The lady's gifts to the knight represent her closeness to nature: she is able to find him "roots of relish sweet," "honey wild and manna dew." She professes to him, "I love thee true." But, she does so in a "language strange" whose words may (and, it turns out, do) not hold the same meanings as the knight's. Still, the knight believes because, in the truest fashion of the romantic sensibility, he wants and needs to believe. At this point, readers might examine the various allegorical meanings readers have attached to the knight's story. While some believe it is a representation of the perils of earthly love□whose desire and randomness can seem to have the qualities of fairy-love□others maintain Keats is really talking about the poet's infatuation with immortal concepts such as beauty. In either case, the lover□whether of another human or of some aesthetic concept□has little choice in the matter. To him, the experience of love is allencompassing, transcendent and, at least briefly, immortal. How many lovers, after all, have behaved rashly, even self-destructively, in the belief that their love took precedence over the normal modes of conduct. In addition, how many disappointed lovers carry with them the belief that they can never love the same way again? Still, new lovers proceed despite the warnings of previously disillusioned lovers. So, the knight proceeds into the fairy-cave, where, he says, "I shut her wild wild eyes"□the repetition suggesting a euphemism for sex □"with kisses four." In a poem devoid of many particulars, the number of kisses seems overly specific. Though there are many numerological interpretations of this detail, one simple explanation for the knight's specificity may suffice: it is the last thing he remembers. Moreover, it is his last act before the disillusionment and perhaps his last pure act. After the kisses, he is "lulled" to sleep, has his final dream, and awakes "on the cold hill's side."

Lines 37-48

In his dream, the knight is warned by previous lovers to beware "La Belle Dame sans Merci"□ the lovely lady without pity. They come to him from the land of death, for once they have glimpsed immortality, all life seems a walking death to them. There are "pale kings and princes," "pale warriors"□all heroic characters whose romantic spirit led to

their demise. Yet, the knight cannot head their warnings. He too is a hero, and in the romantic tradition, a hero is often someone who cannot learn from his mistakes. Regardless, he has already experienced a heightened state from which he cannot return to any previous existence. When he awakens on the hillside, he can only "loiter," waiting for the experience to return. After his fairy-romance, the world is pale and devoid of charm, yet to the poem's initial speaker the knight's vigil, however inevitable, seems to be pointless and grim. The poem concludes with a recollection of the first stanza: "though the sedge is wither'd from the lake / And no birds sing." This not only frames the poem; it also confirms that the knight agrees with the first speaker's assessment of the setting. At the same time, the knight cannot agree with the speaker's implication that no human ought to remain in such a godforsaken place. For the knight, who has glimpsed the immortal and will probably never do so again, any other place would seem equally desolate.

Themes

Unrequited Love

With its forlorn, heartbroken narrator suffering the pangs of embarrassment, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" appears to tell readers about the universal situation known as unrequited love. While love felt equally by two parties is a celebrated event in stories and song, unrequited love occurs when the love felt by one person is much stronger than that felt by the person who is loved. The root "requite" comes from "to repay," which indicates a balance that one expects in a love relationship and the sense of unfairness when one person "pays" love out but is not paid back.

In the poem the knight's disappointment would be less severe if he did not believe from the beginning of their affair that the fairy child loved him in equal measure. As it is, she appears to fall in love with the knight just as he is falling for her. The look she gives him in line 19 and her "sweet moan" in line 20 might be read as signs of her love, and the presents she gives him are further proof they are equally balanced in their feelings for one another. She even takes him back to her home, her "elfin grot," and makes him feel comfortable. It would be natural for him to assume she is as interested as he is in continuing their budding romance when he awakes.

It is unclear whether the knight's intense feeling when he finds his lady gone is caused primarily by the loss of the woman herself. It could be that he is suffering from the disappointing conclusion that she never really loved him as much as he thought she did. By the end of the poem he clearly feels alone, but he does not show any anger toward her. The only clues the poem gives about whether or not the lady may have felt love for the knight come from the spectral images who visit the knight in his dream and tell him the lady is pitiless, that she has no mercy. The presence of these dream images may be explained psychologically, as if the knight subconsciously knew the lady had left him, and his mind had already started shifting the blame toward her. The dream might just be his rationalization, a way of making her out to be evil in order to cope with the pain of learning his love is unrequited.

Nature

The love story told in this poem is framed within images of nature. The lady with whom the knight falls in love is described as the child of a fairy. Fairy stories often stem from rural folklore traditions. The lady is described as having "wild" eyes and as living in a cave on a hill side. When they are together, the knight and the lady give each other presents made from flowers, roots, honey, and dew. After the knight awakens to find the lady gone, the world is described as one from which life has receded, using images associated with nature's death each winter: the squirrels have stored their provisions for the long dead months, the grass in the lake has withered, and the birds have quit singing. The only signs of living nature after the lady disappears are the fading ones on

the knight's face. The "lily" that the poem's other speaker sees on the knight's brow is a sign he once was blessed with the delicate beauty of a flower, although lilies are associated with death. The rose color in his cheek is another sign he has been touched by beauty, but it, like the rest of nature, is "fading."

Despair

Despair is the state of having lost all hope, of finding oneself unable to believe life will ever be good again. The knight in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" falls into despair when he learns a relationship that seemed to be just starting has abruptly ended. His situation is clear from the very first line, when a stranger finds him out in the forest and can tell just by looking at him that something is gravely wrong. The stranger sees how pale he is and, noticing he has chosen to live by a dead, frozen lake, wants to know what ails him, by which he means what has made the knight so sick in spirit.

In the middle stanzas of the poem, the knight describes the romance, which meant more to him than anything that happened before it or since. The brief romance ended with the lady lulling him to sleep. Readers can assume that, comfortable and happy beside her, he expected their love to continue and even to grow when he awoke.

In the real (as opposed to magical) world, the knight's despair would take time to develop, because he would not know for sure that the woman he loved was gone forever. In the magical world of this poem, though, he is visited in his sleep by pale figures of noble men who describe the woman as merciless. When he wakes to find her gone, he readily believes her absence confirms the damning things the figures said about her. The poem does not have the knight looking for his lady or trying to find out why she has left; he is as certain she had no intention of staying with him just as surely as he knows he loves her. There is no hope they will be reunited, and therefore there is no hope that he can ever be happy again. His life is doomed to despair.

Style

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a ballad, an old form of verse adapted for singing or recitation. The ballad form originated in the days when most poetry was memorized rather than written, and the typical subject matter of the ballad reflects a folk sensibility. Ballads are usually narrative, or storytelling, poems, and early ballads often addressed themes important to common people: love, courage, the mysterious, and the supernatural. Though the ballad is generally rich in musical qualities such as rhythm and repetition, it often portrays both characters and events in highly dramatic but simplistic terms.

Additional characteristics of the typical ballad include a set rhyme scheme and alternating line lengths. Formally, the ballad stanza is a quatrain, or a group of four lines, in which the first and third lines contain four stressed syllables while the second and fourth lines contain three stressed syllables. "La Belle Dame sans Merci" consists of twelve such stanzas, with a slight variation: the last line of each stanza contains only two stressed syllables, creating a dramatic suspension between stanzas. Aside from this, the quatrains exhibit the typical ballad stanza pattern of rhyme: the second and fourth lines are set in perfect end rhyme with one another, giving the poem the musical sound most ballads feature.

Historical Context

Romanticism

John Keats is considered one of the central figures in the English romantic movement. Romanticism was a philosophical and artistic ideal that spread across Western civilization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It sprang from the ideas of French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau and German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Rousseau, a major figure in the Enlightenment, wrote eloquently and convincingly about theories of social equality. At the time, most governments were arranged in a system that divided the opportunities for social success available to commoners from those available to people considered to be of noble birth. Rousseau's writings presented society as a corruption of humanity's natural state. His theory that every citizen participates in society willingly, as part of an implied "social contract," created a cult of individual freedom that celebrated the human spirit and led to the French Revolution in 1789. The Revolution's ten-year struggle to overthrow the monarchy and the nobles was one of the most direct influences on the romantic movement.

Goethe was trained as a lawyer, but he became a celebrated poet, playwright, and novelist. In 1775 he, along with German philosopher Johann Gottfriend von Herder and historian Justus Möser, published a collection of essays called *Of German Art and Style*. Their theories about art's relation to traditional folktales and about the place of love and longing in art later evolved into romanticism.

Many literary critics consider the formal start of romanticism to be the 1800 publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the preface to that book, the two poets spelled out the principles of romantic thought. They emphasized the importance of feelings and emotion over intellectualism in poetry, and urged writers to cast away traditional forms and follow their inspirations. Their call for writers to focus on the natural and spiritual aspects of the world were mirrored throughout all the arts at the turn of the century, including painting, music, and architecture. They were strongly influential with the next generation of British poets.

The names most commonly associated with romanticism in literature are Keats, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. The three were friends and associates. Their poetry combined elements of the various romantic strains that had come before them: the thirst for social justice of Rousseau, the mysticism of Goethe, and the emphasis on nature of Wordsworth and Coleridge. In addition, Keats, Byron, and Shelley lived lives of freedom dedicated to the pursuit of love and adventure, a lifestyle often associated with romantic poets in general.

Chivalry

The fact that the character in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a knight is no coincidence. One of the key elements of romantic poetry is an interest in the folk traditions of one's home country. The chivalric tradition, concerned with knights and their relationships to the women they loved, had been familiar in European poetry for centuries. Chivalry was a code of ethics for knights that developed in the south of France in the twelfth century. It required knights to commit themselves to living by the virtues of loyalty, chastity, honor, and valor. It bound the knight to be loyal to God and to follow Christian ideals; to be loyal to the feudal lord under whom he served; and to be loyal to one mistress to whom he promised his love.

For knights of this tradition, love was considered more of an abstract ideal than something that could be experienced in this world. Women were to be loved from afar and to be considered unattainable. Knights chose women who were married, or who were of a higher social rank, who could be worshipped for their beauty and integrity but could not become involved in any sort of physical relationship without diminishing their appeal. A knight sworn to a lady would be bound to suffer in her name, to work hard at making himself worthy of her affection. This aspect of the chivalric ideal served to make knights good servants and citizens, directing their energies away from desire and toward a higher good.

In practice, the idea of chivalry was shortlived, falling to abuse and corruption. It was an idea more often talked about than acted upon by knights. It carried on in literature, however, in the songs of troubadours, who traveled from town to town singing poems for a living. In England, chivalry became crystallized in the legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table during the fourteenth century. The suffering of the knight in this poem, his all-consuming desire for the nymph, and his relationship with her all refer back to the English chivalric tradition.

Critical Overview

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" is one of Keats's most beloved poems and one of the few important works that seems to evade the kind of critical argumentation invoked by the odes and long poems. Typical of critics' magnanimity toward the ballad is T. Hall Caine's 1882 assessment of the poem as the "loveliest [Keats] gave us." He writes that the ballad is "wholly simple and direct, and informed throughout by a reposeful strength. In all the qualities that rule and shape poetry into unity of form, this little work strides, perhaps, leagues in advance of 'Endymion,'" one of Keats's most noted poems. Caine further argues that the ballad's strength comes from the poet's ability to "(move) through an atmosphere peculiar to poetry, lacing and interlacing . . . combinations of thought and measure, (and) incorporating . . . meaning with . . . music." In a 1913 essay, Mary de Reyes notes Keats's fascination with the doomed nature of love in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." She compares the poem with the work of another principle romantic poetin both tone and technique: "In the magical touch of this picture of desolation and gloom, there is much of the spirit of Coleridge. There is no full description. The poem is lyrical rather than narrative." De Reyes points out that the spare description of the landscape "gives the very spirit of the old romance world. And in the intense lyrical feeling we have the climax of passion."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College. In this essay, Kelly examines the many ways in which Keats explores subjective reality in the poem.

One of the most notable things about John Keats's ballad "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is the sly way it presents one of the key issues of romantic philosophy, that of objective versus subjective reality. The quick, simple understanding□the encyclopedia version□is that romantic poets favor subjectivism, particularly those who, like Keats, wrote at the height of the romantic period and helped define the movement, but also those aligned with romanticism to this day. Their world view is generally characterized as a writer focusing on his or her own experience, with no regard for the variety of perspectives that can occur when other points of view are considered.

The central figure in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a medieval knight-at-arms who has suffered one of the worst relationship scenarios imaginable. As he explains it, he met a woman and they fell in love, leading to a brief, passionate romance. After he fell asleep, the unreality of the situation assaulted him in two ways. First, he was visited in his dream by figures who warned him the lady was insincere in her love, and then their warning proved true when he woke up and found her gone.

All of these events, the disappearing lover and the warning he received about her, could just be in the knight's mind. Keats, however, establishes a level of objective reality in the poem by opening it with a second character who meets the knight in the woods and talks with him. It is the interplay between reality and fantasy, and the poem's refusal to clearly define what is and is not real, that makes this one of Keats's most compelling works.

Another poet might have used the uncertain existence of the phantom maiden herself as a test case for reality. There is, after all, no proof she ever existed anywhere but in the knight's imagination, while at the same time there is much evidence that she did not. To begin, she appears to the knight in the wilderness, where no one else could experience her. He describes her as a "faery's child," giving her, at the very least, mythical antecedents. The romance that transpires between them is too perfect too quickly to be thought of as the type of relationship that might develop in the "real" world. But, this poem does not really make much of the unreal aspects surrounding the woman and her sudden appearance and disappearance; they are taken as a given, as the natural course of the mysterious ways of love. It is a fairly standard conceit in romanticism to identify love as a part of the internal self, as more a matter of one person's mind than as a meeting of two. In terms of human relationships, this poem makes no effort to focus on more than one person's perspective, and so the mysterious nature of the faery child is not very telling. She might be a figment of the main character's imagination, or she might just be the catalyst that inspires it, but the reader can presume from the tone and from Keats's other works that this is always the case when one is in love.

The basic story of the poem could easily have been conveyed by the knight narrating his experience directly to the reading audience, if all that Keats were trying to do was to capture the dizzy high and unexpected plummet that can happen when one is in love. Instead, he adds another character, one whose worldly existence is never questioned. This second character defines the reality that surrounds the knight, giving readers another philosophical level against which to compare the love relationship.

Readers are not given any details about who is speaking in the first three stanzas of "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and so this speaker can hardly be thought of as a character in the poem. While undeveloped, this stranger adds several vital elements to the poem. First, having another person in the real world offers the poet an opportunity to give readers a visual description of the knight. This is important because it gives details about the knight's state of mind that would not otherwise come out. The knight's attitude is more optimistic, or at least defiant, than his looks reveal: he himself is not aware of the toll that his ordeal has taken on him. In another type of poem, it might be possible for the knight to tell readers what he looks like without even being aware of how worn out he is. There are ways for a writer to have a character think about his own appearance, by seeing his reflection or by feeling his face with his hands. But in this case, having the knight take time from his brokenhearted misery to think about his own looks would have toned down the intensity of his love. His role in the story is to concentrate on his lover, not himself. While it is important for the poem to show what the knight looks like, that description has to come from someone who is not as deeply immersed in the situation as the knight is; therefore, the stranger is necessary.

The stranger's objectivity is also important for letting readers know just how odd the knight's behavior is. As is always the case in issues of subjectivity and objectivity, there is no way of knowing, from just one point of view, if the events are mundane, shocking, or just as they should be. If the knight's perspective were the only one given in the poem, readers could come away from it thinking that the quick romance was sad, unfortunate, but in some respect normal. Keats starts the poem with someone expressing shock at the knight's pale complexion and at the fact that he is loitering around the empty forest. The knight can express the agony of love, but he by himself could not put this agony into a social context without the presence of another person.

In addition to the knight's subjective view of his situation and the objective perspective the stranger gives to the same situation, the poem also provides several other elements to blur the line between internal and external reality. One seldom noted element is that the poem takes for granted a relationship between mental and physical wellbeing. The knight suffers in romance, and as a result, he is dying. His emotional turmoil leaves him pale and sweating, the color draining from his face. The images of dying nature that surround him can be accounted for easily enough if one believes that, in his misery, he would choose to pass his time in a miserable setting. Even though psychologists believe that mental states affect one's health, the relationship between the two is not generally considered as direct as Keats presents it. According to biographer Aileen Ward, Keats and his contemporaries believed "that emotional agitation, especially that of an unhappy love, could bring on consumption," or tuberculosis, which was the disease Keats had, and the one from which the knight seems to be suffering. The poem's presumption of a

jump from the emotional to the physical world shows that, for Keats, the boundaries between the two were not as fixed as readers think of them today.

One final way that Keats blurs the line between subjectivity and objectivity is the appearance, in stanza 10, of the pale images who speak the poem's title to the knight. There can scarcely be any question about whether they exist in the outside world or only in the knight's mind: they appear in a dream, they appear in a crowd (the way kings, princes, and warriors never do), and they are even in the faded colors of a dream. There is no sign of them in the woods, only in the knight's mind. Keats complicates the question of existence by having them interact with the outside world in a way that goes past the range of the knight's subconsciousness.

To understand the significance of the ghostly figures, one must assume that the faery-child was in fact real and not just a figure of the knight's imagination. This is a more substantial interpretation than assuming that one fantasy is warning the knight against another fantasy. If the knight had in fact met a girl in the woods and shared a quick romance with her, then the figures in his dream could just be interpreted as his subconscious warning him, presumably because it had picked up some negative sign from her that his conscious mind had not noticed. That would only explain the fact that she would *eventually* be bad for him. In the poem, though, they are warning him she will abandon him *at the same time* she is abandoning him in real life. Dreams sometimes are thought to have the ability to predict reality, but granting them the ability to know what is going on in the outside world while the dreamer is dreaming raises a whole new question about where the mental world leaves off and the physical world begins.

Romantic poets are famous for describing the world as a subjective experience, one in which the important things happen in the human heart. There is certainly plenty of that in "La Belle Dame sans Merci," with the knight-in-arms either creating a fantasy love affair or not, creating his own tuberculosis within his mind, and then warning himself about the dangers of going beyond his own mind by entering into a relationship with another person. There is also a strong representation of the objective world, in the unnamed stranger who encounters the knight in the woods. The poem provides no clear-cut answers about how the world of emotion affects or is affected by the physical world, but it does raise substantive questions that cannot be easily ignored.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "La Belle Dame sans Merci," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following except, Hirst illustrates how Keats intertwines the diverse elements of "La Belle Dame sans Merci."

With an inimitable magic Keats depicts another cheated soul in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Flight into visionary experience and back again is expressed by means of the well-known motif (to be used once more in *Lamia*) of a mortal's ruinous love for a supernatural lady: a knight encounters and falls in love with a beautiful "fairy's child", dreams in her "elfin grot" of "pale kings, and princes" and "Pale warriors", and wastes away "On the cold hill's side." The poet may have dashed off this masterpiece of the literary-ballad genre straight into the journal-letter on 21 April 1819, which gives us the version usually preferred to the one printed in Hunt's *Indicator* in May 1820. (The latter, among other things, substituted "wretched wight" for the "knight at arms" of the first line, and in stanza eight omitted "kisses four," the expression Keats singled out for the banter quoted in chapter 2.) Whether Keats was most inspired by Spenser, the popular ballad "Thomas Rhymer," Dante, vampire literature, Celtic lore, Wordsworth and Coleridge, his own earlier poems, a painting by William Hilton, or his relationship with Fanny Brawne is less important than the skill with which he conjures the most diverse elements into a unified impression of spellbinding mystery.

The poem comprises three concentric dream circles. The outer frame (dream 1) consists of a weird encounter between the poem's first speaker and a haggard knight on whose cheek the rose is fading, while the knight's ride through the mead and the kisses in the grotto form an inner frame (dream 2) to the dream about the pale kings with the starved lips (dream 3). The aura of a transcendental experience which pervades the meeting with the fairy lady (dream 2) is undermined by the knight's dream of the death-pale kings and warriors (dream 3) with its suggestion of mortality and betrayal. This dream within the knight's dream in the dream poem□this third dream of the starved lips and horrid warning□comes true when the knight awakes on the cold hillside pale and enthralled as the dream prophesied. The realization of this dream of deathly pallor and starvation has moved in the opposite direction from Endymion's and Madeline's dreams, where fulfillment signified a shift from the actual to some ecstatic transcendental realm. Within the overall dream frame of the first speaker's words to the fantastic knight-at-arms and the latter's reply, the transition from the dream within a dream in the supermortal elfin world to the world of the withering sedge (from dream 3 to dream 1) has a touch of harsh reality. On the other hand the entry into, journey through, and sojourn in the elfin world itself remains pure dream throughout (dream 2). This dream comprises the poem's six central stanzas from the knight's encounter with the fairy's child till she lulls him to sleep; and the encroaching domination of the fairy world is reflected in the transfer of the initiative from the knight's "I" in stanzas four to six to the lady's "she" in stanzas seven to nine. The lady's ambiguity (does "as she did love" in stanza five mean that her love is true or sham? is she a flirtatious seductress or a caressing mother-figure?) and eccentricity (her sidelong bending, unusual food, strange language, and sore sighing), though explicable in a supernatural and perhaps even a natural context, yet create an atmosphere of dreamlike vagueness. The knight has

evidently never entered a grotto and never left "the cold hill's side," for here, we are told, he dreams "The latest dream", so that instead of awaking in the grot he finds himself in the setting of the outer frame.

In the final stanza the knight tries to explain his sorry condition to the questioner. A folk ballad such as "Lord Randall," structured on question and reply, solves its mystery in the last stanza. In "La Belle Dame," however, the explanation ("And this is why □") raises more questions than it answers. The knight explains his haggard appearance and why he does not go home in the inclement season: he is "in thrall." But this explanation merely confuses the questioner, who sees that the knight is under a spell and wonders what the nature of this spell is. It is unclear whether the knight himself knows exactly how, why, and what things have happened to him. The dream in the grotto (dream 3), which is supposed to provide the key to the riddle, tells the questioner at the most what the knight himself has learned but what the reader has known all along from the title: the knight is entranced by a cruel lady. By only pretending to provide a solution to the enigma, this ballad calls attention to the indeterminacy and frequent mystery of its genre just as "St. Agnes" showed how the author of romance manipulates his reader. But whereas in "St. Agnes" the last stanza cast us abruptly back from romance to reality, the last six lines of "La Belle Dame," though apparently returning us to a realistic level, leave us in fact still within the dream world of the outer frame, which makes rational explanation of what has happened impossible and superfluous. The solution that does not solve anything merely confirms our initial impression that we have here the presentation of something felt on the pulses, of a beauty seized as a truth by the imagination and expressed in a language of sensation inaccessible to consecutive reasoning.

The poem pushes negative capability to a new extreme. Since we have to guess even at what has happened, it is not surprising that readers fail to agree upon what the lady, the knight, his journey, and his dream might symbolize. In this "most mysterious and evasive of all Keats's poems," we cannot know whether the fairy's child is a Cynthia who has failed to "make / Men's being mortal, immortal" (*Endymion*, I.843-44), a vampire, a Circe, "a fairy mistress from hell," or "neutral as to good and evil." If we conjecture that she stands for the poetic imagination, we still do not know whether the knight's lapse from vision is due to her refusal to keep up the deception or to the knight's own failure to sustain the transcendental experience; and in the latter case, whether this failure is, as Wasserman suggests, the inevitable concomitant of his mortal condition or the result of some particular deficiency on his part□for instance, as Richard Benvenuto argues, his fear of facing death. The lady may stand for any of the four intensities that attract Keats in "Why did I laugh tonight?": verse, fame, beauty, and death. She may represent the fatality of beauty or of what in "Ode on Indolence" the poet sees as "a fair maid, and Love her name", no less than the allurements of what in the ode he calls "my demon Poesy", especially since the perils of love have repeatedly appeared in Keats's poetry, notably in "Isabella" and in the Romeo and Juliet motif of "St. Agnes." But Murry's assertion that behind the poem lies "the anguish of an impossible love" (of Fanny Brawne) is only one more conjecture and his assumption that the joking comment on the four kisses in the letter "is the detachment of a man who has uttered his heart and must turn away from what he has said" can be proved no more than Jane Rabb

Cohen's contrary (and more extravagant) suggestion that the comment indicates the humorous mood in which the ballad itself was written. The supposition that the knight's journey symbolizes the tragedy of Faustian rejection of human limitations is appealing, because the "starv'd lips" echo a passage in *Endymion*: "There never liv'd a mortal man, who bent / His appetite beyond his natural sphere, / But starv'd and died".

We only know for certain, however, that the knight is a victim of his supernatural adventure and no longer finds his bearings in the natural world of birdsong, harvest, and decay. While he was journeying through the fairy kingdom, birds sang and the squirrel filled the granary; now the harvest is over and the knight is left unprovided for. (In the first two quatrains the truncated stanzaic close echoes the finality of this loss.) Those who boldly confront this world of growth and decline (as Keats does in "To Autumn") not only see the withered sedge but also experience the joys and fulfillment of harvest-time. In his vain attempt to die into the life of fairyland the knight separates himself from the natural order and thus becomes a double loser: cheated of both the wonders of elfin land and of nature, he suffers a kind of death-in-life. The Romantic journey into vision vindicated in *Endymion* and still depicted as a worthwhile risk in "St. Agnes" here proves disastrous.

Source: Wolf Z. Hirst, "Dying into Life: The First *Hyperion* and 'The Eve of St. Agnes'," in *John Keats*, Twayne, 1981, pp. 92-118.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Wasserman explores Keats's techniques, stylistic choices, and probable sources for "La Belle Dame sans Merci."

It would be difficult in any reading of Keats' ballad not to be enthralled by the haunting power of its rhythm, by its delicate intermingling of the fragile and the grotesque, the tender and the weird, and by the perfect economy with which these ef- fects are achieved. Snared by the sensuous workings of the poem, one is greatly tempted to evaluate it entirely as a poem whose function is not the expression of human values, but whose end is attained when it fulfills its own stylistic requirements. Nevertheless, out of the dim sense of mystery and incompleteness that its artistry arouses there rise not only richly suggestive overtones, but also dark hints of a meaning that might be available to us could we penetrate its mystery. The imagination, for example, seizes upon the sedge that has withered from the lake and upon the absence of the birds' song, and elaborates the pictorial connotations of these stark images into all barren and desolate autumnal scenes that ever were. And yet, one senses an insufficiency in these affective and image- making energies of the poem, for the overtones also drive the mind to ask questions of conceptual intent. What, one wonders, is the larger meaning couched within the absence of song? why a knightat- arms and an elfin grot? and what are the significances of the cold hill side and the pale warriors?

Nor are these probings of the mind without justification, since the poem contains within itself the power of compelling us to such questions. For Keats' symbolism is almost always dynamic. His poetry does not lie inert, waiting, like the poetry of Blake and some of the early work of Yeats, to yield itself up to a symbolic reading. Such poetry as theirs assumes that the world is symbolic, and therefore that if the poet selects images of symbolic import and orders them into an artistic intertexture that corresponds to the meaningful relationships in the cosmos, he has created a symbolic poem, let the reader read it as he will. However, we have seen that Keats' world is not symbolic; it is his vision of the world that is symbolic, and a greeting of the spirit is required to transmute image into symbol. Since "every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer□being in itself a nothing," Keats must entice a pursuit of his images by the reader, whose ardor will transform them into symbols, "ethereal things."

In the ballad, therefore, Keats not only dramatized a myth, but also dramatized the fact that the narrative and its component images are symbolic. The first three stanzas are introductory in that they are addressed by an anonymous someone to the knight-at-arms, whose answer will then constitute the narrative body of the poem. These three stanzas consequently serve to set the story of the knight's adventures in an additional narrative framework, a dialogue between the knight and the stranger, with whom the reader tends to identify himself; and thus the reader is drawn more intimately into the knight's experiences, for he feels himself to be present as the knight speaks in his own person. But even more important, in the introductory stanzas images and human values are gradually blended stereoscopically until at length the reader's mode of poetic vision

has been adjusted to see the symbolized value as the thirddimensional projection of the image.

The first two stanzas have identical patterns: the first half of each addresses a question to the knight-at-arms about his spiritual condition; and the second half comments on the natural setting. The similarity of the gaunt, pale appearance of the solitary knight to the desolation and decay of nature is clearly implied, but the absence of any explicit relationship leaves the connection vague and therefore fluid enough so that nature and the knight may later be welded into an organic, instead of a synthetic, union□a method reminiscent of the first stanza of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The second half of each of these stanzas is built around a coordination of two natural images (sedge and birds, the squirrel's granary and the harvest); and it is noticeable that the first pair are the natural images themselves, while the second are the materials of nature as shaped and molded by creatures for themselves. The progress is toward a closer integration of nature and man: the granary and the harvest are what creatures make of nature for their own use. Corresponding to these pairs of images are two pairs of adjectives in the halves describing the knight, the first pair exactly paralleling the natural images: alone, no birds sing; palely loitering, the sedge has withered. All these balanced details, equally distributed to nature and the knight, now coalesce in the third stanza.

This stanza takes its structure from that of the second halves of the first two stanzas, for its pat- tern, too, depends upon the coordination of two natural images, lily and rose, and each image dominates half of the stanza, just as each image in the first two stanzas governs a single line. In other words, the structure of the third stanza is precisely that of the second halves of the first two, expanded to the length of a full stanza. The subject matter of the third stanza, however, is not the appearance of nature, but the spiritual condition of the knightat- arms, which has been the theme of the first halves of the first two stanzas. By this absorption of the knight into the structural pattern of the natural imagery, the movement from a suggested but unstated relationship of man and nature in stanza one to an implied interrelationship in stanza two has now been completed. In the third stanza the two terms are organically integrated, and human values and natural images have been molded into interchangeable expressions: the lily and the rose are present in the knight's countenance, and his withering is theirs. This structural drama of their coalescence now compels a symbolic reading of the poem, and we cannot well avoid questioning the human relevance of the garlands, the elfin grot, and the cold hill side. If, to use Coleridge's definition, a symbol "partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible," the work of the first three stanzas is to make the symbols a living part of that reality.

Critical Essay #4

The first three stanzas, which make dramatic the subsequent narrating and excite a symbolic reading, introduce nine precisely balanced stanzas containing the main narrative (4-12). The progress of the knight in the first four (4-7) comes to a climax in the central one (8) when he is taken into the elfin grot, and in the last four (9-12) he withdraws from the grot. The withdrawal brings the poem back to the scene with which it began, the completion of the circular movement being marked by the fact that the last stanza echoes the first.

Whatever the specific source may have been, the narrative clearly belongs to a folk legend best known in the form of the mediaeval ballad "Thomas Rymer." In the version available to Keats in Robert Jamieson's *Popular Ballads*, 1806 (the variant in Scott's *Minstrelsy* differs in a few important details), Thomas encounters a beautiful lady whom he thinks to be the Queen of Heaven, but who identifies herself as "the queen of fair Elfland." She takes him upon her milk-white steed, for he must serve her for seven years; and for forty days and nights they ride through blood while Thomas sees neither sun nor moon. Forbidden to touch the fruit of this strange country lest he suffer the plagues of hell, Thomas eats the loaf and drinks the claret that the elf-queen has brought. At length they rest before a hill, and the elf-queen, placing his head on her knee, shows him three wonders□ the roads to wickedness, to righteousness, and to fair Elfland. It is the last of these that they are to follow, and for seven years "True Thomas on earth was never seen." The relations of this narrative to a story of a knight-at-arms carried by a fairy's child to an elfin grot are too obvious to underscore. Apparently the myth of a journey to a mysterious otherworld that is neither heaven nor hell nor earth, and of capture there by the fairy magic of love for one who seems to be "Queen of Heaven," constituted a pattern that evoked from Keats a body of speculation ripe for expression and helped give these speculations an artistic shape.

Keats did not simply recast this folk legend into another artistic form but molded it into an expression of his deepest and most vivid conceptions. The legend was not merely an esthetic design that he felt he could bring closer to his idea of literary perfection; to him it was also a meaningful narrative in which he recognized his own journeys heavenward. Since, then, the substance of the folk ballad constitutes mainly the raw materials of Keats' creation, his modifications of the legend and his additions to it are the more obvious clues to his motives. It is noticeable that nearly all the larger narrative elements of the first four stanzas of Keats' central narrative (4-7) are present in the folk ballad also: the meeting with a fairy lady of great beauty, the implication of the lady's desire for Thomas, their sharing the pacing steed, and the knight's eating of the magic food. To these Keats has added three major details that do not appear in the folk ballad, even by implication: the knight weaves for the fairy's child a garland, bracelets, and a girdle of flowers; the lady sings "A faery's song"; and at length "in language strange she said□/ 'I love thee true.'"

What Keats has woven into the narrative, it appears, is another version of the pleasure thermometer, a series of increasing intensities that absorb the self into essence: nature,

song, and love. We have already seen the important role of the pleasure thermometer in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and we shall have occasion to see how functional it is in other poems of Keats. It was "a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth," towards that beauty-truth which was his heart's desire, and each aspiration towards it carried him along the route that his heart had marked out. When, for example, Endymion had trav- eled the "journey homeward to habitual self" and was buried in his own deadly selfhood, he was prepared for deliverance from "this rapacious deep" in three stages. First, the riches of nature appeared before him: "the floral pride / In a long whispering birth enchanted grew / Before his footsteps." Then music: "This still alarm, / This sleepy music, forc'd him walk tiptoe." At length, surrounded by cupids, he observed the love-visitation of Venus and Adonis. And now at last "some ethereal and high-favouring donor" has presented "immortal bowers to mortal sense." By ascending the ladder of intensities, Endymion, too, has been released from the prison house of his mortal self and has attained insight into the mortal-immortal nature of heaven's bourne.

In Keats' ballad these increasing enthrallments of selfhood appear in successive order, each occupying one of three successive stanzas (5, 6, 7); and they lead finally to the heaven's bourne of the elfin grot (8). In folk literature the interiors of hills are often the dwelling places of fairies and elves: Tam Lin dwelled in a green hill, and in the romance of "Thomas of Erceldoune," which deals with the same Thomas Rymer, the hero was led "in at Eldone hill." Apparently the tradition of elfin grots was especially appropriate to Keats' purpose. Earthly in its form and yet "elfin" in its nature□ within the cold hill side of the physical world and yet being the otherworld mystery within the physical□ it corresponds to the oxymoronic realm where life's self is nourished by its proper pith and to which man can ascend by a ladder of intensities. It is the earth spiritually transfigured; its fairyhood is the "leaven, / That spreading in this dull and clodded earth / Gives it a touch ethereal."

In calling upon another analogue to Keats' ballad I do not mean to propose that Keats was directly influenced by it, despite the possibility that he was. Even proof of Keats' indebtedness, could it be found, would be irrelevant to our purpose, for it could not charge his ballad with values not already inherent in it. Nevertheless, it is illuminating to observe what significances the legend of Thomas Rymer held forth to one of Keats' contemporaries, an intimate friend of John Hamilton Reynolds and therefore one who was undoubtedly known to Keats. In the summer of 1818, nearly a year before Keats composed "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," John F. M. Dovaston wrote his "Elfin Bride, a Fairy Ballad," although it seems not to have appeared in print until 1825. Its source is not the folk ballad but the mediaeval romance "Thomas of Erceldoune," which is a more extended version of the same legend.

The argument of the "Elfin Bride," Dovaston wrote, is that "Time has no existence but with motion and matter: with the Deity, 'whose centre is everywhere, and circumference nowhere,'□and with 'millions of spiritual creatures' □ Duration is without Time." Apparently the legend of Thomas has the power of provoking speculations about a condition in which love is forever warm and still to be enjoyed. In Dovaston's ballad Merlin is substituted for Thomas Rymer, his fellow in many mediaeval legends. Merlin meets a "White Lady" and begs of her that he may see "that airy country / That wots not

of Time nor Place." They ride away on palfreys to fairyland, where Merlin is treated to a multitude of "pleasures refin'd." The passing time seems only a moment, but Merlin is informed that "to Man in the dull cold world thou hast left, / Seven times four Seasons are gone." When, however, Merlin attempts a physical consummation of his love, the ideal vision is shattered, and he finds himself once again in the world of time and place, which now seems to him insipid and decayed although the memory of the fairy music still rings in his ear:

He gazed all around the dull heathy ground,
Neither tree nor bush was there,
But wide wide wide all on every side
Spread the heath dry brown and bare.

Returning once again to fairyland, Merlin remains for seven more years until at last a longing grows in him for the mortal and mutable world: he thought

on the vales and green mountains of Wales
And his friends so long forgot.

For blithe are the vales and green mountains of
Wales
And its blithe sojourn there.

The wish is sufficient to free him from the land without time and place.

Then suddenly there small shrilly and clear
The Fairy-folk ceas'd their singing,
And the silvery swells of pipes and bells
No longer around him were ringing.

And the Fairyland gay all melted away
In a misty vapour curl'd;
And his opening eyes beheld with suprize
The light of this long-left world.

Driven back to earth by his human desires, Merlin awakens to find that his life in fairyland has been a vision, that but a moment has passed, and that he is still in the summer bower where he was when his dream began. Although Dovaston, unlike Keats, drew from his narrative the conclusion that man should be content with his mortal lot, it is ob- vious that he also found in the legend of Thomas Rymer a myth of a spaceless, timeless realm of pleasure from which man withdraws when the mortal world beckons him and from which he is cast out when he attempts to realize physically the ideal pleasures. In all this one cannot avoid hearing echoes of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

With Dovaston's ballad in mind we can see even more clearly the meaningfulness of the narrative pattern into which Keats wove the increasing intensities that mark the journey to the elfin grot. Now, dreams often perform in Keats' system of thought the function of

the imagination. It is, for example, in dream visions that Endymion is united with Cynthia and hence gains insight into the beauty-truth of heaven's bourne. "The Imagination," Keats wrote, "may be compared to Adam's dream□he awoke and found it truth." "Real are the dreams of Gods," for to them beauty is truth, not merely a foreshadowing of it, as the visions of the human imagination are; but for the man who lives a life of sensations, dreams may at least be prefigurative visions of the beauty-truth reality to come. Therefore, ideally, having ascended the pleasure thermometer, the knight should perceive an immortality of passion, especially since his visionmaking imagination is aided by fairy magic.

But the tug of the mutable world is too strong for mere mortals because "in the world / We jostle" and, as Dovaston wrote, we are drawn away by thoughts of "the vales and green mountains of Wales / And □ friends so long forgot." Even in the heart of his prefigurative visions of heaven's bourne earthly man recalls that human passions leave a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed; his spirit clings to the vision until "the stings / Of human neighbourhood envenom all." Merlin found that the desire to consummate physically his love for the "White Lady" cast him upon "the heath dry brown and bare," the cold hill side from which one sees only withered sedge and hears no song of birds. And yet, this is a fate that must befall all mortal aspirations, for so long as man is earth-bound his life is made up of

the war, the deeds,
The disappointment, the anxiety,
Imagination's struggles, far and nigh,
All human.

Mortal life must necessarily be an incessant struggle against these ills, which are ineradicable; living is the very act of being militant against the dimensional restrictions of the world. And thus all mortals who engage in "Imagination's struggles" are knights-at-arms. But man cannot gain his quest in this world. No knight-at-arms can remain in the elfin grot because, since he is mortal, he cannot wholly yield himself up to this extra-human realm and agian visionary insight into its nature. He will be impelled to make the visionary physical or will long for "his friends so long forgot." This is precisely the realization that came to Keats when he wrote of his visit to Burns' country:

Scanty the hour and few the steps beyond the
bourn of care,
Beyond the sweet and bitter world, beyond it
unaware!
Scanty the hour and few the steps, because a
longer stay
Would bar return, and make a man forget his
mortal way:
O horrible! to lose the sight of well remember'd
face,
Of Brother's eyes, of Sister's brow
No, no, that horror cannot be, for at the cable's

length
Man feels the gentle anchor pull and gladdens in
its strength.

It is man's bond with mankind that prevents him from lingering beyond the bourne of care. There is nothing in Keats' ballad even suggesting the frequent interpretation that the fairy's child is responsible for the knight's expulsion from the elfin grot; only his own inherent attribute of being mortal causes his magic withdrawal, as only the call of Merlin's human and physical impulses caused "the Fairyland gay" to melt in a misty vapor. The vision of the mortal-immortal can only entice mortal man towards heaven's bourne; it cannot aid him in his aspirations or preserve his vision, which must inevitably be shattered. By this fair enchantment mortal man can only be "tortured with renewed life."

It is in this sense that la belle dame is sans merci, without tenderness; this is a description of what provokes man's aspirations, rather than an evaluation of it. Like the lady of the tradition of courtly love, she is the ideal whom the lover must pursue but whom he can never possess; and hence he is doomed to suffer her "unkindness," which is her nature although not her fault. Only the inherent meanness of man's dreams, then, draws him back from heaven's bourne, for, instead of being visionary penetrations into that final essence which is beauty-truth, they are only of mutable things. Aspire though he will, the stings of human neighborhood envenom all.

Instead of dreaming of the "ardent listlessness" which is heaven, the knight finds that death-pale kings, princes, and warriors intrude into his dream, mortal man being the necessary symbol of transitoriness and decay. What man calls living is truly the act of dying, since it is an incessant progress towards the grave; it is what Pope described as "that long disease, my life." Only after death, when man can exist in heaven's bourne, does he truly live; and therefore all earthly men are death-pale. Being mortal, and therefore death-pale, is also the condition of being cut off from that realm of pure being where life's self is nourished by its own pith. As death-pale man lives his existence of decay he can only yearn for that region from which his spirit comes, from which it has been divorced, but in which is the vital principle which will hereafter feed his spirit with "renewed life." Thus the lips of all mortal men are starved for lack of their spirit's own pith, for lack of the germ of spirit that is to be sucked from "mould ethereal."

Yet, instead of aspiring to this spiritual food of heaven, as the knight does, mortal man has circumscribed himself by the physical world, and though death-pale and spiritually starved, fears the attraction of heaven's bourne. The impulse in that direction, Keats wrote in *Endymion*, leaves one "too happy to be glad," "More happy than betides mortality." "It is a flaw / In happiness to see beyond our bourn." Therefore, fearful of the aspiration that agonizes and spoils the apparent splendor of the material world, mortality, despite its own sufferings, warns the knight that "La Belle Dame sans Merci / Hath thee in thrall!" How strange it is, Keats once mused,

that man on earth should roam,
And lead a life of woe, but not forsake

His rugged path; nor dare he view alone
His future doom which is but to awake.

It is significant that the warning comes from those who seek to battle the world's ills (warriors) and from men of power (kings and princes). "I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self," Keats wrote, "Men of Power"; that is, men who cannot ascend the pleasure thermometer and lose their selves in essence because they are self-contained.

The knight's inherent weakness in being unable to exclude from his visions the self-contained and world-bound mortality dissipates the ideal into which he has entered momentarily, just as the need for the world of men and the desire to materialize the ideal destroy the fairyland for Merlin. The elfin grot once again becomes the cold hill side which is the physical, mutable world, where the knight has been all the while, but which, by means of his visionary insight, took on the magic splendor of the elfin grot, the mystery within the mutable. The vision had momentarily transfigured a real thing into an "ethereal" thing. Exactly so, it was the poet's vision that transformed the marble embroidery on the Grecian urn into the unchanging vitality of a realm without space, time, and identity; and the shattering of that vision once again froze the immortality of passion into cold, motionless marble. With the dissipation of the vision in the ballad and with the consequent return to the cold physical world, the ladder of intensities which the knight had ascended to reach the ethereal world now crumbles beneath him: love has gone. "the sedge has wither'd from the lake," and "no birds sing." Love, song, and nature fade and disappear as the knight's capacity for the passionate intensity for fellowship with essence becomes enervate and he returns to normal human weakness.

Now that the knight has been awakened from his dream by the stings of human neighborhood, he is as pale, death-pale, as the kings, princes, and warriors, for he now shares their mortality. Being mortal, his very existence is a progress towards death, and death therefore is in his nature, although in the elfin grot existence, being without time, is without death. Indeed, Keats originally wrote, "I see *death's* lilly on thy brow □ And on thy cheeks *death's* fading rose." By withdrawing from the elfin grot, the knight has also become a Man of Power; the withdrawal is the act of reassuming his own selfcontaining identity, and thus he is "alone," being his own isolated self. His aloneness is the opposite of a fellowship with essence which absorbs the proper self, that self which is cut off from its selfless origin in heaven. At heaven's bourne there can be no aloneness because there are no individual selves, no proper identities; there it is irrelevant to ask, "Who are these coming to the sacrifice?" Earthly life, then, is a spiritual solitude overcast with the pallor of death, and a denial of the "honey wild, and manna dew," the heaven-sent food which is life's proper pith; all mortal living is a movement towards the sacrificial altar. "Living," therefore, must be a biding of one's time, a meaningless exhausting of one's mortal lease, since man is only a temporary resident in this world. The elfin grot being truly his home ethereal, mortal man, in the solitude of his self, can only "sojourn here, □ palely loitering" on the cold hill side of the world. And the unfinished, hovering quality of the metrics of each stanzaic close ("And no birds sing," "On the cold hill's side") perfectly reinforces the aimless solitude with which Keats is investing mortal life.

Critical Essay #5

We have already noticed the organization of the poem into two discourses□the questions of the stranger in the first three stanzas, and the knight's reply in the following nine. But within this pattern, another, more intricate and significant, is at work. In this inner configuration the poem falls into four equal groups of three stanzas each, the first of which is the symbol-making address of the stranger. The next six stanzas, the narrative core of the poem, tell of the direct relations of the knight and the fairy lady; of these the first three constitute one unit, and the last three another, the grouping and distinctness being marked by the two opening patterns: "I met," "I made," "I set"; and "She found," "She took," "And there she lulled me." The final unit of three stanzas in the poem is a kind of epilogue telling of the aftermath of the encounter with the fairy's child and thus answers the stranger's questions in the three introductory stanzas and brings the poem round full circle so that the final stanza may be an approximate repetition of the first. This last unit is also bound together, nearly as the second three stanzas are: "I saw," "I saw," "And this is why I sojourn here."

But with these balances and intricacies Keats is not merely carving his narrative into fascinating arabesques. His artistry is almost always functional to his meaning and is seldom an end in itself. In stanza four it is noticeable that the only actor is the knight. In the next stanza the knight controls the action of the first two lines, and the lady that of the second two. In stanza six he truly governs only the first line, and it seems significant that Keats altered the action of the folk ballad, where it is the lady who takes Thomas upon her horse. Apparently there is a special intent in giving the action to the knight in the first line so that he may remain an actor throughout these three stanzas, but with diminishing control over the action. Clearly the lady governs the action in the last two lines of stanza six and, in a broader sense, the action of the second line also, for the stanza states that the knight's seeing nothing else is the consequence of the lady's singing.

There is, then, a progressive shrinkage of the "I" as a power and a corresponding dominance of the "she," until in stanza seven, where the height of the pleasure thermometer is reached, the lady alone controls the entire action, and the knight passively yields to her. The consequence of ascending the pleasure thermometer, it will be recalled, is that one enters into the essences of progressive intensities, which are "Richer entanglements, enthralments far / More self-destroying." And proportionately as the knight ascends from nature to song to love, his active self is being absorbed into the ideal, which increasingly exercises control over his self. It is in this sense of empathic enthrallment that the knight is cautioned, "La Belle Dame sans Merci / Hath thee in *thrall*!" Once he has wilfully entered into sensuous essence and set up the lady as an ideal ("I set her on my pacing steed"), he has abandoned his selfhood; even the apparently wilfull act of looking at the fairy's child is the passive consequence of being so absorbed into the essence of song that he can perceive only ideality: "And nothing else saw all day long." Since those who have "a proper self" are "Men of Power," the retreat of the "I" and the emergence of the "she" as the sources of activity are the

grammatical dramatization of the destruction of that power as the knight enters into greater and greater enthrallments.

At the tip-top of the humanly attainable scale is the "orbed drop / Of light, and that is love"; "Nor with aught else can our souls interknit / So wingedly." Consequently, in stanza seven, in which the lady expresses her love, she is the only power, and the knight is completely enthralled by essence, ready now to enter into the heaven's bourne of the elfin grot. Moreover, the inter-knitting of the soul with essence through love so elevates the soul that it may partake of the spiritual stuff of which it is itself made, and hence "Life's self is nourish'd by its proper pith, / And we are nurtured like a pelican brood." In other words, by the knight's entrance into essence through love the ideal nourishes him with the source of his own spiritual mystery□with "roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna dew."

The structural pattern of the main narrative stanzas (4-12) is, then, as precisely balanced as that of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In the ode the first two stanzas trace the ascent to a perception of the frieze as a timeless, spaceless, selfless realm of endless vitality; the last two, the descent from this realm, bring the poem back to the condition from which it started. And the central stanza both depicts the oxymoronic nature of this area and introduces the chemicals for its destruction Correspondingly, the firt four stanzas (4-7) of the main narrative in the ballad lead towards the oxymoronic elfin grot; the last four (9-12), away from it. And the central stanza (8) both admits the knight into the elfin grot and motivates the dissolution of the vision, for in this stanza the knight takes it upon himself to shut the "wild wild eyes" of the mistery. In the ode, the heaven's bourne of the frieze is dispelled by a force within the poet himself, the unavoidable recollection of the mortal world; in the ballad, a force within the mortal knight□not an act of the fairy's child□ causes him to shut out the wild mystery of the ideal. The tug of mortality converts the timeless and spaceless, but vital, frieze into a physical activity in the ever-recurring journey from the town-world to the altar-heaven; the tug of mortality converts the inward mystery of the elfin grot into its outward and merely physical form, the cold hill side.

With the dissolution of heaven's bourne and of the knight's complete assimilation into essence in stanza seven, the grammatical controls in the poem retrieve his selfhood until once again he is wholly self-contained. The "stings of human neighbourhood" have envenomed all; and thus when "thoughts of self came on," he travels "The journey homeward to habitual self." Therefore the empathic order of stanzas four to seven is inverted. In stanza eight the lady governs the action of the first two lines, and the knight that of the last two, for it is the interfering power of his own mortal identity that shuts out the mystery. In the next stanza the lady controls only the action of the first line, and the knight that of the last three. And now at last the knight has fully emerged from the enthrallment, and his self is dominant in the remaining three stanzas. The empathic involvement and withdrawal that were enacted in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" dramatic gesture and verbal moods are here enacted by overt dramatic action and by the gradual transfer of grammatical control from one actor to the other.

One of the remarkable features of the ballad is the intricate interlacing of the meaningfully balanced patterns we have been examining. In one sense the first three stanzas are introductory to the following narrative. Within this main narrative (4-12) the action is perfectly pivoted on the central stanza (8), the narrative, the symbols, and the grammatical controls symmetrically rising to and falling away from this central point. And in yet another sense, the first three stanzas (1-3) and the last three (10-12) are prologue and epilogue, the central six (4-9) being perfectly balanced by the distribution of the opening patterns, "I" and "she." Since we have seen a similar meaningful balance in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," we might well suspect that Keats is far from being merely an associative poet whose only control over structure is the subjective pattern that his feelings spontaneously dictated to him. Quite to the contrary, Keats conceived of a poem as a perfectly ordered cosmos, an experience not only completed but also selfcontained by reason of its circularity. And this perfect circularity□because of which he delighted in what he called the "rondeau"□not only is a control over the work of art as a poetic microcosm but also is itself a meaning functional to the poem. That this sense of the complete and organically meaningful architecture of a work of art was deep in Keats' poetic conceptions is clear from the second of his three axioms of poetry. The touches of beauty in poetry, he wrote,

should never be half way thereby making the reader
breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress,
the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural
to him□shine over him and set soberly although
in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight.

Critical Essay #6

What emerges from this analysis is that "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" has grown out of the same body of conceptions, beliefs, and aspirations that motivate the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and that it is shaped by the same mode of poetic perception. The major difference between the ode and the ballad is that the latter fails to attain the high consolation of the last stanza of the ode; but otherwise the ballad is the projection into myth of what was experienced in the ode as symbol. The increase in psychic distance gained by translating the drama within the consciousness of the poet into objective correlatives allows the poet to stretch out into the chronological span of a narrative a drama that he could express in the ode only as the evolving inward recognition of symbolic values. But the same sense of great harmonic control appears in both poems in their meaningfully pivoted structure and in the interweaving of patterns. And both are variant artistic intertextures of the three coexistent themes that dominate Keats' deepest meditations and profoundest system of values: the oxymoronic heaven's bourne towards which his spirit yearned; the pleasure thermometer which he conceived of as the spiritual path to that goal; and the selfannihilation that he understood to be the condition necessary for the journey. In this sense the ballad differs from the ode essentially in enacting this triune drama in a realm of space and time; and hence the self-conscious identity of the poet becomes the knight, the coexistent symbols of the thermometer are spread out into a context of time, and the journey heavenward is a passage through a spatial world.

Yet, because the ballad lacks the resolution of the ode, the differences are immense. In his dis- covery that art prefigures an attainable heaven where beauty will be truth, Keats spoke to man an Everlasting Yea; "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is his Center of Indifference.

Source: Earl R. Wasserman, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," in *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953, pp. 65-83.

Adaptations

A reading of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is available on a compact disc called *Conversation Pieces*, released in 2001 by Folkways Records. This recording was originally released in 1964 in LP format by Folkways.

A compact disc named *Songs*, released in 2001 on the Hyperion label, has a version of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" set to music and sung by Sir Charles Villiers Stanford.

Lexington Records released a recording of Theodore Marcuse reading "La Belle Dame sans Merci" along with others by the same author on an LP called *The Poetry of Keats and Shelley*, produced in 1950.

The 1996 two-cassette set *The Caedmon Collection of English Poetry* features various poetic masterpieces, including "La Belle Dame sans Merci," read by famous actors such as Sir John Gielgud, Richard Burton, James Mason, and Boris Karloff.

Sir Ralph Richardson reads "La Belle Dame sans Merci" on a 1996 Caedmon audiocassette release called *The Poetry of Keats*.

HighBridge Co. of St. Paul, Minnesota, includes "La Belle Dame sans Merci" on *John Keats, Poet*, a reading of Keats's poems by Douglas Hodge. It was released on audiocassette in 1996 as part of the HighBridge Classics series.

Listen Library Inc. included "La Belle Dame sans Merci" on its 1989 audiocassette *The Essential Keats*. Poems for this recording were selected and read by poet Philip Levine.

A 1963 LP recording from Spoken Arts Records entitled *Robert Donat Reads Favorite Poems at Home* includes the famous actor's rendition of "La Belle Dame sans Merci."

Topics for Further Study

Find a contemporary song you think has the same message as Keats's poem. Compare the song with the poem to comment on the ways people of the nineteenth century and the twentyfirst century view love.

Research why it is significant that Keats wrote the title of his poem in French. Based on your research, do you think the French title has the same significance now that it would have had when Keats were living? Why or why not?

Write a sequel to this poem, explaining what will happen when the spring comes again. Will the lover return to the knight? If not, will he continue waiting, or will his attention fade as the seasons change?

Keats used a supernatural setting to explain his idea of romance. Find a folk story from a non- European culture that involves lovers in a supernatural setting and explain what the supernatural elements tell you about each culture.

Compare and Contrast

1819: America is a small, new country with only twenty-two states. The nation battled Great Britain for its freedom in the American Revolution from 1776 to 1783, and fought them again for maritime rights in the War of 1812, which lasted until 1815.

Today: America is an economic superpower, and Great Britain is one of its closest allies.

1819: The entire population of England is around 21 million, leaving much open, unpopulated land.

Today: The population of England is around 46 million. With about 917 people per square mile, it is one of the most densely populated countries in the world.

1819: England has the world's greatest navy, making it one of the most powerful countries in the world.

Today: The Royal Navy is thirteenth largest fleet in the world and second largest in Europe (after Greece).

1819: Ordinary people rely on poetry to convey physical experiences.

Today: Technological advances in photography, sound recording, and computer-generated virtual reality make it possible to give people experiences without using words.

1819: Vast areas of the globe, such as the two poles, have not yet been explored.

Today: Any areas not currently populated are monitored from the ground and from space.

What Do I Read Next?

All of Keats's poetry is available in one volume entitled *The Complete Poems*. This book is edited by John Barnard and was published in 1977 by Penguin. The Modern Library also has a volume entitled *The Complete Poems of John Keats*, published in 1994, but it uses a revised version of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" that almost no other publisher uses.

Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* was published the same year as "La Belle Dame sans Merci." It is a tale of knights and sorcery set in the Middle Ages and began a trend in historical fiction that has come to characterize the romantic movement.

Since Keats presents his knight as turning pale and drawn, literally dying of lovesickness, students might want to read Susan Sontag's groundbreaking 1978 essay "Illness as Metaphor." It was republished in 2001 by Picador USA in one volume with the sequel essay, "AIDS and Its Metaphors."

Keats's own death at the young age of twentysix is the subject of John Evangelist Walsh's 1999 book *Darkling I Listen: The Last Days and Death of John Keats*, published by St. Martin's Press.

Andrew Motion's acclaimed biography *Keats* provides one of the most thorough portraits of the poet available. It is available in a 1999 paperback edition from the University of Chicago Press.

Keats's name is almost always mentioned along with that of his friend and fellow romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The most dependable, authoritative text of Shelley's poetry available is the 1977 edition entitled *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, selected and edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers and published by W. W. Norton & Company.

Further Study

Bostetter, Edward E., *Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron*, University of Washington Press, 1975.

The method used here is primarily biographical with relationships drawn between the poet's life and the poem. Bostetter shows how Keats's mistress, Fanny Brawne, fit the love pattern he describes in this poem.

Evert, Walter H., *Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats*, Princeton University Press, 1965.

Evert analyzes the attempts of critics to determine the "source," or inspiration, of this poem. Examining different theories, he finds substantial evidence that the theme of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" was drawn from a sub-theme in his earlier work, *Endymion*.

Grant, John E., "Discovering 'La Belle Dame sans Merci,'" in *Approaches to Teaching Keats's Poetry*, edited by Walter H. Evert and Jack W. Rhodes, Modern Language Association of America, 1991, pp. 45-50.

This brief analysis was written primarily to help instructors make the poem more understandable for students.

Harding, Anthony John, *The Reception of Myth in English Romanticism*, University of Missouri Press, 1995.

Harding examines the myths and folk stories that romantic writers worked into their poetry, tracing source materials and noting the ways in which traditional stories were altered to fit the mood of the times.

Hirst, Wolf Z., *John Keats*, Twayne's English Authors Series, No. 334, Twayne Publishers, 1981.

Hirst's analysis of the poem visualizes it in "three concentric dream circles," examining it in terms of the interrelationships among the encounter between two men, the encounter between two lovers, and the knight's encounter with the pale dream figures.

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Caine, T. Hall, "That Keats Was Maturing," in *Tinsley's Magazine*, Vol. XXI, August 1882, pp. 197-200.

de Reyes, Mary, "John Keats," in *Poetry Review*, Vol. III, No. 2, August 1913, pp. 72-82.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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