



#### WRITING IDEAS

1. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is a [ballad](#)—one of the oldest poetic forms in English. Ballads generally use a bouncy rhythm and rhyme scheme to tell a story. Think about an event that has happened to you recently and try to tell it in ballad form.
2. The poem is a narrative of an encounter that entails both pleasure and pain. Think of a person you have met in your life who has brought you both joy and unhappiness. Write a poem that describes your first encounter and, like Keats, the moment you realized they had you "in thrall."
3. Take the final word from each line of Keats's poem (arms, loitering, lake sing). Use them as the first words of lines to your own poem, which either recreates the mood of Keats's poem, or creates a totally opposite mood.
4. Make an erasure of Keats's poem. Cross out words or entire phrases to make a new poem "within" or "underneath" the real one.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Keats wrote in a letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse, "A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity." Keats thought poets should remove their egos from their poetry, to better allow for poetry to happen unfiltered by personality. What similarities do you detect between the Knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and Keats's idea of a poet?
2. Go through and circle all of the poem's adjectives. What do you notice about them? Why does Keats use so many? What effects do they create? What happens when you read the poem without them?
3. There are a few voices talking in this poem. Go through the poem and figure out who is speaking, and when: what does each voice say, and not say? What is the effect of having multiple voices frame the poem? Who speaks and who doesn't?
4. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is a kind of fairy-tale gone awry. What are the "fairy-tale" elements in the poem (words, themes, emotions) and how do they relate to other poems you have read? You might compare this poem's content to "[Annabel Lee](#)" by Edgar Allan Poe, or its structure to "[Ozymandias](#)" by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

#### TEACHING TIPS

1. Use "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" to do a brief introduction to meter and prosody. Ask your students to recite the refrain of a popular song, or one that gets stuck in their heads easily. Pull different kinds of metrical feet—[anapest](#), [dactyl](#), [iamb](#), [trochee](#), [spondee](#)—from the lyrics they give you (having a few songs in mind yourself may be helpful). Emphasize that these names just describe the system of stressed syllables already inherent in English. Go through the different kinds of metrical feet with your students. Tell them they are going to play "Meter Madlibs," and then hand out a few stanzas of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" with some of the words removed. On the board, write down the kind of foot that belongs in each blank space. "O what can ail thee \_\_\_\_\_"[dactyl], for example. Have students work in groups to fill in the blank with their own words.
2. Have students try to map the events of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" on two timelines—one that shows the events as they happen in "real" time, and the other as Keats relays them in "poem" time. Talk about how narrative works in poetry and fiction. Why do poets and authors play with sequence and chronology in their work? What might it tell us about how we experience time ourselves?
3. The rhyme scheme in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is consistent, but not exact. In groups have students go through and circle all the exact rhymes, put a square around all the slant rhymes, and underline the words that don't seem to rhyme at all. Review the different kinds of rhymes as a class. Then form a rhyme circle. Make whatever stipulations you want (no exact rhymes; only slant), say a word, and go around the circle using different kinds of rhyme on that word.

## La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad

BY JOHN KEATS

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

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
So haggard and so woe-begone?  
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 cheeks 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 looked 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 sighed full sore,  
And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
With kisses four.

And there she lullèd me asleep,  
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—  
The latest dream I ever dreamt  
On the cold hill 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 starved lips in the gloom,  
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 withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing.



## Ode to a Nightingale

BY JOHN KEATS

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
 But being too happy in thine happiness,—  
 That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees  
 In some melodious plot  
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
 Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
 Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
 Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
 O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
 And purple-stained mouth;  
 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
 The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
 And leaden-eyed despairs,  
 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy,  
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:  
 Already with thee! tender is the night,  
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;  
 But here there is no light,  
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
And mid-May's eldest child,  
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down;  
The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
The same that oft-times hath  
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.  
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
In the next valley-glades:  
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?



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## To Homer

BY JOHN KEATS

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,  
Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,  
As one who sits ashore and longs perchance  
To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.  
So thou wast blind;—but then the veil was rent,  
For Jove uncurtain'd Heaven to let thee live,  
And Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,  
And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;  
Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,  
And precipices show untrodden green,  
There is a budding morrow in midnight,  
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;  
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel  
To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.



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## "Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art"

BY JOHN KEATS

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—  
    Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night  
And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
    Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,  
The moving waters at their priestlike task  
    Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,  
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask  
    Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—  
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,  
    Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,  
    Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.



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## If By Dull Rhymes Our English Must Be Chain'd

BY JOHN KEATS

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,  
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet  
Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;  
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of poesy;  
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress  
Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd  
By ear industrious, and attention meet:  
Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be  
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;  
So, if we may not let the Muse be free,  
She will be bound with garlands of her own.