

**Degree 1 English (mb 50 marks)**

**Section – Poetry**

### ***La Belle Dame Sans Merci by John Keats***

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is a ballad by John Keats, one of the most studied and highly regarded English Romantic poets. In the poem, a medieval knight recounts a fanciful romp in the countryside with a fairy woman – *La Belle Dams Sans Merci*, which means *The Beautiful Lady without Merci*. In French that ends in cold horror, related to this focus on death and horror, Keats wrote the poem months after his brother Tom died of tuberculosis.

#### **Summary of the poem**

What is the matter, knight in shining Armor, standing alone, looking rather ill? The plant life by lakeside has shrivelled up and the sound of bird song is absent.

Again, tell me what's the matter? You look extremely distressed and sad. The squirrels have gathered their provisions for winter, and we human have harvested our fields.

Your forehead is pale like a lily and moist with the sweat of the painful fever. The colour in your cheeks, once bright and lively as rose, is fading extremely quickly.

I, the knight met a woman in the meadows. She was so enchantingly beautiful I assumed she was the child of fairy. She had long hair, she moved so gracefully she seemed to hover over the earth, and she had a mysterious wildness in her eyes.

From flowers, stems and leaves I wove a crown for her to wear. I also wove her bracelets and a belt strong with the cent of the flowers I used to make it. Having received my gifts, she looked at me it was the look of someone falling in love- and she moaned sweetly.

I sat her behind me on my trotting horse, yet that whole day I saw nothing but her – as we trotted along, she would lean forward and around me, singing a mysterious fairy song.

When we stopped, she dug up sweet, nutritious roots for me. She served me wild honey, and a substance so heavenly in taste it reminded me of manna, the food that kept the Israelites alive on their journey out of Egypt. In a strange language that I nevertheless understood she said, I truly love you.

Next she took me to her enchanted cave, where overwhelmed with emotion, she wept and sighed- something pained her. I shut those wild eyes of her by kissing her four times in an attempt to soothe her.

Next she lulled me to sleep, and I fell into a deep dream- it still fills me with sadness and despair to remember it, that was the last dream I ever had. In that cave which was located on a cold hillside. In it I saw pale kings, princes and worriers gathered around me. I saw the colour of death in all of their faces. They told me that La Belle Dame Sans Merci – the beautiful lady without mercy – had taken me as her prisoner. I saw their love- starved, life starved-lips in the dying light. These lips widened as they warned me about the troubles, I had gotten myself into. Then I woke up and found myself here, on this cold hillside.

So that is the answer to your question- that's why I linger here alone, looking rather unhealthy, even though, as you say, that plant life by lakeside has shrivelled up and the sound of the bird song is absent.

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