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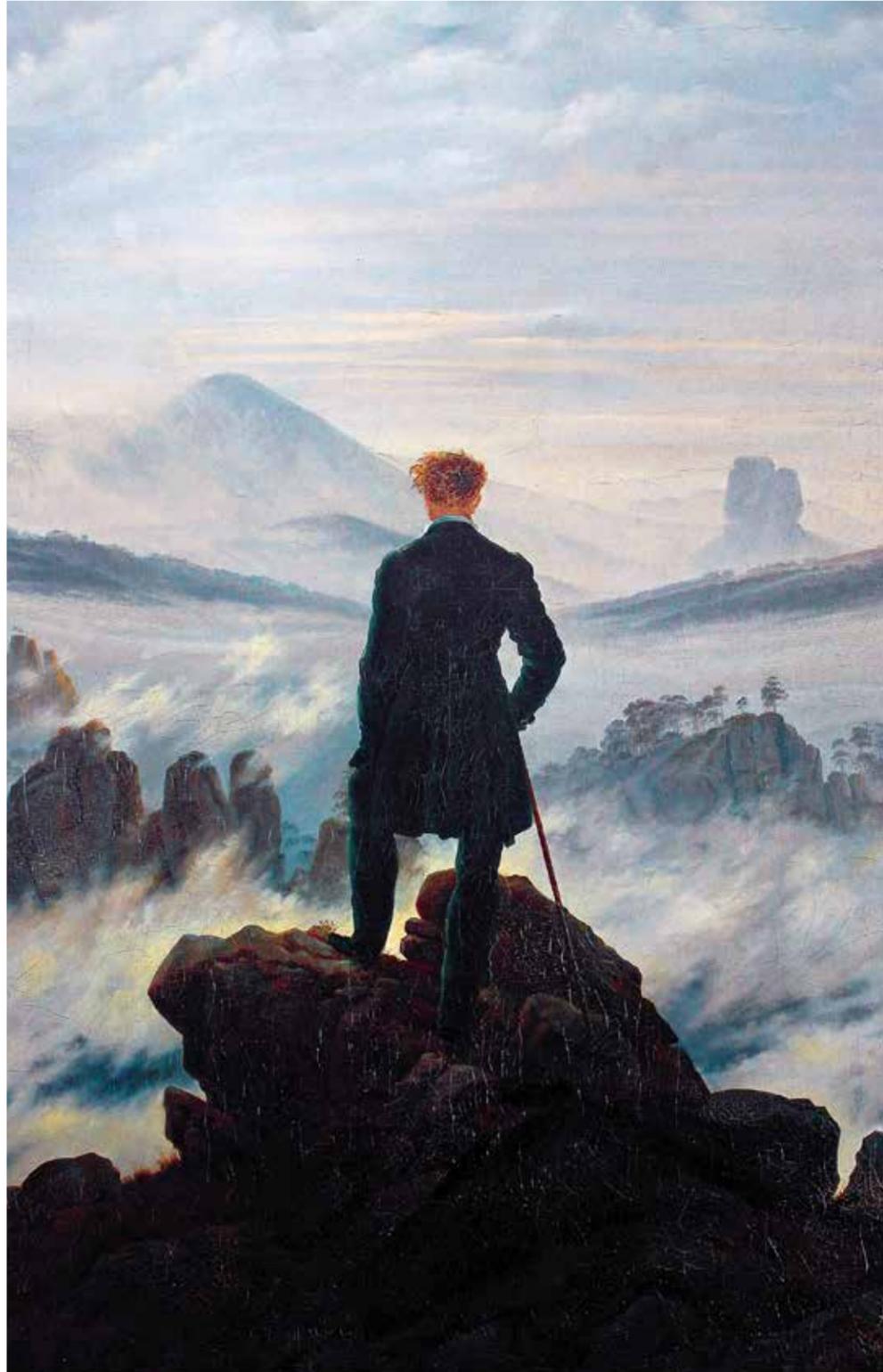
THE ROMANTIC AGE (1760-1837)



Romantic nature

Together with imagination, nature was at the heart of Romantic poetry. It adopts different degrees of significance and importance, but basically it was seen as a positive, idealised and spiritual entity. The countryside was the ideal place for inspiration and meditation, the observation of beautiful, natural landscapes gave the poets pleasure and joy.

▶ Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818. Kunsthalle, Hamburg.



OVER TO YOU

❶ To inspire = 'to exert a stimulating or beneficial effect upon a person, to arouse a particular emotion' (Collins English Dictionary).
What do you find particularly inspiring? Choose from the following.

1. Certain things in nature. (specify)
2. A particular kind of music
3. Being in a particular place.
4. Doing a certain sport.
5. Playing a musical instrument.
6. Anything else.

Describe the first picture. Where is the man? What is he doing? Describe the weather, etc.

Look at the photos. How would you describe the effects the snow has on buildings, objects and landscapes?

Describe a natural setting you think is particularly fitting for solitude and reflection: what do you like to think about in your more pensive moments? Make notes of your ideas.

Different types of nature

Which of these scenes do you find more 'inspiring' and why?

How much time do you spend in the real outdoors, or somewhere where nature is present?

1. every day (my family has a garden)
2. only at weekends
3. only sometimes (on holiday)

Would you like to have more contact with nature or do you feel more attracted to the city?

William Wordsworth 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (1807)

'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' is one of the most famous poems by Wordsworth. The poem describes a time when the poet was out walking and suddenly encountered a field of daffodils. In the last stanza he describes how this simple scene he witnessed in nature inspired him to write a poem, not immediately but some time later when a quiet, meditative mood brought the whole scene back to him. This is an excellent example of what Wordsworth described as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity': how our mind can store certain images, moods or atmospheres, which then come back to us at a later date, giving us the opportunity to re-live the joy and emotions of that moment. Wordsworth's language is deliberately easy to understand as he aimed at communicating his feelings and message to as many people as possible in 'their' language. This poem also emphasises the poet's idea that nature should be observed and enjoyed and not analysed. It was also typical of Wordsworth to praise what is commonplace: natural landscapes, simple rural scenes and to find an almost child-like enthusiasm for them, what he would call 'the essential passions of the heart.'

'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud'

I wandered¹ lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er² vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host³, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering⁴ and dancing in the breeze
Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle⁵ on the milky way,
They stretched⁶ in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing⁷ their heads in sprightly⁸ dance.
The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid⁹ the sparkling¹⁰ waves in glee¹¹:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed¹² - and gazed - but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft¹³, when on my couch¹⁴ I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward¹⁵ eye
Which is the bliss¹⁶ of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

1. **wandered:** vagabondavo.
2. **o'er:** [over] sopra.
3. **host:** moltitudine.
4. **fluttering:** fluttuando, ondeggiando.
5. **twinkle:** scintillano.
6. **stretched:** si stendevano.
7. **tossing:** scuotendo.
8. **sprightly:** in modo brioso/allegro.
9. **outdid:** erano meglio di.
10. **sparkling:** scintillante.
11. **glee:** felicità.
12. **gazed:** fissavo.
13. **oft:** [often].
14. **couch:** divano.
15. **inward:** interiore.
16. **bliss:** beatitudine.



OVER TO YOU

- 1 Where are the flowers exactly?
- 2 What was the poet doing before he came across the daffodils?
- 3 In which lines of the poem does he say his mood changes?
- 4 How does the reader know that he was greatly inspired by this 'vision'?
- 5 Which words reflect the happiness the poet felt at seeing the daffodils?
- 6 In which lines of the poem can we clearly see Wordsworth's idea of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'?
Emotion recollected in tranquillity
- 7 A memory of a scene in nature inspired Wordsworth to write this poem. Can you think of a time when something in nature had a profound effect on you? Do you have any memories of this which enable you to 're-live' the intensity of the emotions connected to them? Describe one of these memories on paper and if it isn't too personal, share it with the rest of the class.



◀ Daffodils in the spring time.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge 'Frost at Midnight' (1798)

In 'Frost at Midnight' Coleridge uses nature as a perfect setting for reflection and meditation, and so is able to depict it with great clarity. In the objects around him he senses the presence of the creative force of God and peacefully allows himself to be enchanted by its beauty. The poet carefully observes and then describes a wintry night, along with his thoughts in great detail, creating an enchanted, dream-like atmosphere in his poem. As often happens in Coleridge's poetry, the objects from the natural world carry a symbolic meaning: the frost that covers everything crystallises the human world in a beautiful stillness and silence enabling the poet's thoughts to run freely. The rich imagery used helps the reader to form a vivid picture bringing the whole scene to life. Nature for Coleridge was 'the language of God', he believed that God was present in every object, detail and creature of the world. His desire to experience the spiritual, then, could only be fulfilled by learning and understanding the variety of expressions found in the natural world, which were for him the embodiment of the divine.

For this reason his baby in 'Frost at Midnight' will be free and happy, because he will participate in a superior form of knowledge that comes from God. A knowledge obtained by communing with nature.



► G.B. MacDonald, *The Road to the Church*, 19th century.

'Frost at Midnight'

In these extracts of the poem a beautiful wintry scene inspires a peaceful flow of thoughts.

The Frost performs its secret ministry¹,
Unhelped² by any wind. The owl's³ cry
Came loud—and hark⁴, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings⁵: save that at my side
My cradled⁶ infant slumbers⁷ peacefully.
[...]
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart⁸
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt⁹ learn far other lore¹⁰,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared¹¹
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim¹²,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars¹³.
[...]
Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee¹⁴,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greatness, or the redbreast¹⁵ sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow¹⁶ on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree¹⁷, while the nigh thatch¹⁸
Smokes in the sun-thaw¹⁹; whether the eave-drops fall²⁰
Heard only in the trances of the blast²¹,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles²²,
Quietly shining²³ to the quiet Moon.

1. **ministry**: missione.
2. **unhelped**: senza l'aiuto.
3. **owl**: piccolo gufo.
4. **hark**: ascolta.
5. **abstruser musings**: riflessioni.
6. **cradled**: nella culla.
7. **slumbers**: dorme.
8. **it thrills my heart**: mi riempie di gioia.
9. **thou shalt**: [you will].
10. **learn far other lore**: imparerai altre cose.
11. **I was reared**: sono cresciuto.
12. **pent...dim**: imprigionato tra edifici tetri.
13. **saw nought...stars**: vedevo niente di bello eccetto il cielo e le stelle.
14. **thee**: [you].
15. **redbreast**: il pette rosso.
16. **betwixt... snow**: fra i ciuffi di neve.
17. **mossy apple-tree**: il melo coperto di muschio.
18. **nigh thatch**: lo strato di neve sopra la casa.
19. **smokes...thaw**: si scioglie al sole.
20. **eave-drops fall**: la neve che, sciogliendosi, cade dal tetto.
21. **heard only...blast**: sentito soltanto nel sonno del rumore.
22. **shall...icicles**: li appenderà nella forma di ghiacciolo silenziosi.
23. **quietly shining**: che brillano silenziosamente.



OVER TO YOU

1. **Focus on lines 1-7 and answer the following.**
 1. What natural element covers the landscape outside?
 2. What is the only noise to be heard?
 3. Who is the only other person near the poet and what is he/she doing?
2. **In lines 8-13 what do we learn about the poet's childhood?**
3. **How does the poet hope his child's future will be? Choose.**
 - similar to his own
 - very different from his own
4. **Focus on lines 14-23 and answer these questions.**
 1. Which line tells us that the poet wishes constant happiness for his child?
 2. What references do we have to summer and winter?
 3. Lines 21-23 are the final lines of the poem. What words contribute to the sense of intimacy the poet feels?

The Negative Hero

Heroes and heroines often stand out because they have particular qualities, usually good or superhuman qualities which distinguish them from the average person. But not all heroes are like this. Here we are going to present two heroes who are completely different from each other and from the stereotypical ideas we have of heroes. These, so called, negative heroes, typical of the Romantic period, are doomed to a destiny. They may hide a mysterious secret, be attracted to evil, corrupt other characters so that they too share their fatal destiny, or they may be transformed into victims themselves, so losing their heroic qualities.



▲ *Shrek* (2001) directed by A. Adamson and V. Jenson.



▲ John William Waterhouse, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, 1839. Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt.



▲ *Fight Club* (1999) directed by D. Fisher.



▲ William Blake, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun*, 1806-09. Brooklyn Museum, New York.



▲ Johann Heinrich Füssli, *Satan Calls Belzebub*, 1802. Kunst-haus, Zurich.



OVER TO YOU

Look at these paintings and images. In what ways can the figures depicted be considered 'heroes' and in what ways are they 'negative'? If necessary refer back to the introduction.

Matthew Lewis *The Monk* (1796)

Typical of the gothic novel, the monk is a fascinating man with charisma and power, apparently a real hero, if it weren't for the fact that he gradually reveals the obscure aspects of his character: his wickedness and cruelty.

Matthew Lewis (1775-1818) wrote the novel *The Monk* when he was nineteen years old, and it soon became very successful when published. He wrote it anonymously but on becoming a member of Parliament could not resist acknowledging himself as author. The story is a mixture of lust, murder and the supernatural. The reader becomes involved, along with the main character, in a spiral of blood, death and despair right up to its apocalyptic ending. Many frightening characters, typical of the horror story, appear: a bleeding nun, the wandering Jew and Lucifer himself.

But the dominant figure of the novel is its negative hero, the monk Ambrosio. Although he is wicked and perverse, an epitome of the devil, he fascinates the reader with his charisma, great intellectual and physical powers and his fascinating past. *The Monk* contributes to the developing tradition of the negative hero (from Marlowe's *Faustus* and Milton's *Satan*) making Ambrosio's character one in which splendid potential is twisted and defeated by destructive conflicting qualities.

The plot itself follows his fall: from an initial situation in which Ambrosio is idolised as 'a man of holiness' to the seduction of Matilda, up to his final ruin.

Ambrosio is torn between his duties towards the monastery and his carnal desires. He is unable to accept old values and respect the rules, but he is also unable to break with his world. In the end he will be cruelly punished for his crimes.

The Monk as a novel and as a heroic figure became so famous that Lewis himself became known as 'The monk'.

► Dieric Bouts, *The Fall of the Damned* (detail), c. 1450. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille.



The Monk

TEXT 1

A description of Ambrosio.

His stature was lofty¹, and his features uncommonly handsome. His nose was aquiline, his eyes large black and sparkling², and his dark brows almost joined together. [...] Tranquillity reigned upon his smooth unwrinkled forehead³; and content, expressed upon⁴ every feature, seemed to announce the man equally unacquainted with cares and crimes. He bowed himself⁵ with humility to the audience: still there was a certain severity in his look and manner that inspired universal awe⁶, and few sustain the glance⁷ of his eye at once fiery and penetrating. Such was Ambrosio, Abbott of the Capuchins, and surnamed 'The Man of Holiness⁸'.

1. **lofty**: alta.
2. **sparkling**: brillanti.
3. **unwrinkled forehead**: fronte priva di rughe.
4. **upon**: (qui) attraverso.
5. **he bowed himself**: s'inclinò.
6. **awe**: timore, soggezione.
7. **glance**: sguardo.
8. **The Man of Holiness**: il santo.



OVER TO YOU

❶ Which of the following sentences are true about Ambrosio?

1. He is a good-looking man.
2. He looks honest and correct.
3. He is a simple monk.
4. He looks shy and inoffensive.
5. His humility is only apparent.

TEXT 2

Ambrosio is with Antonia, a young and beautiful virgin in the vault of the monastery.

With every moment the Friar's passion became more ardent, and Antonia's terror more intense. She struggled to disengage herself² from his arms: Her exertions³ were unsuccessful; and finding that Ambrosio's conduct became still freer, she shrieked⁴ for assistance with all her strength. [...] Her alarm, her evident disgust, and incessant opposition, seemed only to inflame the Monk's desire, and supply his brutality with⁵ additional strength.

1. **Friar**: frate, qui Ambrosio.
2. **disengage herself**: divincolarsi.
3. **exertions**: sforzi.
4. **shrieked**: gridò.
5. **supply with**: dare.



OVER TO YOU

❶ The good and beloved monk has become a monster. What is he trying to do to Antonia?

❷ What features of Ambrosio as a negative hero are emphasised here?

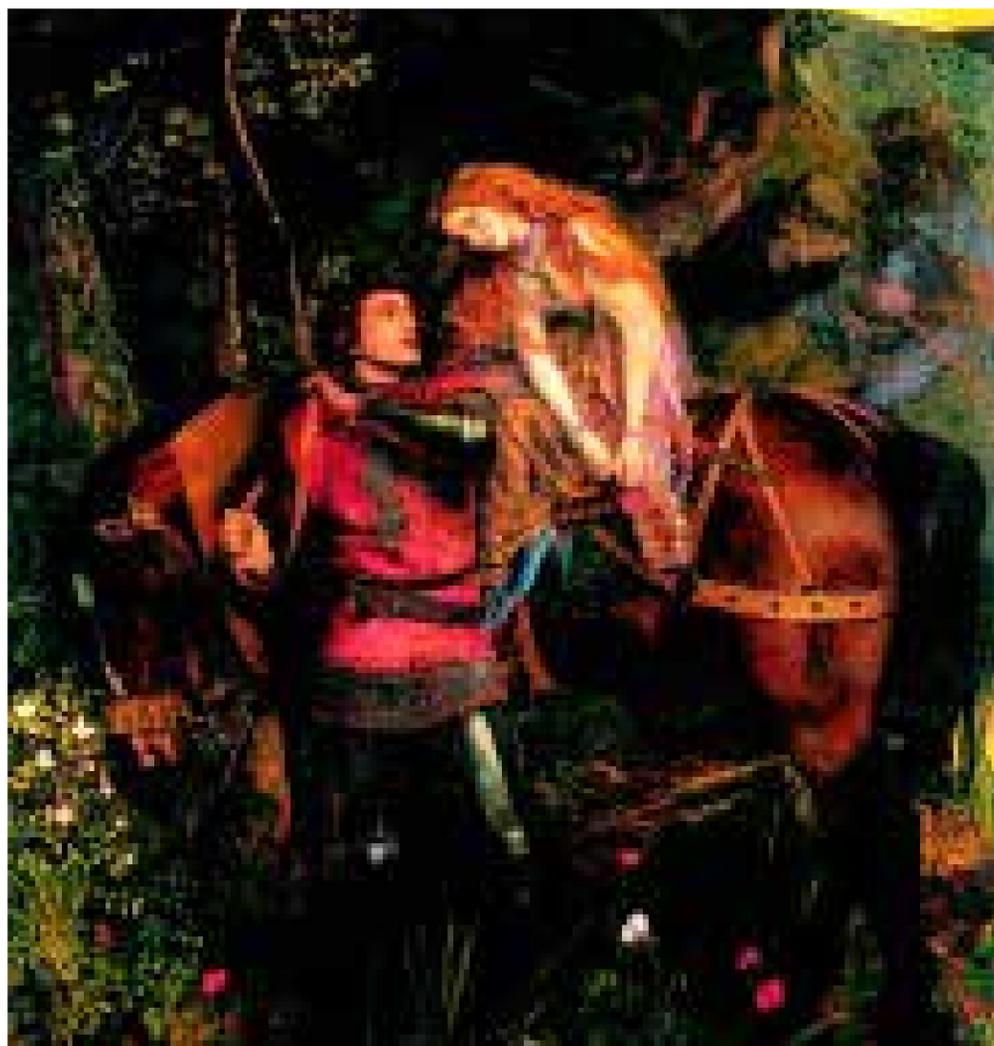
❸ How do you think this scene will end?

John Keats 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1819)

The title of this lyrical ballad by John Keats (in English, 'The beautiful lady without pity') already prepares the reader for a more Romantic hero compared to Lewis's monk. Here we see all the ingredients of the Romantic gothic: a medieval setting, a quest for idealised love along with a supernatural atmosphere. What is interesting, and at the same time overwhelmingly 'Romantic', is what brings about this hero's downfall. What transforms him from a chivalrous knight into a tragic victim.

For many, the lady of the poem is seen as a temptress who enslaves the knight and prevents him from ever living a normal life again; condemned as he is to 'sojourn' on the hillside hoping she'll return. In this interpretation the knight is the lady's victim. Looking at the poem in the context of Keats's life, however, we may find a different reading. At the time of writing Keats had just discovered he was suffering from tuberculosis, a disease which had already killed his brother. At the same time he had also recently fallen in love with a young woman, Fanny Brawne. The loss of his brother, the discovery of his own illness and his love for Fanny, which almost certainly had no future, created an inner torment, sadness and frustration. In view of this, the lady and her relationship with the knight may change. Is she still a temptress or does she represent something more? Could the knight now be seen as the poet himself, and if so, how?

▶ Arthur Hughes,
La Belle Dame Sans Merci, 1861.
National Gallery
of Victoria,
Melbourne.



'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'

O, what can ail¹ thee, knight-at-arms²,
Alone and palely loitering³?
The sedge has withered⁴ from the lake,
And no birds sing.

O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard⁵, and so woe-begone⁶?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily⁷ on thy brow,
With anguish moist⁸ and fever dew⁹;
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads¹⁰,
Full beautiful - a fairy'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 zone¹¹;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

I set her on my pacing steed¹²,
And nothing else saw all day long;
For sidelong would she bend and sing
A fairy's song.
She found me roots of relish¹³ sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew¹⁴,
And sure in language strange she said -
'I love thee true.'

She took me to her elfin grot¹⁵,
And there she wept and sighed full sore¹⁶,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

And there she lulled¹⁷ me asleep,
And there I dreamed - Ah! Woe betide¹⁸!
The latest dream I ever dreamed
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
Hath thee in thrall!¹⁹

I saw their starved lips in the gloam²⁰,
With horrid warning gaped wide²¹,
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.

1. **ail**: affliggere.
2. **knight-at-arms**: cavaliere.
3. **palely loitering**: indugiando.
4. **the sedge has withered**: il carice è appassito.
5. **haggard**: afflitto.
6. **woe-begone**: abbattuto.
7. **lily**: giglio (simbolo di morte).
8. **moist**: umida, sudata.
9. **fever dew**: sudore febbrile.
10. **meads**: prati.
11. **zone**: cinta.
12. **steed**: cavallo.
13. **relish**: sapore.
14. **manna dew**: secrezione dolce prodotta dalle piante.
15. **elfin grot**: grotta fatata.
16. **full sore**: in modo angosciato.
17. **lulled**: cullava.
18. **Woe betide**: esclamazione di tristezza.
19. **hath thee in thrall**: ti ha reso schiavo.
20. **gloom**: crepuscolo.
21. **gaped wide**: aperte.



OVER TO YOU

- 1** In the first three stanzas the speaker addresses the knight and describes him. Complete the words associated with the knight.

a_ _ , p_ _ _ _ / l_ _ _ _ _ , h_ _ _ _ _ ,
 w_ _ _ _ _ , a_ _ _ _ _ , f_ _ _ _ / _ _ _ ,
 f_ _ _ _ / _ _ _ _ , w_ _ _ _ _ .
- 2** How does this knight differ from the stereotypical figure of a medieval knight?
- 3** What do we learn about La Belle Dame Sans Merci and her past?
- 4** In what ways is she an ambiguous figure?
- 5** Why is she 'sans merci'?
- 6** What elements can we find in Keats's poem which do not appear in Lewis's? Choose from the following.

 - ambiguity
 - mystery
 - horror
 - provocation
 - melancholy
 - anger
 - despair
- 7** What do you think Keats is saying about love in his poem? How would La Belle Dame Sans Merci be seen today? Can you think of any examples from the media?
- 8** Looking at the two Romantic gothic works you have just studied what similarities can you find in the texts and in their 'heroes' and what differences? In what ways are they negative?
- 9** Which negative hero do you empathise with most and why?