La Belle Dame sans Merci — A Ballad by John Keats, (1819)

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 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 withered from the lake,
    And no birds sing.

Source: Selected Poems (Penguin Classics, 1988)
A few ideas on structure.

The twelve stanzas are split:

• 1 - 3 stanzas... observations and repeated questions from stranger.
• 4 - 6 stanzas... the knight answers, repeating I met, I made, I set.
• 7 - 9 stanzas... the knight progresses, repeating She found, She took, And She lulled.
• 10 - 12 stanzas... the knight reverts, repeating I saw, I saw, I sojourn.

Stanza 1 - A stranger encounters a pale knight by a lake. There is something wrong with the man. Sedge grass has died, the birds are quiet - is this a winter scene or an integral part of the atmosphere?

Stanza 2 - The stranger repeats his enquiry. This knight looks miserable and sick. It's the back end of autumn, approaching colder weather.

Stanza 3 - There is a direct observation by the stranger. The lily and the rose are both symbols of death. Is the knight so close to meeting his Maker?

Stanza 4 - The knight replies. He met a woman in the meadows (Meads), no ordinary woman but a beauty, an otherworldly figure.

Stanza 5 - The knight made love to her in the meadow. It was consensual.

Stanza 6 - Afterwards he put her on his horse and he walked alongside as she sang her exotic songs.

Stanza 7 - She knew just where to look for sweet and heavenly foods. I ate them and she loved me for it, even though I didn't really understand what was happening.

Stanza 8 - She took me to her special place, deep in a grotto, where she became so emotional I had to reassure her, so wild were her eyes. I kissed them 4 times.

Stanza 9 - She calmed me down too, so much so I feel asleep and had a dream. There was trouble brewing. That was my last ever dream.

Stanza 10 - In the dream I saw pale kings, warriors and princes, near to death. They were warning me about the beautiful woman.

Stanza 11 - Their mouths were gaping open in that dreamy twilight gloom. Then I woke up on a cold hill side.

Stanza 12 - And so you find me here by the lake. I don't know what I'm doing. So the cycle is complete, yet the reader is none the wiser about the woman's or indeed the man's, intentions or motivations.

Was she an evil entity set on absorbing the knight's life forces? A kind of vampire come to the human world to seek knowledge of flesh and blood? Or did he take advantage of the woman first, after which she wanted some kind of revenge?

Perhaps their chance meeting was a combination of wishful thinking on behalf of the knight and opportunity grasped by the beautiful, if supernatural, female.

The whole poem suggests that the borderline between reality and imagination is often blurred. We give ourselves up to ideals of beauty, then in a trice it is gone, or we go through experiences that are not to our liking, that leave us spent, hollowed out.