

EROS ROMÂNTICO: UMA LEITURA DO DESEJO COMO FALTA EM *LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI*, DE JOHN KEATS, E *ANNABEL LEE*, DE EDGAR ALLAN POE

ROMANTIC EROS: A READING OF LONGING AS LACK IN “LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI” BY JOHN KEATS, AND “ANNABEL LEE” BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

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Resumo: Este estudo analisa a presença de Eros nos poemas *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, de John Keats, e *Annabel Lee*, de Edgar Allan Poe, através das lentes do Romantismo Helênico. Propomos aqui uma leitura comparada de ambos os poemas a partir do conceito de Eros como doce-amargo de acordo com Carson (2014), focando especialmente na triangulação do desejo como falta proposta pela autora em sua leitura de Safo. Dessa maneira, analisamos as intersecções entre os poemas e a visão do amor e do desejo na Grécia antiga, e como os ecos destes se fazem presentes na literatura inglesa do século XIX, retomados pelos poetas românticos.

Palavras-chave: Romantismo Helênico. Eros. Safo. John Keats. Edgar Allan Poe.

Abstract: This study analyzes the poems *La Belle Dame sans Merci* by John Keats, and *Annabel Lee* by Edgar Allan Poe, through the lens of Romantic Hellenism. We propose a comparative reading of both poems based on Carson's (2014) concept of Eros as bittersweet, particularly through the triangulation of the desire as lack, as proposed in her reading of Sappho. In this way, we analyze the intersections between the poems and the vision of love and desire in ancient Greece, and how their echoes are present in 19th century English literature, taken up by Romantic poets.

Keywords: Romantic Hellenism. Eros. Sappho. John Keats. Edgar Allan Poe.

Introduction

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What we call Romantic Hellenism emerged almost simultaneously with Romanticism itself in England. By Romanticism, we refer first and foremost to the artistic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, commonly marked by the publication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe—even though the author himself would later move in different directions. Nevertheless, the seed of Romanticism spread across Europe, and for the English—particularly the second generation of Romantic poets—it manifested as Hellenism.

English Romanticism proper lasted for only about forty years, from 1785 to 1825 (Curran, 2003, p. XIII), yet its influence extended well beyond this period. Many later authors—such as the Brontë sisters or even Edgar Allan Poe—are often read today through the lens of Romanticism. However, to speak of Romantic Hellenism is to speak especially of three poets: John Keats, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron. In a sense, the Hellenic influences within English Romanticism and among these poets can be seen as having an archaeological beginning, sparked by discoveries in the Greek world that rekindled interest in classical heritage, particularly through the work of the art historian Winckelmann (Webb, 2003, p. 151). These influences were further heightened by the discovery of the Elgin Marbles and the celebratory essay by Benjamin Haydon written in response to this archaeological event (Webb, 2003, p. 148).

Although, until then, Roman antiquity had exerted the strongest classical influence on English literature (Gaull, 2005, p. 15), Greek culture also became prominent, especially during the early nineteenth century. As Webb (2003, p. 148) observes, Romantic Hellenism in England assumed a powerful presence that expressed itself in diverse forms, despite the difficulty of defining it in precise terms—each artist envisioned and interpreted Greece according to their own aesthetic sensibilities.

Not all Romantic artists incorporated Greek gods into their works; nonetheless, Hellenic thought permeated the minds of those youthful poets, and Greek philosophy—as well as its poets, tragedians, and artistic legacy as a whole—influenced much of the nineteenth century.

The common factor to all these varieties of Romantic Hellenism is an interest in Greece or the Grecian model and a desire to appropriate it for present purposes. This interest expresses itself sometimes negatively and sometimes positively; sometimes as a nostalgic yearning to escape into another place and another age apparently more golden than the present and sometimes as a desire to make the lessons of the past immediately relevant to the urgencies of contemporary life; sometimes as an emphasis on the differences between Greece and England, sometimes as a suggestion of analogies; sometimes as

radical, sometimes as conservative; sometimes as admiration for Athens, sometimes as cultivation of Spartan virtues; sometimes as geographically specific, sometimes in terms of a landscape and a sense of place both distanced and idealized; sometimes as an inhibiting awareness of the Greek tradition, sometimes as anxious homage to the giant examples of antiquity and sometimes as creatively critical engagement with a tradition that is fragmented and suggestively open to interpretation, development and revision. If Homer could be many things to many readers, so too could the Greek example. The fascination of Romantic Hellenism is in its endless variety, in the scope it offered for views that are radically opposed. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the image of Greece and of the Greek achievement was constantly refined, revised, refuted or reinterpreted through a complex and continuous process of redefinition (Webb, 2003, p. 149-150).

Thus, when examining nineteenth-century English Romantic poetry, one often encounters a distinctly Hellenic sensibility—if not overt references to Classical mythology. Percy Bysshe Shelley, in the preface to *Hellas*, famously proclaims, “We are all Greeks.” A fervent admirer of Hellenism, Shelley’s assertion may be read not only as a reflection of his time but also as a deliberate attempt to transcend temporality by affirming that the ethical, moral, and spiritual values underpinning society remained deeply rooted in Greek thought. These values, he suggests, persist throughout centuries and cultures, and their influence is rendered increasingly apparent through the cultural revival led by Romantic poets of his generation.

This article examines two quintessentially Romantic poems—John Keats’s *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, and Edgar Allan Poe’s *Annabel Lee*—through the lens of the Greek conception of love as lack: Eros.

The bittersweet

Sappho, the renowned Greek poet from the island of Lesbos, lived during the sixth century BCE. Celebrated by Plato as the “Tenth Muse,” only fragments of her poetic corpus survive. Nevertheless, those fragments attest to a singular thematic focus: love—or more precisely, eros, in its Greek formulation. Sappho was the first to describe eros as “bittersweet” (Carson, 2014, p. 3): “Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me — Sweetbitter, unmanageable creature who steals in” (Sappho, fr. 130).

In the original Greek, Sappho employs the compound word *glukupikron* (γλυκύπικρον) to characterize Eros. In doing so, she issues what seems a curious directive—conjoining two opposing qualities and notably placing sweetness before bitterness. The god of love is, thus, both pleasure and pain: a desire that presents itself

initially as sweetness, only to turn and embitter the tongue. One cannot exist without the other; they are inextricable, fused into a singular, paradoxical experience.

According to Grimal (2005, p. 148), Eros is “an eternally unsatisfied and restless force.” He is the embodiment of unease. Since classical antiquity, poets have testified to his effects and the impossibility of remaining untouched by his presence. Eros is simultaneously friend and foe (Carson, 2014, p. 8), exalted and cursed. Yet regardless of the form he assumes, Eros is inescapable. He resides precisely in the tension of pursuit and evasion, in the dialectic of desire and resistance. Eros is a god of boundaries.

“The Greek word *eros* denotes ‘want,’ ‘lack,’ ‘desire for that which is missing.’ The lover wants what he does not have” (Carson, 2014, p. 10). A deity with multiple cosmogonic associations, some traditions claim Eros emerged alongside the cosmos itself, while others situate him closer to Olympus. Yet the myths converge on a fundamental truth: Eros is willful, and he marks a threshold. An encounter with Eros alters everything.

The Greeks had numerous words to articulate the various shades of desire, but one of the most enduring conceptualizations of love emerges from the poetry of Sappho. In *Fragment 31*, she delineates a triangular configuration of desire—an experience defined by lack, longing, and the unattainable other:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
 whoever he is who opposite you
 sits and listens close
 to your sweet speaking
 and lovely laughing—oh it
 puts the heart in my chest on wings
 for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
 is left in me
 no: tongue breaks and thin
 fire is racing under skin
 and in eyes no sight and drumming
 fills ears
 and cold sweat holds me and shaking
 grips me all, greener than grass
 I am and dead—or almost
 I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty (Sappho, fr. 31).

The poem ends there—the rest has been lost to time. Yet it remains one of Sappho’s most complete and striking compositions, vividly portraying the privileged position of a man in proximity to the speaker’s beloved. For the poetic voice we hear, this man, seated near and listening to the beloved’s words and laughter, is godlike. Eros, in

this framework, is deeply temporal: the gods exist outside time, in an eternal present. The man is divine not because of any intrinsic quality, but because he inhabits the “now”—he shares a moment of immediate presence with the beloved. Meanwhile, the speaker exists in a fragmented temporality, caught between the recollection of that moment and the projection of desire into an unattainable future. Love, therefore, is marked not simply by pursuit and evasion between lovers, but by a deeper tension with time itself. The moment Eros reveals himself, we become conscious of temporal limitation, of the inexorable separation between ourselves and the ones we love—whether that separation be a person, a place, or even death. Love resides in lack and in the acute awareness of time’s passage.

Greek representations of Eros frequently depict him in this perpetual dance of pursuit and flight. Eros is restless. And yet, paradoxically, his gaze has the opposite effect: “Returning to the semantic field of *derkómenos*, it becomes clear that the act of staring, so strongly emphasized, results in the temporary paralysis of the *persona*—the first stage in Eros’s implacable hunt” (Ragusa, 2011, p. 70)³. One of the most iconic images of Eros is that of a god whose pursuit begins with a glance—one that freezes his object of desire—before dissolving their limbs in a wave of burning sensation. He induces both paralysis and melting, contradictory states that converge in the bodily and emotional dissolution he leaves in his wake: “It is a frequent motif—Eros as heat that liquefies the lover; yet Eros is also a liquid, streaming from the eyes” (Ragusa, 2011, p. 70)⁴. Erotic experience is thus marked by ambiguity. It stretches beyond the boundaries of time and self, laying bare a fundamental, inescapable absence.

Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between ‘I love you’ and ‘I love you too,’ the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can. (Carson, 2014, p. 30).

In this sense, we can interpret Eros as an experience of lack—of feeling seen and accompanied, only to recognize that the sensation of wholeness will never be fulfilled. There will always be a barrier between the lover and the beloved. When Anne Carson

³ Tradução nossa do original: “Retomando o campo semântico de *derkómenos*, está claro que da tão fortemente frisada ação de fitar decorre a paralisia temporária da *persona*, num primeiro passo de sua implacável caça”.

⁴ Tradução nossa do original: “é motivo frequente o de Eros/ éros qual calor que toma o amador e o liquefaz, mas é Eros/ éros também um líquido que vertem os olhos”.

asks, “Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole,” (Carson, 2014, p. 30), she speaks directly to this absence—the boundary that Eros enforces. Desire lays bare the fundamental limitations of our condition. Poets, in loving, have forged a literary tradition that gives voice to this absence—this lack that is both human and temporal. What we lack is the one we love, whose absence is made tangible through time. If the ancient poets sought to immortalize time by inscribing absence into verse, it would seem that the Romantics, each in their own way, did the same.

Keats and His “Belle Dame sans Merci”

La Belle Dame sans Merci is a poem composed by John Keats in 1819, during one of the most prolific and inspired periods of his poetic career. This was the same year he produced *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Lamia*, his major odes, and several notable sonnets (Wolfson, 2001, p. XXV). Subtitled “A Ballad,” the poem evokes the medieval ballad tradition both through its title—borrowed from a 1424 poem by Alain Chartier (Kline, 2021)—and its form. Keats employs iambic tetrameter quatrains characteristic of English balladry, alternating with classical iambic trimeter of Greco-Roman verse. Thematically, too, it aligns with medieval sensibilities, recounting the lament of a knight who has lost his beloved. Keats further enhances the poem’s archaic resonance through deliberate use of antiquated diction, with words such as “thee” that harken back to a bygone literary past.

Over the course of more than two centuries, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* has inspired a vast array of interpretations. As Stillinger notes, “the text of a complex poem validates what the reader wants to read in it” (Stillinger, 2001, p. 257). In this way, the poem resists a singular reading; its reception varies according to the reader’s perspective, and its multiplicity of meaning is part of its enduring power.

Thus for some readers, *The Eve of St. Agnes* has been (and still is) a poem about love, even specifically Keats’s love for Fanny Brawne, while for others it is a poem about the authenticity of dreams, about stratagems, about wishfulfillment, about artistic creativity, about Gothic literature, about family politics, about the crisis of feudalism, about escape, about critical interpretation, and so on and on. As one can see even in the briefest sampling of the critical literature, there have been (and presumably will continue to be) many different explanations of what ails the knight-at-arms in *La Belle Dame*. There are multiple possibilities for interpreting each of the odes and the rest of the poems in the canonical list. The key to understanding the universality of

Keats's appeal is the fact that in every case the text may be seen to support the interpretation, even when the interpretation stands in direct conflict with another interpretation based on exactly the same text (Stillinger, 2001, p. 257).

Narratively, the poem features two distinct voices. The first is that of an unnamed speaker—perhaps a traveler—who, upon arriving at a lake, encounters a knight languishing on the shore. Troubled by the knight's forlorn expression and mysterious presence, the speaker addresses him with a series of questions and observations in the poem's opening three stanzas. The remaining nine stanzas comprise the knight's response, in which he recounts his fateful meeting with the beautiful yet merciless lady, and how, ever since that encounter, he has remained by the lake, seemingly suspended in time and sorrow.

In this article, we will offer a comparative analysis of Keats's poem alongside Edgar Allan Poe's *Annabel Lee*, not through the lens of their extensive interpretive histories, but rather through the framework of Eros as lack, drawing upon the Hellenistic Romantic revival to trace resonances of Greek eros in both texts. Our objective is not to propose a definitive reading of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, but to add one more interpretive thread to the rich critical tapestry the poem has inspired.

Edgar Allan Poe's *Annabel Lee*

First published posthumously on October 9, 1849, in Rufus Wilmot Griswold's obituary for Edgar Allan Poe in the *New York Tribune*, the poem *Annabel Lee* had already been circulating in manuscript form for several months. Widely considered one of the most poignant lyric poems in the English language, it has been described by George E. Woodberry as "the simplest and sweetest of his ballads" (1909, p. 351). Though often viewed as second in prominence only to *The Raven*, the poem is commonly interpreted as a tribute to Poe's wife, Virginia Clemm Poe. As Thomas Ollive Mabbott points out, however, "that idea is rather in the realm of legend than demonstrable fact" (1969, p. 468).

Still, the poem's central theme—the eternal devotion of a speaker to his beloved, even after death—resonates powerfully with Poe's experience of personal tragedy. While Virginia's death likely influenced the composition of *Annabel Lee*, it was only one of many losses that marked Poe's life and shaped his literary imagination.

Orphaned at the age of two, following his mother's death from tuberculosis and his father's abandonment, Poe was taken in by John and Frances Allan of Richmond, Virginia. Though never formally adopted, he was given his foster father's surname as a middle name and received a thorough education. Allan supported Poe's enrollment at the University of Virginia, a rare privilege at the time. However, their relationship was marred by conflict—particularly over finances and Poe's literary ambitions. Poe's inadequate funding led him to gamble in an attempt to pay for his schooling, resulting in debt and a permanent break with Allan.

After leaving Richmond, Poe moved to Boston and eventually enlisted in the United States Army under the name Edgar Perry. During this time, he published *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), a collection that already reflected Romantic themes of lost love, pride, and mourning. The title poem, "Tamerlane," is the lament of a conqueror who regrets abandoning love for worldly power—an emotional conflict that would recur throughout Poe's poetry.

Importantly, Poe's literary voice was not shaped by Romanticism alone. His early and intense classical education gave him a foundation that profoundly influenced his thoughts and style. As Kevin J. Hayes observes, Poe's engagement with classical literature went well beyond casual interest.

At an early age he began the study of Latin, and before he entered the University of Virginia, in 1827, he was accomplished in reading Horace and Cicero, scanning Latin poetry, capping verses, and composing satires in a neoclassical style. As a college student he read in French the many volumes of Rollin's *Ancient History* and *Roman History*, as well as the works of Voltaire; he became proficient in Greek and mathematics; and he is known to have read widely in Plato, Homer, Lucian, and Aristotle, among other classical writers (Unrue, 1995, pp. 114–115).

This background provided Poe with a deep reservoir of mythological and philosophical ideas, many of which surface—subtly or overtly—in his poetry.

Poe's early exposure to European culture also contributed to this intellectual formation. Between 1815 and 1820, he lived in England while John Allan pursued business interests. He attended boarding schools in Chelsea and Stoke Newington, likely visited the British Museum, and encountered classical artworks and texts firsthand. This exposure, paired with his classical training, positioned Poe uniquely to blend Romantic melancholy with classical ideas of beauty, fate, and mourning.

One particularly fruitful lens through which to read *Annabel Lee* is the ancient Greek notion of eros⁵, especially as conceived by Sappho. For Sappho, eros is not merely romantic desire but a powerful, often destructive force that binds lovers even in separation. She famously writes: “Eros shook my heart / like a wind on the mountain / falling on oak trees” (*Frag.* 47). In *Annabel Lee*, this same intensity is reflected in the speaker’s undying passion: “But we loved with a love that was more than love— / I and my *Annabel Lee*” (Poe, 1996, p. 116). The idea that their love is so exceptional that supernatural beings conspire to end it (“The angels, not half so happy in Heaven, / Went envying her and me”) (Poe, 1996, p. 116) elevates their bond into myth, echoing Sapphic eros as both divine and ruinous.

Scott Peeples highlights a key dimension of this mythic treatment of love and grief. He notes that the speaker

tells us almost nothing about his beloved. We know she was ‘a child’ who lived in a ‘kingdom by the sea,’ but she is otherwise present to him only as absence, as if *Annabel Lee* is his name for love and grief. The inextricability of those emotions is heightened by the speaker’s insistence that her death resulted not from random misfortune but from their love (Peeples, 1998, pp. 170–171).

In this reading, *Annabel Lee* becomes an abstraction—a symbol of idealized, unattainable love, whose death gives form to the speaker’s grief. She is both lost and eternal, present only in memory and desire.

The poem’s mythic overtones—its angels, seraphs, and sea-bound kingdom—draw from the symbolic language of both classical Antiquity and the Romantic sublime. Yet beneath these stylized elements lies a deeply personal mourning, informed by a lifetime of bereavement. Poe mythologizes his grief not as a form of escapism, but as a means of elevating it into artistic permanence. In doing so, *Annabel Lee* stands as both an elegy and an invocation, its power grounded in the fusion of biographical pain, Romantic idealism, and classical thought.

A comparative analysis

⁵ Here without a capital “e” because we’re talking not just about Eros the god, but also eros the feeling.

Both poems are marked by the passage of time from their opening stanzas. In *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, Keats signals time through the seasons. At the poem's outset, "The sedge has withered from the lake, / And no birds sing" (Keats, 1897, p. 299): as the speaker's description of the setting unfolds through the first three stanzas, further indicators of time's passage appear: "The squirrel's granary is full, / And the harvest's done" (Keats, 1897, p. 299). The time of reaping has passed; the lake is barren, and no birds dare sing. The seasons have turned, and winter has arrived—life having drained from the landscape. In *Annabel Lee*, the narrator immediately situates us in the past: "It was many and many a year ago, / In a kingdom by the sea" (Poe, 1996, p. 116). Time in both poems reflects the loss of love—not only in nature's imagery but also in the inner reflections of the characters, who look back and contemplate what has been lost. As Fernandes observes, "Eros, for part of our tradition, is a symbol of youth destined for ruin by the action of Kronos" (Fernandes, 2023, p. 213)⁶.

While Keats's knight has ostensibly endured but a single year without his *belle dame*, the narrator of Poe's poem remembers his beloved many years after her death. Eros, in this sense, unfolds as a triangular relationship: between the lover, the beloved, and that which separates them (Carson, 2022). Desire is thus characterized by lack—by the element that introduces distance between the two.

Nobody desires what they already possess. We desire that which we do not have. That means desire is not simply a binary structure of subject and object, but one that requires a third component—separation. Without this obstacle, there is no lack. For Anne Carson, however, this third element is not merely an "obstacle" but it is called distance. Without distance, there is neither lack nor pursuit. Desire exists only so long as it is never fully satisfied: to desire is to reach without grasping (Fernandes, 2023, p. 216, our translation⁷).

In both poems, absence is the third element. This absence manifests in two forms: one temporal, and the other through the lingering trace of what was once present—a kind of physical echo. Time, as absence, alters perception: while pain endures in both speakers, one sees love as bitter in its absence, the other as sweet—though tinged with sorrow. Thus, the poems diverge in their narrators' perspectives on love and in the fates of the

⁶ Original: "Eros é, para parte de nossa tradição, símbolo de uma juventude destinada à ruína por ação de Cronos"

⁷ Original: "Ninguém deseja o que já possui. Desejamos aquilo que não temos. Isso significa que o desejo é uma estrutura que não inclui apenas o sujeito e o objeto do desejo, mas também um terceiro elemento, que os separa. Sem o obstáculo, não há falta. Para Anne Carson, no entanto, esse terceiro elemento não se chama exatamente obstáculo, mas se chama distância. Sem distância não há falta nem busca. E o desejo sobrevive enquanto não se esgota no alcance. Desejar é tentar alcançar sem alcançar".

beloved women. In Keats's ballad, it is the men who die after encountering the *belle dame*—though this death is a kind of suspended animation, with the knight left alive but paralyzed in a permanent state of longing for a future that has already passed. In Poe's poem, the beloved dies, taken by envious angels, leaving the narrator alone. Absence is felt through the passage of time, but it is also transformed by that very passage: the longer the separation, the sweeter the memory becomes, as though eternity itself intensifies love.

A classic reading of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* regards the poem not only as the greatest lyrical ballad in the English language, but also as one whose themes penetrate the deepest essence of the soul—particularly the eternal cycle of pursuit and betrayal that defines human existence:

I myself think that Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is the greatest lyrical ballad in the English language; but my reasons for thinking so sustain the greatness of philosophical poetry, which this ballad itself comes close to being. Keats' poem is manifestly greater than Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, because the latter, with its wealth of imagination and its music, does not reach to any profound reality or to any reality of moment; while Keats' ballad goes to the esoteric essence of the soul's search and the soul's betrayal. Thus, by an intuitive realization of one of the most moving, if not the most moving, of all the secrets of life, it brings forth what every imaginative mind deeply perceives, and for which adequate words were never so well found as Keats found them. So again, why is Keats' poem more valuable and miraculous than Browning's *Child Roland*? It is because the mystery of death is not so unique as this mystery of the soul's life and searching, and does not, when approached, yield the same sure core of inner truth; as if Keats had broken to the center of the rough rock of average perception to take forth this perfect jewel-of whose existence so many knew, even to the point of attempts to describe it (Masters, 1925, p. 349-350).

Although this study does not focus on the poem's twentieth-century reception, it is interesting to observe how the theme of pursuit-and-escape has long been perceived in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, both literally in its characters and figuratively in its existential or even esoteric dimensions, as Masters suggests (1925, p. 350). This pursuit-escape dynamic may be interpreted, within the erotic tradition, as martial in nature. Discussing Alcman's poetics, Ragusa (2011) highlights the violent aspect of Eros, whose assault renders the beloved a victim of desire:

Recounting the key event of the hunt and capture, the first-person speaker reflects on their own condition after Eros's violent arrival—his attack demanding obedience from the victim, who is reluctant yet aware of her powerlessness before the god, and of her limitations in the erotic arena to which she has again been cast. The description of this assault emphasizes its naming in the verb *eperkhómenon* ('attacks', v. 5), drawn from martial contexts, with which Ibycus underscores the threatening, shadowy nature of the god, who marches upon his victim like an army upon its enemies. In the battlefield—or

the field of seduction—only panic remains: the terror that defines the speaker’s reaction to Eros’s advance, emphasized at the start of verse 5: the victim trembles, knowing she has no chance against the force that will descend upon her, and from which she has tried, unsuccessfully, to flee—hence her being hunted (Ragusa, 2011, p. 71, our translation⁸).

This dynamic resonates with the experience of Keats’s knight. From the moment he encounters the beautiful lady, he is overcome by wonder—struck by her “wild” gaze: “Her hair was long, her foot was light, / And her eyes were wild” (Keats, 1897, p. 300). This gaze—Eros’s gaze—paralyzes its victim before melting his senses. She appears as a supernatural figure: “For sidelong would she bend, and sing / A faery’s song.” (Keats, 1897, p. 300). Enchanted by love’s seduction and ignoring the warning signs, he follows her to a secret place: “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” (Keats, 1897, p. 300). For a moment, the hunter and hunted seem to merge in erotic harmony—but when Eros manifests, there is always triangulation. A third element separates the lover from the beloved. The knight dreams of pale kings, princes, and warriors—ghostly former lovers of the lady—who cry out: *La Belle Dame sans Merci* / Thee hath in thrall!” (Keats, 1897, p. 305). At that point, the knight assumes the role of victim, and he remains in that state, immobilized, until the seasons turn once more and the traveler finds him on the lake’s shore—defeated by the erotic power of the god of desire.

Still considering Eros as a figure who drags his “victim” into a battlefield, one cannot overlook the poem’s semantic choices. Keats famously wrote two versions of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*: in the earlier version, dated 1819, the figure beside the lake is not called a “knight,” but a “wretched wight” (Keats, 1897, p. 299). In that version, the lady’s eyes are not only wild but also sad: “She took me to her elfin grot, / And there she gazed and sighed deep, / And there I shut her wild sad eyes— / So kiss’d to sleep” (Keats, 1897, p. 300). The dynamic between the lady and the young man is more melancholic, less adversarial. In the later version—more commonly cited—this relationship becomes

⁸ Original: “Recontado o evento-chave da caçada e aprisionamento, a 1ª pessoa do singular pensa sua própria condição após a violenta vinda de Eros, com seu ataque que impõe obediência à sua vítima – relutante, porque cônica da impotência diante do deus, de um lado, e das suas limitações na arena erótica à qual é novamente atirada, de outro. No desenho desse ataque, destaca-se sua nomeação no verbo *eperkhómenon* (“ataca”, v. 5), próprio a contextos marciais, com o qual Íbico reforça o aspecto ameaçador e sombrio do deus que marcha sobre sua vítima como atropa sobre seus inimigos. No campo de batalha ou da sedução, não resta senão o pânico, o pavor, que caracterizam a reação da *persona* à ação de Eros, enfaticamente, na abertura do verso 5: a vítima treme, sabedora de que não tem chance contra a força que recairá sobre si, e da qual tentou, sem sucesso, fugir – daí sua caçada” (Ragusa, 2011, p. 71).

more conflicted, more overtly marked by seduction and abandonment, with the sense of being victimized by love, unfulfilled longing, and the presence of martial figures: knights, kings, princes, and pale warriors—all once enchanted by the fey beauty of the lady.

The other manifestation of the third element is water. Both poems unfold beside bodies of water: a lake in Keats, a sea in Poe. Yet while the lake's waters are still, the sea is wild and untamed. This may also symbolize time—all lakes eventually pour into the sea. In Greek thought, water signifies transformation, purification, and is closely associated with the feminine (Carson, 2023, p. 14). Thus, lost loves recalled at the edges of water evoke feminine imagery, linking love to a force both devastating and erotically charged—forever tied to the loss of the beloved woman.

Conclusion

Looking back through time, we can see the influence of classical Greek thought on how we perceive and express feelings in poetic weaving. The second-generation English Romantics, such as Keats, immersed themselves in the Hellenic universe when composing their verses, attempting to capture the love felt in absence, as is the case in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Eros, as a Greek deity, has many aspects, having different epithets and attributes; however, when we focus our gaze on what Carson (2022) says about the erotic triangulation of desire – Eros as lack –, we have the image of the hole that is – this emptiness itself, not the beloved – the object of poetic sighs.

A few decades after Keats's Romantic generation, we find Poe again directing his poetics toward the imagery of loss, represented by the turbulent waters that remained in view once his beloved was gone. His classical education leads us to believe that he had sufficient knowledge of Greco-Latin culture to formulate his poetic thought on love, also inspired by classical Antiquity. This, combined with the legacy of Romantic Hellenism that still permeated the artistic world of the time, may have contributed to his negative construction of love.

In this sense, we can see how Greek erotic thought permeated centuries and cultures, being translated into a Romantic face of Eros in the English language. In this facet analyzed here, we realize that although the desire for Eros is present in both poems, the outcome is different: while Keats describes this state of permanent waiting for the beloved as something painful, full of doubts and melancholy, Poe seems to replace the

real memory of *Annabel Lee* with an idealization impossible to achieve, whether in life or in death. However, both poets mark love as a space of loss: whether this loss occurs before or after is irrelevant, for what remains is the emptiness of impossible desire, of the absence of the beloved's body. Eros is, therefore, for Keats and Poe, a sweet acquaintance whose departure brings suffering and sadness. The Romantic vision, in this sense, parallels the classical, for Eros is known, in the classical Greek tradition, as the bittersweet, the one who brings pleasure but also pain. Thus, by analyzing the presence of Eros in *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Annabel Lee*, we have here thus exemplified the parallels of an erotic-romantic tradition that has its roots in Sappho's ancient Greece and extends to 19th-century Romanticism.

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