

HELLENIC LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN POE'S HORROR SHORT STORIES: "SIOPE- A FABLE" AND "THE SPHINX"¹

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe is renowned for his tales of horror and the desolate environments within his works that baffle readers. Several studies in the past have demonstrated his constant attempts to criticize his contemporaries principally due to the immoral path that he believed they were following. In doing so, he envisioned morbid catastrophes that signified his belief that humanity's absolution would only be ensured through total annihilation and absolute silence. The present study focuses on two of these instances, "Siope- A Fable" and "The Sphinx," in an effort to demonstrate Hellenic motifs in Poe's dreary visions that have not been sufficiently discussed by relevant literature.

Keywords: Siope, The Sphinx, Hellenic motifs, Oedipus, Hellenic language, Hellenic Literature.

Resumen

Edgar Allan Poe es conocido por sus historias de horror y los ambientes desolados dentro de sus obras que desconciertan a los lectores. Varios estudios en el pasado han demostrado sus constantes intentos de criticar a sus contemporáneos principalmente debido al camino inmoral que él creía que estaban siguiendo. Al hacerlo, imaginó catástrofes mórbidas que significaban que su creencia de que la absolución de la humanidad sólo sería asegurada mediante la aniquilación total y el silencio absoluto. El presente estudio se centra en dos de estos casos, "Siope-A Fable" y "The Sphinx", siendo un esfuerzo por demostrar los motivos helénicos en las visiones de Poe que no han sido suficientemente discutidos por la literatura pertinente.

Palabras clave: Siope, Esfinge, motivos helénicos, Edipo, lengua helénica, literatura helénica.

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1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe is rightly considered as one of the central figures of American Romanticism. His works have influenced many even today, and imitators of his works have emerged all over the world ever since the end of the nineteenth century. Notwithstanding this, English-speaking critics have recurrently dismissed his importance in the field of American literature, often being unable to understand why he is so significant in European eyes. Aldous Huxley, for instance, dedicated a number of pages into explaining why Poe's works are mere vulgarities in his 1930 essay titled *Vulgarity in Literature*. Indeed, Poe had a complex personality; his sufferings were often caused by his own actions, and his eccentricity was probably what led many critics into denying his importance for the field. Be that as it may, the American author's high intellect is most obvious; he often responded to connoisseurs through sharp commentary destined to alert the American society by constantly stressing the oppressive tendencies of the democracy of his time. However, the Americans were apparently absorbed by the changes the Industrial Revolution had brought about, and they had no time to pay attention to a writer who had lost his credibility due to his peculiar behavior.

In attempting to contextualize motifs in Poe, covering a panoramic view of the American author's corpus and its relation with dark imagery, I may remind us that readers often come across the author's need to pursue unity and oneness. For him, humanity's sole way of reaching absolution was utter destruction which would ultimately lead to a perfect rebirth. "Impossible or not, Poe attempted to picture death in other early works," adds Scott Peeples (48). This Poe scholar intriguingly asserts that Poe often employs *eternal silence* "to equate death with a perfect stillness" (48). Great instances of such images found in Poe are "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," and "Silence-A Fable," three of his most renowned post-apocalyptic tales. In order convey his literary message, Poe often uses the Greek language — either Greek words in the text or epigraphs borrowed from Hellenic sources. That urged Burton Pollin (2001) to reexamine Poe's Greek; his study ultimately determined that the American author was most likely confused when it came speaking and writing in Greek. Added to the above, Poe's burlesque perspectives on American society often point toward Greek symbols in his attempt to mock superstition and inexplicable preoccupations with omens. Notice, for instance, how Poe's remorseless narrator in "The Black Cat" is haunted by a domestic animal whose eerie presence has justly been connected to Hellenic antiquity — in his seminal

edition of the tale, T. O. Mabbott interestingly contends that “the cat’s name, Pluto, from the ruler of Hades, is symbolic” (859).

The purpose of this essay is to revisit Greek motifs in Poe in two of his most grotesque short stories that envision a desolate environment, one that would ideally serve humanity’s absolution. More to the point, following Burton Pollin’s lead, I will attempt to stress the importance of Hellenic language and literature in Poe’s “Siope-A Fable” and “The Sphinx,” two short stories that are dominated by the motifs of *terror* and *isolation*. My study will also attempt to approach the reasons behind Poe’s obsession by Hellenic language and literature; the lack of studies focusing on the American author’s plain use of Hellenic motifs in these two tales is notable, and my essay is a foreword to future systematic study on Poe’s Hellenic sources and associations.

2. The Importance of Hellenic language for Poe’s Ultimate Silence: “Siope-A Fable”

“Silence-A Fable” is one of Edgar Allan Poe’s most unusual short stories. It was first published in 1838 in *The Baltimore Book* and later republished in *The Broadway Journal* on September 6, 1845. The fable introduces the reader to the story of a demon and a man in an ensorcelled land, and its mystic ambience has concerned relevant research over the past few years. In this regard, Christian Drost’s study interestingly asserts that “the story is characterized by ‘inarguable irony’” which ultimately “came to contrast arguments stating that its ‘nature is far from poetic, and the final silence is anything but inspiring’” (178).

One should be aware of the only sound they ‘hear’ throughout the plot as it is unfolded: a demon’s voice. That is also confirmed by its first words — “Listen to *me*” (Mabbott 195) — along with the last sound which the author compels us to keep in mind, the demon’s laughter. The plot is set off by a demon’s narration of his/her attempts to sway a man on a rock using various methods of pandemonium. For instance, he/she “called upon the hippopotami” which “roared loudly and fearfully beneath the moon” and then “a frightful tempest gathered in the heaven, where, before, there had been no wind” (197). Ultimately, the demon’s attempts to dismantle the man’s composure fail. It is only when chaos disappears and absolute silence takes over that the unnamed protagonist becomes agitated, intimidated and horrified by the nothingness. As Poe makes clear, the man is originally attracted by chaos away from humanity while sitting on a rock, carefully observing the horrifying scenery — this place is where the demon lives and predominates. Then, the man opts to stay still despite the anarchy and utter confusion he witnesses. The background of the story — a conversation in which

the allegory is being narrated — takes place next to a tomb. The concluding scene, and perhaps the most distressing, portrays a cat sitting on the demon while staring into his/her eyes. The demon's laughter ends the narration, hinting humanity's embrace of chaos instead of nature.

Poe chose to construct his story in three levels: the demon narrates the story to the narrator; then he/she focuses on the story of another man; ultimately, the narrator tells the story to the readers. Satirically, both the man in the demon's story and the narrator himself commit the same mistake, and that is probably the reason why the demon ends the tale with a laugh. Just as in the case of "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" and "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," Poe employs a protagonist away from humanity here. To that end, the American author uses the first two lines of Alcman's poem—*εὐδουσι δ' ὀρέων κορυφαί τε καὶ φάραγγες* (Mabbott 195)—as the tale's epigraph. Indeed, that particular reference is a conclusive hint of a Hellenic influence in Poe. Building on this remark, I may remind us that Alcman (7th century BC) was an ancient Greek poet from Sparta, one of the nine most renowned melic poets in Hellenic history. His previously mentioned poem of six lines attempts to approach nature and to indicate the absolute silence that dominates it. In fact, as Ana Agud interestingly adds, "el poema describe el sueño, solo el sueño, de toda la naturaleza salvaje, aquella cuyo *sueño no se parece al de los hombres* porque no es el reposo de la conciencia, sino el de cuanto carece de ella, de cuanto está por debajo de ella en los 'niveles de conciencia'" (36). The above scholar further explains: "Este sueño del paisaje es la figura de aquel otro 'sueño profundo' de las especulaciones indias, que está por debajo de toda ensoñación y de toda forma de la imaginación... En este sueño de 'todo' puede reposar también la imaginación humana, sumarse a el y dejarse llevar no solo a la 'negra tierra' sino también a la noche definitiva" (36). Keeping these remarks in mind, I may notice that Poe and Alcman both delve into the same topic; the obvious similarities between the story and the Greek poem may actually confirm the American author's influence by Hellenic literature. Poe quite possibly wished to demonstrate this obsession by Greek sources; after all, "nothing makes so fine a show as your Greek," as another protagonist of his states in "How to Write a Blackwood Article" (Mabbott 225). After examining several recent editions of Poe's tale, I observe that the Hellenic phrase is often misspelled; yet it is always accurately translated as "The mountain pinnacles slumber; valleys, crags, and caves *are silent*" (Mabbott 195). Intriguingly, the last two words which are crucially relevant to the message of Poe's narrative—man's alienation from society and eternal silence — have been italicized. It may also be interesting to note that Henry Curwen's 2014 edition of Poe's work based on Charles Baudelaire's French adaptation presents the Hellenic phrase written in Latin characters even though the original 1845 version in the *Broadway Journal*

confirms that the author had in fact attempted to present it in Greek. In this regard, after taking a closer look at the latter issue, I also observed a number of typographic mistakes which may suggest that Poe could not master the language at that point of his life — the epigraph is found as follows: “*Ἐνδονσιν δ’ ὁρεων κορνφαι τε και παραγγες/ Πρωνες τε και χααδραι*” [sic] (Poe 135).

Added to the above, Poe clearly indicates his extraordinary interest in the Greek language by using a Hellenic word in his title. Gerald Kennedy and Charles E. May both confirm that the was originally titled “Siope-A fable” (May 60; Kennedy 39). Building on that, it becomes apparent that Poe may have wished to portray the ideal environment for humanity’s absolution, one that is dominated by silence, using the Greek word *σιωπή* which should read as “silence” or “stillness”. Intriguingly, Drost’s study observes that this word “is an anagram for ‘is Poe’” (179), thus indicating the profound depth of this Hellenic reference. It is interesting to note that Poe’s emphasis on silence continues one step further in another poem, “Silence-A Sonnet,” published on January 4, 1840. This work appears to be his warning of a silent demise of the human soul. It is this apparent connection between the two works that may have urged Thomas Ollive Mabbott to remind us that when one compares the two works they “need not find the meaning beyond all conjecture” (192).

Furthermore, we should also be aware of Poe’s direct link to Hellenic antiquity in the story’s concluding lines. Upon the narrator’s final remarks, we become witnesses of a reminiscence of the Hellenic past: Poe states that “there were much lore too in the sayings which were said by the Sibyls; and holy, holy things were heard of old by the dim leaves that trebled around Dodona” (Mabbott 198). Upon her exploration of Hellenic mythology, Lucia Impelluso (206) delves into the Sibyls’ importance for the Olympian gods, and she particularly mentions the following:

The Sibyls were renowned female prophets of antiquity. Generally speaking, their image is that of a priestess who guards the cult of Apollo and interprets his oracles. The Sibyls have very ancient origins, and many lands claim to have been their birthplace. The name is apparently derived from Sibyl, the daughter of the Trojans Dardanus and Neso. A maiden endowed with the gift of prophecy, her reputation soon expanded to all the known world. After her, all female prophets were attributed her name. (Impelluso 206)

Based on the above, we may effortlessly observe that the concluding paragraph is an undeniable link between Poe and ancient Greece. To be sure, my study does not wish to underplay references alluding to Arab folklore and Islamic religion in Poe’s work; my main purpose is to shed some additional light to Poe’s

Hellenic face which has somewhat been overlooked by relevant literature. The story's Hellenic title, its Hellenic epigraph, its probable connection to Alcman's ancient poem, as well as its allusions to Hellenic mythology all point toward Poe's obsession by Hellenic sources. This emerging Hellenism is perhaps a product of the Bostonian author's extensive education on the classics as well as of his unconcealed fondness of the Hellenes through Byron which has been noted by Pollin's 1968 study, Kenneth Silverman's extensive review of the American author's life, or even by Dimitrios Tsokanos's more recent essay on Poe's critique on contemporary society.

3. The Presence of a Hellenic Myth in Poe's "The Sphinx"

"The Sphinx" is one of Poe's most distinguished horror stories. It was first published in 1846 in *Arthur's Ladies Magazine* and it has rightly been perceived as a satire. It principally deals with the two-week visit of an unnamed narrator to a relative just outside New York. Presumably, the events described took place in the early 1830s when, as the *New York Times* reveal, "the epidemic of cholera, cause unknown and prognosis dire, had reached its peak" (qtd. in Wilford). As William Marks observes in his 1987 essay, Edgar Allan Poe "did not invent either the cholera or the wave of terror it produced in New York and other major Eastern seaports during his lifetime" (47). The motif of terror is dominant here and it has inevitably prompted a number of studies by several Poe scholars up until very recently — see, for instance, Morris and Navarette.

Poe makes clear that the narrator's mental state has been severely affected by the excessive number of deaths that had occurred in New York at the time. In this regard, William Marks points out that "he [the narrator] is fairly palsied by daily arriving news of the city's mounting death toll" (47). The plot is unraveled as the narrator admires the "naked face of a hill"; his eyes suddenly fall upon a monster that ultimately astonishes him. Terrified as he is, he questions his own sanity, unable to believe what he had just seen. He soon attempts to describe the horrific creature portraying it as a monster of huge dimensions, "larger than any ship of the line in existence" (Poe, 1846: 15). He vividly adds the following:

The mouth of the animal was situated at the extremity of a proboscis some sixty or seventy feet in length, and about as thick as the body of an ordinary elephant. Near the root of this trunk was an immense quantity of black shaggy hair — more than could have been supplied by the coats of a score of buffaloes; and projecting from this hair downwardly and laterally, sprang two gleaming tusks not unlike those of the wild boar, but of infinitely greater dimension. Extending forward,

parallel with the proboscis, and on each side of it, was a gigantic staff, thirty or forty feet in length, formed seemingly of pure crystal, and in shape a perfect prism: — it reflected in the most gorgeous manner the rays of the declining sun. The trunk was fashioned like a wedge with the apex to the earth. From it there were outspread two pairs of wings — each wing nearly one hundred yards in length — one pair being placed above the other, and all thickly covered with metal scales; each scale apparently some ten or twelve feet in diameter. I observed that the upper and lower tiers of wings were connected by a strong chain. But the chief peculiarity of this horrible thing, was the representation of a *Death's Head*, which covered nearly the whole surface of its breast, and which was as accurately traced in glaring white, upon the dark ground of the body, as if it had been there carefully designed by an artist. While I regarded this terrific animal, and more especially the appearance on its breast, with a feeling of horror and awe — with a sentiment of forthcoming evil, which I found it impossible to quell by any effort of the reason, I perceived the huge jaws at the extremity of the proboscis, suddenly expand themselves, and from them there proceeded a sound so loud and so expressive of wo, that it struck upon my nerves like a knell, and as the monster disappeared at the foot of the hill, I fell at once, fainting, to the floor. (Poe, 1846: 15)

After the incident, the narrator desperately attempts to explain his vision but his effort is hindered by his own fear of losing his sanity. However, as the plot progresses the narrator sits near a window right next to his relative and he soon spots the monster once again. He then decides to express his fear by showing the monster to his relative. Strangely unable to locate the creature, the relative causes the narrator's dismay. William Marks interestingly reconsiders this part of the tale asserting that the relative's "richly philosophical intellect was not at any time affected by unrealities" (47). This scene leads to a monologue in which the tendency of humans to "underrate or overvalue the importance of an object" (Poe, 1846: 16) is emphasized. The relative then introduces the protagonist to the "school boy account of the genus Sphinx, of the family Crepuscularia, of the order Lepidoptera, of the class of Insecta" (16). Upon his portrayal of the creature, it becomes apparent that it precisely matches the description of the narrator's vision of a monster. The story concludes with Poe's attempt to illustrate the human tendency to misinterpret the value of certain objects; after all, the alleged monster was an insect which deceivingly appeared as a large animal though it was no more than a "sixteenth of an inch in its extreme length" (16).

At first glance, it is arguable that Poe's intention was to project the ease in

which all humans make mistakes and misjudge certain situations. Those mistakes are even more aggravated when one is properly predisposed and open to the impossible. On a closer examination, we could discern striking similarities between the tale and the myth of the ancient Greek Sphinx. This has not escaped the attention of relevant literature; William Marks remarks that “Poe’s allusion to the legend of Oedipus should remind us that the original solution to the riddle of the Sphinx was not the end of the story but rather a prelude to the hero’s tragic realization that the mysterious problems that plague human life like to disguise themselves as happy solutions” (50). Bearing this observation in mind, I wish to build upon the possibility of Poe’s allusion to the Greek myth of Oedipus. After all, the American was not the first author of his time to revisit the Hellenic myth as there have been several others who have also dealt with the myth long before Poe did. As Gerard Gillespie clarifies:

The modern fascination for the Oedipus figure began its steep rise by the mid-eighteenth century in the wake of the young Voltaire’s tragedy *Oedipe* (1719) and attained its major climax in the first few decades of the twentieth century under the influence of Freud. Thus the newer vogue of Oedipus overlapped the already prominent vogue of Prometheus, which climbed to an earlier zenith in the romantic age. (197)

Other instances of renowned writers that have incorporated Oedipus’s legend in their works are William Shakespeare in *Hamlet* and De Quincey in his “The Sphinx’s Riddle,” an essay first published in *Hogg’s Instructor* in 1850.

A variety of comments regarding the myth can be encountered in works of several ancient Greek poets; those of Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Aeschylus and Euripides stand out among others. Nonetheless, the most prominent adaptation of the legend comes from Sophocles’s *Οἰδίπους τύραννος. Οἰδίπους ἐπὶ Κολωνῷ. Ἀντιγόνη*². As the ancient Greek tragedian dictates, Oedipus came across a mythical creature commonly known as “the Sphinx” on his way to his hometown. Intriguingly, the mythical Sphinx is described as a creature with indisputable similarities when compared to Poe’s monster. As mythology dictates, after inadvertently killing his father, Oedipus decided to pass through Thebes. During that period, Thebes was devastated by the appearance of the Sphinx at the outermost part the city. The beast was a winged creature, with the head of a woman and the body of a lion, and it identified with death. More to the point, it was responsible for the ceaseless deaths of all passers-by. Allegedly, the Sphinx asked every person it chanced upon to solve an unsolvable enigma; in the case of a wrong

² Oedipus Rex. Oedipus at Colonus. Antigone.

answer it instantly killed the bystanders. In answer to the numerous deaths in the area, the king of Thebes promised his throne and the hand of his own wife to whoever solved the enigma. Oedipus's journey led him to the area and he inevitably encountered the notorious creature.

With respect to the enigma and its exact wording, researchers have not conclusively decided on an exact version as it one is not provided by mythology. Yet, as Haralabos Spiridis contends, later texts of Apollodorus of Athens (c. 180 BC- after 120 BC) have revealed that the the question was the following: “*τι ἐστὶ ὃ μίαν ἔχον φωνὴν τετράπουν καὶ δίπουν καὶ τρίπουν γίνεται;*”³ A more analytic version of the mysterious question comes from Asclepiades of Samos (born c. 320 BC) in his *Σπαράγματα*: “*Ἐστὶν δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπουν, οὗ μίᾳ φωνῇ, καὶ τρίπουν, ἀλλάσσει δὲ φύσιν μόνον, ὅσσοι ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἐρπετὰ γίνονται, καὶ ἀν’ αἰθέρα καὶ κατὰ πόντον. Ἀλλ’ ὅποτάν πλείστισιν ἐρειδόμενον ποσὶ βαίνει, ἔνθα τάχος γυνοῖσιν ἀφανρότατον πέλει αὐτοῦ.*” (qtd. in Spiridis).⁴ The myth ultimately implies that this question was perceived by the ancient Greeks as the most uncanny enigma. However, the fable goes on with Oedipus solving it within seconds—according to Sophocles, Oedipus described the moment using the following words: “*ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ ο μολών, ὁ μηδὲν εἰδώς Οἰδίπους, ἔπαυσά νιν, γνώμη κυρήσας οὐδ’ ἀπ’ οἰωνῶν μαθών*”⁵ (Sophocles 60-2). Oedipus's answer also remains a mystery until today. Speculations of the tragic hero's response have been expressed in later texts; such instance is Servi's claim that his answer was the following: “*Ὁ ἄνθρωπος. Γιατί όταν εἶναι μωρό περπατάει με τα τέσσερα, όταν μεγαλώσει με τα δύο και όταν γεράσει χρησιμοποιεῖ, ως τρίτο πόδι, ένα μαστούνι*”⁶ (117). Immediately after his answer, the Sphinx broke into pieces and vanished.

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, the two stories bear similarities that can be spotted at first glance. Poe most likely alluded to the Sphinx in order to convey the same literary message; the Hellenic legend unequivocally intends to refute the notion of impossibility; meanwhile, as Marks (46-51) indicates, Poe's tale intends to address the same matter. Physically speaking, both creatures are described bearing similar body parts borrowed from different animals—although they are portrayed as monsters incorporating features of a lion or an elephant, they are both portrayed as winged creatures. Moreover, both are closely connected to death, they

³ Translated: “What creature lives on earth and is two-legged, four-legged and three-legged throughout its life?” [My own translation]

⁴ Translated: “It is a creature that lives on earth and it has two and four legs, it has more than one voices, it also has three legs, it changes its nature when it starts walking, and its speed is reduced in time.” [My own translation]

⁵ Translated: “But I, Oedipus who knew nothing, shut the Sphinx's mouth by solving the enigma using my mind and not by finding the answer through birds.” [My own translation].

⁶ Translated: “It is Man; because when we are babies we crawl, when we are young we walk on our two legs and when we are old we use a cane as a third leg.” [My own translation].

are immensely feared, and they unmistakably impersonate the concept of a horrid curse upon humanity. In fact, one could claim that they are even considered as an omen of death. Finally, as I indicated above, the two stories attempt to indicate the same flaw in human nature: its tendency to be conquered by fear ultimately rejecting logic. In the same vein, Marks comments the following: “Poe’s Sphinx forms part of an appalling design, although it is quite innocent and insignificantly small in itself” (48). The above approach is also incorporated in the Greek myth; the purportedly invincible Sphinx is obliterated by Oedipus’s simple and logical answer. This Poe scholar also claims that “the buried subject of ‘The Sphinx’ is the mind, and in Poe’s fiction the mind cannot be treated apart from the subject of TERROR” (49). Identically to the case of the ancient Greek Sphinx, Poe’s tale reduces mystery into a puzzle.

Perhaps the mysterious and simultaneously intellectually stimulating aura of the ancient Sphinx is the reason why Edgar Allan Poe chose the particular myth as a departing point for the creation of his tale. As it was previously determined, the publication of the present short story coincides with a challenging period in the American author’s life due to the rise of cholera and a social crisis. Those seem to have affected the judgment of the author’s contemporary society and, quite possibly, his own.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that the Hellenes had crucially influenced Poe upon his literary production. I also wish to indicate that this influence has most certainly led the author into employing Hellenic references in his critique on society and in tales that suggest a change that would ultimately lead to a perfect rebirth. As I have demonstrated in the previous pages, Hellenic language is definitely present in “Silence-A fable”; Poe identifies the absence of sound with the Greek word *σιωπή* which ultimately seems to be a major reference to his motifs of *isolation* and *silence*. Hellenic mythology is also present in Poe, undeniably shaping his morbid setting in “The Sphinx”. Fear and madness are intertwined here, and both do transport readers to the ancient myth of Oedipus, as I have demonstrated.

Perhaps all the aforementioned references are proof of Poe’s affection for the Hellenic literary spheres. After all, we must not forget that Greece was his “Holy Land” as Pollin has asserted in his 1968 extensive essay on Poe’s “Sonnet-To Zante” (1968: 305). Future research might usefully explore the presence of the myth of Oedipus in “The Sphinx” since a number of other narratives — “Eleonora” being one of the most evident examples — contain Oedipal elements,

ones which may constitute a clear link between Poe's works and Hellenic literature.

Considering the above, I must acknowledge that the present study does not hope to undertake a systematic approach to the topic. Be that as it may, it is an attempt to stress the importance of the Hellenic literary spheres for Poe, and the need for further research in this unfathomed aspect of Poe studies. Future research should revisit the psychoanalytic school since Morris Wei-hsin Tien's (1990) study interestingly reconsiders the presence of Oedipus in a number of Poe's tales arguing that it is closely linked to his much discussed Oedipal complex.

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