

# “TO THE GLORY THAT WAS GREECE”: HELLENIC PATTERNS IN POE’S POETRY

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## **Abstract**

Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry has repeatedly drawn the attention of many literary critics since his poems have meticulously been delved into from different perspectives. Undeniably, a multitude of references that allude to ancient Greek mythology and classical literature are present within his verses. These have been noticed and delineated by noteworthy Poe scholars such as Scott Peeples, Kenneth Silverman, Daniel Hoffman and Kevin Hayes in several of their researches in the past. However, despite the wide range of studies that have been published, one cannot encounter any mention regarding the existence of Hellenic motifs or even a reference to an apparent Hellenism in Poe’s poetry. In an effort to outline what has already been affirmed with respect to this topic and to unearth additional links between Poe’s works and Greece, the present essay aims to determine the presence of Hellenic motifs in Poe’s “To Helen” and “Lenore”.

**Keywords:** Poe, Greece, Greek mythology, ancient Greece, Helen of Troy, Hellenic motifs

# “TO THE GLORY THAT WAS GREECE”: PATRONES HELÉNICOS EN LA POESÍA DE POE

## **Resumen**

La poesía de Edgar Allan Poe ha llamado la atención de muchos críticos literarios ya que sus poemas han sido meticulosamente analizados desde distintas perspectivas. De forma innegable, una multitud de diferencias que aluden a la mitología griega y a la literatura clásica están presentes en sus versos. Estas referencias han sido detectadas por académicos notorios de Poe como Scott Peeples, Kenneth Silverman, Daniel Hoffman y Kevin Hayes. Sin embargo, a pesar de la amplia variedad de estudios hasta la

fecha, nadie ha establecido mención alguna sobre la existencia del elemento griego o incluso sobre el aparente helenismo de la poesía de Poe. En un esfuerzo por delinear lo que ya ha sido dicho con respecto al tema y por descubrir vínculos adicionales entre la obra de Poe y Grecia, el presente ensayo tiene como objetivo determinar la presencia del elemento griego en la poesía de Poe en “To Helen” y “Lenore”.

**Palabras clave:** Poe, Grecia, Mitología griega, antigua Grecia, Helena de Troya, elemento griego

# “TO THE GLORY THAT WAS GREECE”: HELLENIC PATTERNS IN POE’S POETRY<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry has continually drawn the attention of a variety of scholars and researchers. The romance employed in his verses has meticulously been delved into by several noteworthy Poe scholars such as Joseph Reed (1981), or Jerome McGann (2014), who both noticed that the American author unmistakably attempts to explore his own concept of ideal beauty in an array of his poems. Thus, as Gargano also comments, Poe’s attempt to portray Helen of Troy as his idea of flawless beauty in “To Helen” is quite obvious (Gargano 1960: 652-3).

The present essay’s selected poems, “To Helen” and “Lenore”, have been explored from a variety of different perspectives. Roy Flickinger (1934) and Paul Baum (1949) were two of the first academics that connected Poe’s “To Helen” to Helen of Troy. My own interpretation of these two poems is indebted to Kenneth Silverman’s 1991 study of Poe’s life and works—one aspect of his study was to delineate the Hellenic references that seem to have been employed in these particular poems. Building upon the aforementioned scholar’s findings, I intend to identify all references in Poe’s selected verses that might allude to the Hellenic domain in an attempt to unearth additional links between Poe and Greece. I also hope to demonstrate the existence of philhellenic patterns in Poe’s poetry. Apart from sporadic references regarding the present essay’s topic in the research of prominent Poe scholars, such as Hoffmann (1972), Peeples (1998 and 2004), Silverman (1991), and Kennedy (2001 and 2006)—all of which will be delineated below—this particular research field has not been extensively examined up to date. A systematic study of the philhellenic motifs that seem to be apparent in Poe’s works has never existed.

According to the above-mentioned scholars, Poe’s poems appear to conceal a series of historical references. It can be observed that Edgar Allan

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Poe's life coincided with the Greek Revolution. This particular period seems to have caused a series of political and ideological changes in Europe. Lord Byron was one of the most renowned foreign supporters of the Greeks' cause. The significance of his participation in the Hellenic War of Independence against the Ottomans is crucial to the scope of this investigation since, according to Daniel Hoffman (1972), Lord Byron was Poe's main literary idol. In his study, Hoffman mentions that Poe and Byron are very much alike—he distinctly mentions the following: “how very like Byron is Poe” (1972: 28). This claim is also confirmed by Kenneth Silverman (1991: 38) and Matthew Goodman (2008: 150) whose investigations reveal that the American author had been enthusiastic about Byron while exploring his inspiration and carefully trying to compose verses himself. Silverman also adds that “Edgar created this portrait of the artist largely from conventions of romantic pessimism, especially in the works of Byron. Widely printed and reprinted in America, Byron's poems inspired many young American poets to portray themselves as similarly moody, lonely victims of early blight and later world-weariness” (1991: 41). Hence, in an era when the classical tradition had been forsaken—mainly due to the fact that the Romantics refused to uncritically accept notions and ideas deriving from the ancient past—Poe's apparent infatuation with the Hellenic domain seems to contrast with the viewpoint of his peers.

Through the present essay, I aim to delve into two of Poe's most distinguished poems, “To Helen” and “Lenore”, in order to determine the obvious presence of Greek motifs in his masterpieces. This line of investigation might also indicate Poe's captivation by the Hellenic domain while composing his poetry. Such systematic research on the Hellenism of Poe's poems has never been conducted—by the term Hellenism I refer to the existence of notions, characters or even words in the American author's works, all of which bear connections with the Hellenic realm. Thus, keeping in mind and exposing what has already been voiced regarding the selected poems, I will attempt to proceed one step further than the scholarly affirmations by indicating the existence of additional concealed philhellenic patterns in Poe's poetry. My study will be analogous to Frederick Brenk's 1990 research, “‘Purpureos Spagram Flores’: A Greek Motif in the Aeneid?”, as his methodology has been considered a landmark in investigations that delve into the presence of Hellenic motifs in modern and early modern poetry. Following the aforesaid scholar's lead, I initially intend to scrutinize the selected poems by indicating interpretations

regarding the poems and then proceeding to the unearthing of additional references that might prove the existence of philhellenic patterns.

## **2. A Hellenic portrayal of ideal beauty in Poe’s “To Helen”**

“To Helen” was first published in 1831 and it was written by Edgar Allan Poe during his youth. Fourteen years later, in 1845, Poe revised his own poem by making a series of alterations which have left their mark on history. The poem’s Greek references and characteristics can, at first glance, be defined as undisguised. However, one has to analyze them further in order to determine the integrity of this claim.

“To Helen” has been studied bearing in mind various possible interpretations regarding its title. What has been affirmed so far has been delineated by J. M. Pemberton (1970), whose study indicates that many superficial considerations have been made in the past with respect to the author’s use of this particular name. Pemberton also argues that Poe’s use of a variety of derivatives drawn from the proper name signifies that it was of major importance for the American author. He then continues by asserting that at least a few scholars have established a connection between the name Helen and beauty in the Greek sense; admittedly, Poe’s use of this particular name is proof of a Hellenic influence in his way of thinking (Pemberton 1970: 6). Hence, what seems to be plausible is that Poe’s title precisely refers to the famous Helen of Troy (Gargano 1960: 652). Meanwhile, from a physical point of view, Kevin J. Hayes claimed that the image of Helen portrayed in the poem is definitely the ideal version of beauty in Poe’s mind whereas, in Hayes’s own words, “Helen’s eyes fill the poet’s soul with Beauty and Hope, and at last are recognized as not only brighter than stars but even outshining daylight” (2009: 152-3). Apart from the aforementioned assertions, though, one needs to dissect the poem in order to uncover the key elements that constitute its alleged Hellenism.

Initially, the spotlight falls upon the second line of the poem, which leads to the point where Poe compares the beauty of Helen to “those Nicean barks of yore” (Poe 2014: 849). There have been many reviews and interpretations regarding this particular reference and the majority of them can be found outlined in Weston’s following remarks:

- (a) That of W.P. Trent who suggests that the “weary, way-worn wanderer” is Ulysses and that “Nicean” is somehow intended to represent “Phaecian.”,
- (b) That of C.W. Kent who suggests that the “Nicean barks” mean the ships of Alexander the Great,
- (c) That of F. V. N. Painter, who sees in the epithet

“Nicean” a reference to the ancient town of Nicaea, now Nice, in France. (d) That of W.M. Rossetti who interprets “Nicean” as a misspelling for “Nyseian” and suggests that we have an allusion to the Greek god Dionysus and the island of Nysa. There is still another theory, that “Nicean” is a direct coinage by Poe from the Greek word *Nike*, victory, and that “victorious barks” is the true meaning of the phrase. (Weston 1933: 213)

Thus, taking into account the above array of interpretations, one can safely assume that whether Poe’s “Nicean barks” are in fact the Phaeacian barks belonging to the ancient Greek king Alcinous, Alexander the Great’s ships, a reference to the ancient Greek god Dionysus, or even a coinage of the ancient Greek word meaning victory, the Hellenic character of this line is evident.

Moving on to the fourth line of the poem and building upon the above study, it can be noted that Poe’s “weary, way-worn wanderer” may actually be Ulysses himself. This claim is also supported by Gargano who states that this particular line of “To Helen” is “a not-too-veiled reference to Ulysses” (Gargano 1960: 652). The same scholar also suggests that this poem stresses Helen’s responsibility to be a savior (1960: 653). However, as he continues, “the widespread assumption that Poe makes her the agent of Ulysses’ or the way-worn wonderer’s return to his ‘own native shore’ cannot be supported by the poem” (1960:653).

Another connection to the ancient Greek domain is also encountered in the eighth line of the poem—“Thy Naiad airs have brought me home” (Poe 2014: 849). Paul Baum’s study notes that Poe’s Naiad airs “hint at some connection with the Naiad Nikaia, beloved unsuccessfully by the shepherd Hymnos and later overcome, treacherously, by Dionysus himself” (Baum 1949: 294). Baum concludes by stating that: “this would relate the barks to the Bithynian city (which was not on the Black sea, but had a connecting waterway) and in some way to Dionysus. But how Poe knew about Nikaia is still a mystery” (1949: 294).

As Greek mythology dictates, Nikaia was one of its most important protagonists. As Ekaterinidis further explains:

Nikaia was a river nymph, daughter of the god Sagarius and Cybelis. Nikaia was disgusted by love and, for this reason, god Eros was severely insulted by her behavior. So, he made god Dionysus fall in love with Nikaia. After getting drunk, Dionysus and Nikaia made love and, thus, they had two children, Teleti and Satyr. According to a tradition, Nikaia, the Bithynian

city, was named after her in order to honor her name.<sup>2</sup> (Ekaterinidis 2006: 381)

There are particular parts of the poem where readers definitely come across an amalgam of ancient Greece and Rome. This can be confirmed through Poe’s own words—”To the glory that was Greece /And the grandeur that was Rome” (Poe 2014:849). The above assertion is also confirmed by Havelock who insists that this particular couplet indicates Poe’s attempt to associate his repeated uses of Catullus’ and Homer’s works. According to the same literary critic, Poe’s intention was to combine the historical romance within Catullus’ *claras Asiae urbes* and the immense beauty of Helen of Troy (Havelock 1943: 248).

Four lines later, readers stumble upon a particularly significant remark in the poem. Its fourteenth and fifteenth lines—”Ah! Psyche, from the regions which /Are Holy Land!” (Poe 2014: 849)—constitute a clear link between Poe’s masterpiece and the ancient Greek language. As Gargano indicates, these specific lines are Poe’s greatest tool that allowed him to portray Helen as the ideal beauty (1960: 652-3). Poe had a higher regard for the spiritual beauty than for physical beauty and he may have considered the first as the sole archetypical one. As Gargano also suggests, “once Poe has refined an ethereal Psyche from the earthly Helen, she becomes a savior and an inspiration” (1960: 653). However, readers’ attention has to fall upon the particular word Poe uses in order to convey that his radiant Helen bears the attributes of the prototypical beauty. In order to convey his message, Poe uses the word “Psyche”. It is not surprising that this word is of Greek origin as it derives from the Greek word *ψυχή*, which in ancient and even in Modern Greek is exactly translated as “soul”. Poe undoubtedly utilizes a word originating from the Greek language probably wishing to convey the ideal notion of perfection and purity that was conceived by the ancient Greeks centuries before his time.

Hence, the analysis of Poe’s “To Helen” reveals Greek references that are concealed in it. However, while looking at Edgar Allan Poe’s biography and taking a further step in this particular field of Poe studies, I intend to delve into the possibility of connections between Poe’s biography and the poem itself. Following Brenk’s example, I aim to unearth the possible reasons why Poe chose Helen of Troy as a source of inspiration.

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<sup>2</sup> The present extract has been translated by the author.

Poe may have had Jane Stanard or Sarah Helen in mind while composing his work. Both women's roles in Edgar Allan Poe's life are believed to have been essential. After examining Jane Stanard's presence in the American poet's life, my research led me to Silverman's following affirmation that can perhaps enlighten us on Poe's rationale:

When about fourteen years old he became lastingly infatuated with Mrs. Jane Stanard, the warmhearted thirty-year-old mother of one of his schoolmates. Several reliable later accounts report that he went to her for sympathy when unhappy at home, felt consoled and comforted by her, and indeed loved her with "all the affectionate devotion of a son". In one dramatic way she resembled both Elisa Poe and Fanny Allan: she was ill, seemingly a victim for several years of depression. . . . Edgar frequently visited Jane Stanard's grave in Shockhoe Hill Cemetery. Upset by the loss of this young motherly woman, with its shadow of earlier loss, he grew cross and rejected. (Silverman 1991: 26)

Notwithstanding, famous critics have expressed different interpretations with regard to Poe's inspiration for the poem. It has been claimed by many scholars that Poe addressed this poem to Sarah Helen Whitman; the latter had been the author's fiancée for a short period of time (Ehrlich 2001: 85). According to Silverman, she always preferred to be called Helen and she was a woman of placid beauty, being considered by many as "perhaps the leading female literary critic in America" (Silverman 1991: 347-8). It is also made clear that Poe was severely affected by her presence. Before "To Helen" was published he appears to have sent it to her enclosed within an envelope which, as Silverman distinctly describes, "she again identified as his, this time simply by comparing the handwriting with that on the letter-envelope enclosing his earlier 'To Helen'" (1991: 351). The above allegations are also confirmed by Hayes who appears to have reached to the same conclusion (Hayes 2009: 152).

Whether Poe was inspired by Jane Stanard and Sarah Helen or not, it can be deducted that he clearly valued the presence of these two women in his life. As Gargano noticed, Helen represents the ideal image of love and beauty (1960: 652). Jane Stanard's and Sarah Helen's importance for the American author may have led him to compose the present poem in their honor while portraying either of them as the ideal woman. Concurrently,

being influenced by his literary idols, or even by his ancient Greek studies<sup>3</sup>, he might have considered Helen of Troy as a perfect figure for their representation.

### 3. The presence of ancient Greece in Poe’s “Lenore”

“Lenore” is undoubtedly one of Poe’s most unparalleled poems. Interestingly, it began as a different poem with the title “A Paean”. However, it was first published as “Lenore” in 1843. It is also considered to be part of the poet’s literary ballads and the fact that Poe has chosen this particular title reveals his inclination to utilize the name Helen and many of its derivatives—“To Helen”, “Lenore” and “Eleonora.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is significant to notice that “Lenore” seems to incorporate one of Poe’s favorite themes—that of the death of a beautiful woman. As Gerald Kennedy affirms, “Lenore” seems to veil a vital difference compared to the rest of Poe’s stories that use the same motif since it exhibits a potentiality of its protagonists’ reunion in the afterlife (1987: 69). The present verse has been lionized in the past and its bizarre setting has attracted the attention of a plethora of prominent scholars up until very recently—such examples are the studies of Gillespie (2011), McGann (2014), and Fussel (2015).

The poem’s plot appears to focus on the funeral of a deceased woman, Lenore, who is depicted as “the queenliest dead that ever died so young” (Poe 2014: 780). Her fiancé, Guy De Vere, creates the impression of a man who does not wish to mourn his beloved’s death—“And, Guy De Vere, hast *thou* no tear?—weep now or never more!” (2014: 780). As Lenore’s passage from the world of the living to the underworld takes place, we come across the first hint that leads readers to believe that this poem bears allusions to the ancient Greek domain.

Lenore’s soul is described crossing the Stygian river, having set sail towards the world of the deceased—“Let the bell toll—a saintly soul floats on the Stygian river” (2014: 780). A closer look on this reference uncovers that Stygia was, in fact, an ancient Greek goddess of the mythological Underworld. As mythology reminds us, she was loathsome and dreadful, and her name was given to Hades’ river as it was the main entrance to his

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<sup>3</sup> According to Daniel Stashower, “By the age of eleven the boy was studying Horace in Latin and Homer in Greek.” (2014: xii)

<sup>4</sup> Hoffman and Pemberton appear to have reached to the same conclusion in their studies (1972: 36 and 1970: 6, respectively).

Kingdom (Chatzidaki 1993: 3695). More specifically, as the ancient Greek mythology distinctly portrays:

The Stygian River was named after Styga, one of the Ocean goddesses, daughter of Oceanus and Tithios who seemed to be the wife of Pallantas (this is doubted by Epimenides) and mother of Nike, Kratos, Zilos and Via [Victory, Power, Jealousy and Violence, respectively].<sup>5</sup> (1993: 3695)

Thus, it can be inferred that Poe's "Stygian river" may actually pose as a direct reference to Hades' fearful river. Quite astonishingly, none of the investigations regarding this poem have commented upon this Hellenic reference.

As mentioned above, Lenore's husband-to-be does not desire to grieve for his fiancée's death—"let no bell toll" (Poe 2014: 781). That is because of his belief that he should rejoice as his beloved proceeds to the afterlife—as he states, "lest her sweet soul, amid its hallowed mirth /Should catch the note, as it doth float up from the damned Earth" (2014: 781). Nonetheless, the male protagonist seems to wish for Lenore's safe passage aided by the help of an angel. At this point, through De Vere's words, Poe makes a remark that discloses the poem's concealed Hellenism. Lenore's fiancée utters that the angel should accompany his beloved with "a paean of the old days". Poe appears to have wished to draw attention to this particular verse—after all, the initial title of the poem was "A Paean." Thus, it is necessary to investigate the origin of the word "Paean" as well as its significance for the poem. According to Hellenic history:

A Paean was a song of worship created by the ancient Greeks. It was sung by men while dancing. At first it was sung in the honor of Apollo and, later on, in order to honor several ancient Greek gods. A Paean was usually sung for the prevention of deceases but it had generally been used in the past as a way to express happiness for a win or to show gratitude to a particular god. Thus, many different kinds of Paeans were created such as the Paean of war, the Paean of gratitude, the Paean of victory etc. The most famous Paean creators were Pindarus, Alkmanas, Bachilides *et al.* The general characteristics of a Paean were its happy tone (they were sung in every ceremony, except at funerals), its precision and its calm execution.<sup>6</sup> (Tsaktsira *et al.* 2006: 372)

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<sup>5</sup> The present extract has been translated by the author.

<sup>6</sup> The present extract has been translated by the author.

Therefore, one can assert that the male protagonist’s feelings may be elated rather than mournful, in contrast with the readers’ initial thoughts. In emphasizing this particular Hellenic connection between Poe’s poem and ancient Greece I also draw from Ollive Mabbott’s “Some Classical Allusions in Poe” (1919). Particularly intriguing is his acknowledgement that “Poe’s contrast between the paean and the dirge, in Lenore, was perhaps suggested by the Greek periphrasis for ‘a dirge’—ὕμνεϊ δίχα παϊάνων” (1919: 94). Accordingly, the alignment of Greek mythology and history with Poe’s masterpiece validates the poem’s Hellenic character. The image of Lenore’s passage to another world through the Stygian river accompanied by an angel singing an ancient Greek *paean* supports this claim.

### 3. Conclusions

The purpose of the present essay is to further delve into the Hellenic references that are concealed in Poe’s selected poems in order to unearth additional links between Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry and Greece. It is also intended to demonstrate the existence of philhellenic patterns in Poe’s verses due to Poe’s repetitive use of notions and characters encountered in classical literature and ancient Greek mythology. Having delineated what has already been affirmed regarding each one of the selected poems, it was noticed that additional links between Poe and the Hellenic domain exist in some of the American author’s greatest poems.

The Hellenic connection between Poe’s “Lenore” and ancient Greece through the ancient Greek *paean* has also been unearthed—quite astonishingly, none of the studies so far have examined this particular link in depth. Undeniably, the presence of ancient Greece in “To Helen” and “Lenore” is evident. As it has been demonstrated by a series of scholars in the past, Poe probably considered the name Helen and many of its derivatives as the ideal choice for the portrayal of perfect beauty. Building upon this remark, it becomes apparent that beauty in the Hellenic sense was indeed a major source of inspiration for the American author. I nevertheless wish to indicate that Poe’s repeated use of Helen of Troy, the identified presence of Ulysses as a ‘way-worn wanderer’, the Naiads, or even the utilization of the Greek word *ψυχή* itself, all establish a Hellenic motif in Poe’s “To Helen”. In the same vein, Poe’s allusion to the Greek *paean* and his incorporation of ancient Greek Stygian river all testify to the American author’s inclination towards Hellenic literature.

Although many of these indications have been noted by noteworthy Poe scholars, none of them has stressed the presence of a Hellenic pattern in the American author's poetry. Perhaps Poe was indeed influenced by Greece while composing his works; yet the existence of a philhellenism in Poe's verses has to be investigated in a more extensive manner. That is to say, more poems have to be scrutinized and aligned with sources deriving from Greek literature, philosophy, or history so that we obtain a more spherical outline of the Hellenic influence in Poe's works. Hence, in order to fill in a gap in this particular field of Poe studies while also attempting to shed some additional light on Poe's own idiosyncrasy, more research regarding this topic needs to be conducted.

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