

The Beautiful and the Deceiver: A Comparative Analysis of the Female Presence In Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci and in Ian Emberson's Danse Macabre

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Abstract: *The present work will study the female presence in the poem Danse Macabre written by Ian Emberson and its relation to Keats' ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". Our hypothesis will discuss the Gothic influences from the eighteenth century in addition to a number of contemporary points of view about Art in "Danse Macabre"'s feminine characterization. Consequently, the Hegelian concept of "Death of Art" will help us to suggest that differently from "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", where the poet shows an individual concern, the major function of the woman in Emberson's poem is to illustrate the artist's conduct in the modern age.*

Keywords: *Contemporary poetry; Female Presence; Death of Art.*

1. Introduction

(...)
*But the world where my loved one lived
was far – so far from this world of mine,
for hers was a nature that full of zest
tasted each pleasure without repine,
and filled her days with frolic and jet
and drinking my love like wine.*
(Emberson, 1981)

Ian Emberson is a contemporary poet whose writings are influenced by several Romantic artists, as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake. However, one particular poem, called *Danse Macabre* (Emberson, 2000: 18) brings an atmosphere of suspense associated to a narrative form, which can remind us of certain ballads and Gothic texts, such as Keats' ballad *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (2005: 118). This tone is provided by a number of different factors, like the symbolic female protagonist, the

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rhyme scheme, which can be related to a waltz, the dialogues and the most important element in this study, the relationship between a mythological figure and a living poet. Because of such elements, we shall firstly attempt to establish a parallel between Emberson's poem and Keats' La Belle Dame Sans Merci, in order to perceive some changes and common elements in relation to the female presence. Our principal aim is to demonstrate, through the female characterization, that the Hegelian concept of "Death of Art", presented in Romantic poetry and in Keats' ballad, suffered a change in Emberson's text, which can define, in a certain way, the artist's view of contemporary society.

1.1. The Romantic Age and Gothic poetry

*But yet I had a terror of her robes,
And chiefly of the veils, that from her brow
Hang pale, and curtain'd her in
mysteries(...)*

(KEATS, 2005: 27)

The Romantic period or the Return to Nature, as it can be also called, produced a number of significant effects on English literature. However, the changes suffered at that time were caused by political factors combined with social circumstances, which involved all of Europe, such as the French Revolution and new philosophical doctrines. The struggle of Orthodoxy against Deism maintained mostly by the upper classes of society, created an ambiance of death and melancholy¹. This had a strong impact on poetry, as it can be seen in Shelley's or Byron's poems. The resentment against the present world, the escape to a primitive environment based on Rousseau's philosophy, the conflicting passions, the inner conflicts and the scientific spirit were frequently current in literature at that age (GRIERSON; SMITH, 1962: 93).

Besides, the Enlightenment was an age of power and knowledge², which affirmed that men were masters of Nature. As Francis Bacon said, "there shall be neither

¹ For more information, see: GRIERSON, Herbert John Clifford; SMITH, James Cruickshanks. *A Critical History of English Poetry*. Mitcham: Penguin, 1962.

² Francis Bacon said at the time that "power and knowledge are synonymous". See BACON, Francis. *Essays*. London: Tate Publication, 2008.

mystery nor any desire to reveal mystery” (BACON, 2008: 74). This scientific comment had an important reflex on poets as well. According to Grierson and Smith, Keats' style was a transcendentalist creative conception of the part played by reason and imagination (1962: 115), which combined Bacon's ideals with a great deal of imagination and fancy.

Keats' life also brought an intensity of feelings to his poetry. His strangeness and thoughts about women are very clear, for example, in a letter written to his friend Bailey, when the poet was about 20 years old:

Is it not extraordinary? When among Men I have no evil thoughts, no malice, no spleen - I can listen and from every one I can learn - my hands are in my pockets I am free from all suspicion and comfortable. When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice, spleen - I cannot speak or be silent - I am full of Suspensions and therefore listen to no thing - I am in a hurry to be gone You must be charitable and put all this perversity to my being disappointed since Boyhood -I must absolutely get over this, - but how? The only way is to find the root of the evil, and so cure it. (2007: 81)

Noticing this characteristic of the poet's personality, it can be said that such feelings associated with a number of poetic elements are presented in the ballad “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, written in 1820. The poem has a narrative form, which tells the story about a knight who is seduced by an allegorical fairy, who represents death and destruction. This woman, at the very beginning, is received with some estrangement and enthrallment by the poet, as we can see in the lines below:

“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
(...)
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
(...)”

(2005:66)

These feelings in relation to women show a fear and a sense of insecurity in the poet, but at the same time, can also denote a strong attraction and desire. He is attracted by her powers and impressed with her extreme beauty. Such behavior is currently found in extensive letters from Keats to his brother George, principally after 1818, when the poet met Fanny Brawne, an eighteen year old girl who, according to him was “beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange”:

Shall I give you Miss Brawn? She is about my height – with a fine style of countenance of the lengthen'd sort – she wants sentiment in every feature – she manages to make her hair look well – her nostrils are fine – though a little painful – he[r] mouth is bad and good – he[r] Profil is better than her full-face which indeed is not full but pale and thin without showing any bone – Her shape is very graceful and so are her movements – her Arms are good, her hands badish – her feet tolerable – she is not seventeen [actually she was eighteen and three months] – but she is ignorant – monstrous in her behavior flying out in all directions, calling people such names – that I was forced lately to make use of the term Minx – this is no[t] from any innate vice but from a penchant she has for acting stylishly. (KEATS, 2007: 205)

Therefore, we can see that Keats' impressions concerning women was somewhat divided between a growing sexual attraction and a desire to stay focused on his works and duties. Fanny, as Bate said (1964: 476), consumed much of Keats's time and thought, besides having, according to some poet's friends, a flirtatious attitude. Such teasing behavior aroused in Keats feelings of jealousy and depression, compromising his writings.

However, despite of this ambivalent passion felt by Keats, they have never had the chance to get married, since his financial conditions and health problems did not permit it. So, it can be said that the fact of social or financial inferiority created in him a sentiment of insecurity, as if his beloved were out of reach, just like the fairy in the ballad, who belongs to a different world: *Full beautiful, a faery's child* (2005: 66).

In this ballad, Keats conceded to poetry the position of an autonomous art ³, unifying the world of the senses and the world of dreams through a female character, in

³ The ballad “La Belle Dame San Merci” brought such feeling of autonomy, since the poet changed the material things presented in the day-life into his own sentiments and imagination. That characteristic symbolized that art was not just a representation of the world in itself, but demanded a creative work with the language and with the subjects.

order to escape from the “inescapable fact of our finitude” (BATE, 1974: 80). This frustration can be connected with his feelings for Brawne and his unsatisfactory relation to human's natural condition of finitude, which can be explicit in the excerpt below, where Keats affirms that:

The whole appears to resolve into this – that Man is originally ‘a poor forked creature’ subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other. If he improves by degrees his bodily accommodations and comforts – at each stage, at each ascent there are waiting for him a fresh set of annoyances – he is mortal and there is still a heaven with its Stars above his head

(2007: 210)

The theme about fancy and the idea of imaginary place and women can be related to that described by Johnson as “the hunger of imagination which prays incessantly upon life” (JOHNSON, 1998: 42). Keats' readings of Voltaire, Johnson and Coleridge at that time produced a significant effect on his works, and in the composition of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”.

The escape from real facts was understood by the poet as a process of selection of the thoughts into ideals, in order to comprehend reality in itself and bring “greeting to the Spirit”. He believed, according to Bate (1964, 179), that everything depended on what was being selected, and how, and in what combination. Therefore, such escapism presented in the ballad can be considered as a commonplace in Keats' final writings, as *Lamia and Fall of Hyperion* (2005: 201).

Besides the use of imagination, the poet inserts a number of sexual connotations in expressions as horse, in addition to “honey” and “manna dew”, in order to reveal his “human feelings”, since the sexual attraction is more connected with the world of senses. Horse, in most of the mythological traditions, symbolizes animality or an instinctive dynamism that can carry the person away (1995: 74), whereas the other two, related to food, can represent erotic desire and appetite⁴:

“I set her on my pacing steed

⁴ Such relation is easily found in Romantic and even in Modern poets, such as William Faulkner or T.S Eliot, who combine food with matters of the Spirit. See: BROUGHTON, Panthea Reid. *William Faulkner: The Abstract and the Actual*. Oxford University Press, Vol. 54, N° 4, 2004.

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(...)"

(2005:66)

Considering this, we can perceive that the Lady actually is a fetish, who dominates all men with her supernatural power and inspires their passion and fear. This kind of devotion is very similar to some mythological cults and can remind us of Egyptian or Greek Goddesses. However, the protagonist, besides being linked to sex, is also related to death and figures that do not have any concrete form, as the Lake.

"(...)
The sedge has withered from the Lake
And no birds sing!
(...)
I see a lily on thy brow
(...)
Though the sedge is wither'd from the Lake
And no birds sing."

(2005:66)

So, as we could notice, the woman in the poem is characterized as someone who has the power to stay absent from the world of senses, in order to lead the poet through a supernatural or terrifying place. Such a characteristic can suggest a religious concern as well: the woman leads the man to a fancy world; she is, therefore, a mythological character, like the elf. So, it is possible to conclude that the lady in La Belle Dame Sans Merci represents someone who takes out the balance of the man or is responsible for his loss of Paradise.

2. "Danse Macabre"

*"If death itself is not something spontaneous...then
we can feel at home in the uncanny"*

(FREUD, 1987: 56)

Ian Emberson's poem "Danse Macabre" can be considered as a poetic text which has a strong diversity of discourses, since it dialogues with the poem already seen, with Freudian Psychoanalysis and even with some Hegelian concepts of art.

As we previously mentioned, "Danse Macabre" has a narrative form, which tells the story in first person of a man who discovers that Death actually is a beautiful and sensuous woman. This figure will seduce the poet till he joins her in a morbid dance and enters into her supernatural world, as can be observed in these lines:

"Oh, hush my darling – and don't repine",
And she gave a gracious prance,
Then she twined her fingers into mine
And whispered: "Shall we dance?"
(2000: 18)

However, the female characterization is presented differently from Keats's allegorical fairy, since she is defined as Death at the very first line, in a symbolic structure: "Death came to me in a mini skirt" (2000: 18).

Her appearance seems to be very ordinary; she is just a regular woman on the outside, who takes part in the living world. The use of colloquial language or the woman's everyday aspect also differs from Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, since the latter is full of mystery and fancy. Thus, the poet in *Danse Macabre* gets shocked when he realizes that the female actually represents a spiritual creature:

'Says I: "Well – not in my wildest whim
Did I picture you looking like this,
I'd been told you were a reaper grim
And behold – a saucy miss"'

Nevertheless, this ordinary woman is compared in her actions and conduct to an elf, a mythological being that has magical powers which can be used to help or to harm men, like Keats' fairy:

"Ah – many a one is like yourself
Surprised by my winning smile,
I have jokes and jests like a playful elf
And I know the way to beguile".

The dance has an essential purpose in the text and also in elves' myths. The title "Danse Macabre" suggests that the poem itself is constructed as a movement of dialogues, a movement of situations (life/death; past/present) and a consonance between an ordinary environment and a Gothic atmosphere. The alternate rhyme scheme, for example, also reminds us of this kind of undulation.

Besides, in Germanic mythology, according to the Illustrated Encyclopedia of Myths and Legends (1995: 63), elves were also seen as beings connected to dance. They frequently were associated with sexual desire; however, they used to deceive the living creatures. So, when we perceive that woman's most important occupation is to "beguile" men, and guide them to a supernatural or morbid place in the poem, two dichotomies emerge due to the sexual connotation of her conduct: woman/deceiver and birth/death. Such a dichotomy of birth/death are directly linked to the elves presence in the poem, since they are associated with evil things, like death; apart from causing sexual desires, which can suggest the idea of birth and conception.

Consequently, just like the woman already seen above in Keats's ballad Emberson's female character is connected to a strange world, which can be physical or psychological. He also seems to be influenced by certain scientific innovations, but now, from the twentieth century, such as Freudian Psychoanalysis and the discovery of the unconscious. Here the mystical miss has a different function: she provides for the "narrator" the power to reflect on his own work.

Therefore, the presence of women shows some similarities in both poems. In Keats's ballad, the lady leads the poet to her elfin grot and then, abandons him. However, in Emberson's poem, the woman, who is the Death itself, tries to seduce and deceive the poet, taking him with her to a supernatural place, where the narrator speaks, as we can perceive in the lines below:

"Death came to me in a mini skirt
As skittish as a kitten,
And said: "I am come for your final flirt"
But added: "You don't seem smitten"
(2000: 18)

Both poets create two different times: the first one is the narrator's time, which gives a sense of control to the poem and belongs to the unknown world or the uncanny. On the other hand, the second time is the time of the narration itself, the time of the dialogues and of the action, since it belongs to the material world or the world of appearances.

Still, in "*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*", the poet falls in love with the lady at the very moment he sees her strange and magical appearance, differently from *Danse Macabre*'s speaker, who says that he does not have a smitten character. In Emberson's poem, thus, the poet does not want to escape from the concrete world, for he is already a part of it. He has lost his Romantic Spirit, which can be represented as a sublime power that artists used to have possession.

Keats, in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, reveals his connection a woman from another world, and consequently, his power to mediate the known and the unknown elements through poetic art. He takes the Absolute and the Spirit as the principal form and content of poetry, in order that his subjectivity turns to itself, since he is more worried about expressing his inner conflicts and his passions.

So, Keats' behavior in relation to artistic aspects was concentrated on writing about spiritual subjects using terror and the Gothic to escape from the concrete world. The solution was found in the spirit and the imagination, but such supernatural vision was provided by the female character, for in the Enlightenment, men had total control over their personality and were rational beings. Women, however, from a misogynistic point of view, since the ancient times have a mysterious nature, more emotional or mystical. Keats supposedly needed woman's presence, as an inspiring Greek Muse, to be able to mediate the unknown and the concrete world.

Ian Emberson, however, is more distant from this Romantic view of art. He seems not to believe in the feeling of the powerful artist, who has the power to be in contact with his own Absolute Spirit. He is closer to a sense of self-conservation or reification in relation to society. He says:

"But – please just pass me by with a nod
I've poems and plays unwritten,
There are footpaths I have never trod
As you say – I'm not much smitten".

For such reason, the Hegelian concept of literary art (1974: 38) can be very helpful for us to comprehend this movement of poet's elevation and self-conservation through time. Hegel considers the true subject of art as the Divine (*das Göttliche*) and believed that Classic Art was not a representation, but an idealization of the sensitive material, creating almost a metaphysical view about the process of writing. He says:

The Greek spirit is actually the plastic artist, which transforms a rock into a piece of art. After such transformation the rock is not any longer an ordinary rock and does not bring in itself just its contour. It is, however, transformed and made, against its nature, in the spirit's expression.

(1974: 38)

In this way, according to Hegel, classical art was a combination of sensitive things with the spirit. Yet, Keats in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* found his subject chiefly in subjectivity, searching for fancy and a mysterious character. This situation is defined by Hegel as the "Death of Art", because there is no fusion between the external world and the Spirit.

Poetry contains the immediate perception by the soul of itself. Like the figurative Arts, it develops itself distinctively in the world of imagination (...). It is reckoned, however, among the Romantic arts, in virtue of its character of spirituality it is free from all contact with matter. It expresses spirit immediately with spirit. (1974: 59)

In "Danse Macabre" (EMBERSON, 2000: 18) this does not happen, given that the poet assures the reader that he does not have a passionate soul. This poet has works undone because of such a characteristic. The direct connection to the world of senses, the lady's ordinary appearance and the colloquial language reaffirm the refusal to a spiritual writing. Emberson's poem thus illustrates a major difference between the contemporary age and the Romantic period: the sense of reification of the modern artist, who feels that he is part of a material reality and does not believe in an *innerlich* (HEGEL, 1974: 45) content.

So, in summary, we can say that the poet in "Danse Macabre" is inserted in a material society. He refuses a spiritual poetry and does not worry about expressing his inner conflicts or sentiments. Ian Emberson's poem, since there is no foil between the

FREITAS, Patricia. *The Beautiful And The Deceiver: A Comparative Analysis Of The Female Presence In Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci And in Ian Emberson's Danse Macabre*. pp. 26-36

poet and the external world, provides, through the female presence, an atmosphere of the artist's self-conservation in the modern age.

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