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Echoes of Antiquity: Greek Archetypes in John Keats' *Lamia* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

Greek archetypes endure in literature not because their meanings remain unchanged, but because they are continually redesigned to address new cultural and emotional contexts. From classical antiquity through Romanticism and into Modernism, myth has functioned as a flexible emblematic framework through which writers express enduring human concerns. This paper examines the mythopoetic approaches of John Keats and T. S. Eliot to exhibit how classical Greek archetypes are reshaped to serve divergent literary purposes. Focusing on *Lamia* and *The Waste Land*, the study highlights both continuity and conversions in the use of classical myths, revealing how Keats employs them to enhance sensuous beauty and emotional depth, while Eliot adapts it to convey fragmentation, disillusionment, and alienation. Through this comparative analysis, the paper argues that myth remains a dynamic literary resource across periods and era while holding its expressive power.

Keywords: Greek Archetypes, Myth, Romanticism, Modernism, John Keats, T. S. Eliot.

Introduction:

Greek archetypes i.e. recurring symbolic motifs, character models, and narrative patterns rooted in ancient Greek culture, constitute a foundational element of Western literary and cultural tradition. From classical antiquity to the modern age, Greek archetypes have retained their relevance by continuously evolving and adapting to new literary and cultural contexts. Classical dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides shaped enduring figures like the tragic hero, the prophetic seer by investing them with psychological and ethical complexity. During the Romantic period, poets like John Keats reimagined these archetypes aesthetically, using figures such as Lamia to explore imagination, beauty, and emotional intensity. Modernist writers, most notably T. S. Eliot, reworked Greek archetypes in a markedly different way, fragmenting figures such as Tiresias, Philomela, and the Sibyl to represent cultural decay and spiritual barrenness through what he termed the "mythic method" (Eliot 480). The persistence of these archetypes can be explained through Carl Jung's concept of the "collective unconscious," which views such figures as recurring psychic patterns shared across cultures and historical periods (Jung 3–4). Their continued presence in modern language, psychology, and narrative structures demonstrates that Greek myths remain dynamic interpretive frameworks for understanding lasting human concerns rather than stagnant remnants of the past. This paper argues that although both Keats and Eliot draw upon Greek archetypes, they do so with fundamentally different artistic intentions and aesthetic philosophies.

A comparative reading of *Lamia* and *The Waste Land* reveals how Greek myths are adapted to serve distinct literary and historical purposes. In *Lamia*, John Keats reimagines Greek mythology as a source of Romantic enchantment, restoring its sensuous beauty, emotional intensity, and narrative allure to construct a world in which imagination momentarily prevails over rational thought. By contrast, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* reconfigures myth into a fragmented cultural framework that mirrors the spiritual anguish and psychological disorientation of the modern age. This study demonstrates how Keats employs myth to revive aesthetic and imaginative richness, while Eliot transforms it into an organizing principle that exposes the fragmentation and moral barrenness of modern civilization. Such a comparative approach highlights the enduring malleability of myth across literary movements, showing how classical antiquity functions both as a source of imaginative renewal and as a means of cultural critique.

Greek Archetypes in John Keats' *Lamia*:

John Keats was born in 1795 in London to a livery stable manager. Though, Keats was not a Greek man or a Greek poet, his passion of using Greek myths and archetype was very great which vividly expressed in his poems. And this made P.B. Shelley remark- "John Keats is a Greek." (Horne 196). Although, he did not know the Greek language or about Greek customs and their way of life yet he was Greek in temper and spirit. The Greek influence came to him through his reading of *Translation of Greek Classics* and *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary* but more important than these was his own inclination and nature. By reading these books was like the discovery of a new planet. His study of *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary* fully acquainted him with the Greek mythology and he loved every bit of it. The instinctive Greek tendency of Keats' mind lies in his passionate pursuit of beauty, which is very soul of his poetry. It is a temper of tranquil pleasure of keen sensuous joy in beauty. He enjoyed pure pleasure in nature, which for him did not carry any philosophical or spiritual message. For Keats, the sense of beauty overcame every other consideration. In fact, the world of Greek paganism lives again in the poetry of Keats, with all its sensuousness and joy of life, and with all the wonders and mysticism of the natural world. David Daiches observes, "Indeed, though Keats was much influenced by medieval themes and by what he considered to be the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, it was ancient Greece that haunted his imagination most." (225)

Lamia is a narrative poem by John Keats, first published in 1820 in the volume *Lamia, Isabella, the Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems*. The poem draws heavily on Greek mythology. Keats found the story of Lamia in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Like many Romantic poets, Keats turned to classical myths not merely for storytelling but as symbolic frameworks through which deeper human concerns could be explored. In Greek myth, Lamia is understood as a female *daimon* connected with the destruction of children and, in later tradition, as a nocturnal spirit that haunts the night ("Lamia"). Classical accounts also preserve her earlier identity as a Libyan queen whose association with Zeus provokes Hera's vengeance, a punishment that leads to her transformation into a monstrous, child-devouring figure and aligns her with ideas of hybridity and corrupted motherhood ("Lamia").

The poem revolves around its titular character, Lamia, who occupies the central position in the narrative. The poem is divided into 2 parts. In Part I, Hermes, the messenger god, arrives in the forest of Crete in search for his beloved nymph but meets Lamia the serpent-woman. She promises to reveal the presence of his nymph to him if he gives her a woman's body and will place her near Corinth. The agreement is sworn to. The nymph is revealed to Hermes, who, in his turn, changes the beautiful serpent into a beautiful maiden and places her on the road to Corinth. Such anthropomorphic transformations are a recurring feature of Greek myth, where boundaries between the divine, the human, and the animal are fluid. On the road to Corinth, Lamia sees Lycius, the young and handsome Corinthian youth whom she falls for. He too falls in love with Lamia. Lycius tells her that he would die if the vision of their love were to vanish. They go to Corinth and stay in a palatial building, created by the magical power of Lamia. In Part II, the marriage feast which Lycius is determined to give, despite Lamia's unwillingness, takes place. Here comes Apollonius, the philosopher, who stares at Lamia and makes her uneasy. Since he knows her reality and as soon as he reveals it, Lamia dissolves into a snake and vanishes. Lycius dies at the shock and pain of the discovery. Keats adapts Greek archetypes to create an escapist world of emotional intensity and symbolic richness where myth supports the Romantic quest for transcendence through art and the beauty. "The expression of beauty is the aim of all art, and beauty for Keats and Greeks are not exclusively physical or spiritual but represents the fullest development of all that makes for human perfection." (Sengupta 68)

The poem opens with a Hellenistic frame in which Hermes aids Lamia in exchange for revealing a hidden nymph, evoking Greek tales of divine bargains and metamorphoses, such as those in Ovid. This setting in pre-fairy Crete, where "faery broods / Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods" (I.1-2), transitions from Greek paganism to later folklore, underscoring Keats's historical layering of myths. Central to *Lamia* is the archetype of transformation, a staple in Greek myths as in Circe and Proteus, symbolizing the fluidity between human and divine, reality and dream. Lamia's "rainbow-sided" serpentine form—"Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue" (I. 47)—is described with aesthetic delight, aligning with Hellenistic ideals of beauty in art and nature, where even monstrosity holds allure. Keats elevates this to a Romantic pursuit: beauty as eternal joy, as in "Do all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy?" (II. 229-230) Apollonius's rational gaze dissolves her illusions, "unweav[ing] a rainbow" and clipping "an Angel's wings" (II. 231-237). Apollo, god of prophecy and light, is invoked indirectly through Apollonius, representing science's demystification of poetic imagination. According to Clarence Thorpe, the ephemeral pleasure palace in the poem is the pleasure house of the unreflecting dreams of the young poet who has been attracted to the seemingly beautiful Lamia. Cold philosophy causes the palace of barren dreams to crumble. The youngster who loved so unwisely also dies, but in his place born a stronger and firmer soul. Thus, this is an allegory of Keats own education of self, the realization of the unreality of romantic vision and the need to accept the reality of logic and reason. (Thorpe)

In Keats's version, Lamia is not merely a deceptive phantasm but a complex, sympathetic character trapped in a "wreathed tomb" of her serpentine body, yearning for human form to experience "love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife / Of hearts and lips" (I. 39-41). Her transformation is agonizing: "Her elfin blood in madness ran, / Her mouth foam'd... / Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent" (I.146-150), portraying monstrosity as a curse rather than inherent evil. This reframing critiques gender politics, presenting males like Lycius (abusive) and

Apollonius (intrusive) as the true monsters, while Lamia's genuine love evokes sympathy for the marginalized female Other. Feminist interpretations highlight Lamia's subversion: her excesses of life, love, and imagination and redefine monstrosity as "too much life," akin to Romantic Satanism, where she resists patriarchal tyranny. Scholars such as Denise Gigante and Karla Alwes interpret Lamia as a figure for poetry itself, whose sensuous appeal embodies a subversive resistance to the dominance of rational philosophy. Her supernatural capacities—manifested through dream-like movement and the construction of an illusory palace—recall the functions of Greek nymphs and oracular figures, while simultaneously aligning with Romantic assertions of individual imagination and subjective vision.

The basic meaning of *Lamia* seems to be that the magical spell of romance is broken when analyzed in a cold and philosophical manner. “Exposing a fantasy to the cold light of day, then, may mean losing it forever; one can't carry dreams into the real world and expect them to survive. And losing a dream may mean losing everything one has to live for.” (Nelson). In *Lamia*, Keats has captured a sly, crafty, changeable and possessive nature as well as a weakness in the face of reality. Lycius is modeled on the pattern of a Greek knight in arm who satisfies a quest motive. He is contemplative and has a philosophic bent of mind but is essentially a romantic lover, unable to bear reality, an antithesis of the dreamer’s fancy.

The use of mythology in *Lamia* enhances the poem’s aesthetic texture and atmosphere, creating a sense of enchantment in which reality and fantasy merge, thereby intensifying the poem’s magical and immersive quality. The poem’s heroic couplets and richly sensuous imagery foreground Hellenistic aesthetics through the personification of nature, while simultaneously exposing the barrenness of abstract philosophy. Lamia’s dissolution alongside Lycius’s death foregrounds the susceptibility of beauty when confronted by rational truth, echoing classical tragic concerns with hubris and inevitability. In reanimating *Lamia*, Keats transforms Greek archetypes into emotionally reverberating ideals, marked by sympathy and aesthetic admiration.

Greek Archetypes in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

While John Keats approaches Greek mythology as a living aesthetic presence capable of sustaining beauty, desire, and imaginative freedom, Thomas Stearns Eliot(1888–1965) inherits myth in a markedly altered cultural climate. Writing in an age shaped by fragmentation and spiritual fatigue, Eliot does not seek myth as an escape into sensuous plenitude but employs it as a structural device to impose order upon modern disintegration. Where Keats animates Greek archetypes through emotional immediacy and sensuous intensity, Eliot reconfigures myth with intellectual distance and ironic restraint. This shift from Romantic idealization to Modernist reassembly marks a fundamental transformation in the literary function of classical mythology.

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, represents a radical departure from Romantic Hellenism, employing Greek myths in a fragmented, allusive manner to reflect the disillusionment and cultural fragmentation of the modern world. Influenced by anthropological studies of myth, Eliot weaves Greek archetypes into a polyphonic narrative that diagnoses spiritual sterility, blending them with other traditions to create a "heap of broken images" (Eliot, *The Waste Land* line 22-23) symbolizing post-war despair. While John Keats approaches Greek mythology as a living aesthetic presence capable of sustaining beauty, desire, and imaginative freedom, Thomas Stearns Eliot inherits myth in a markedly altered cultural climate. Writing in

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The Waste Land is a poem which throws light on the problems and perplexities of modern civilisation. Eliot is a stern realist who cannot ignore the social, secular, commercial and technical compulsions of the modern world. He sought a literary strategy capable of revealing continuity between contemporary experience and historical tradition. Eliot has referred to the past in order to show the similarities of the problems of both the ages and how the experience of the past can help in finding solutions to the problems of our time. The technique of myth, symbol and parallelism makes a reference to the past. Although separated by time, the fundamental crises faced by humanity remain largely unchanged. Solutions that once helped earlier civilizations confront disorder may still hold relevance for the modern age, since both periods confront comparable forms of cultural breakdown. For this reason, he adopts the mythical method as a means of drawing structural parallels between the ancient world and the fractured realities of modern life. Eliot's "mythical method," articulated in his 1923 essay on Joyce's *Ulysses*, uses ancient myths to structure and parallel modern chaos. “In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.” (Eliot, 1923: 483) He also explains, “It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. … Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method.” (Eliot, 1923:177-178) In other words, we can say this mythical method bridges the gulf between the crisis in human history and civilization.

Greek myth used in *The Waste Land* refers to the past sins and its consequences on his land and people. The idea is that the redemption and salvation are possible through self-reformation and life of faith, service and dedication to moral values. Eliot very impressively uses the technique of ironic contrast in which he compares the situations of past and present in the poem. In the past, fairies walked on the banks of river Thames but today prostitutes wander on the banks in search of sex. The fairies washed their feet in the river water but now a days Mrs. Porter and her daughter “wash their feet in soda water” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* line 201) Similarly, sexual purity was greatly valued in the past. Its loss was followed by the death-wish and suicide of the victim like the king Oedipus and queen Jocasta did in the ancient Greece. Today sexual indulgence is the matter of routine no one bothers about it. “Hardly aware of her separated lover/ Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / 'Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.’/ When lovely woman stoops to folly and / Paces about her room again, alone,/ She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,/ And puts a record on the gramophone.” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* lines 250-256) Now the polluted river does not cleanse; dull lusts, sexual or acquisitive, hang about it now; the seeker finds no gaiety and no glory.

Eliot turns to myth as a means of confronting the complexities and anxieties of modern life. By invoking mythic patterns, he presents time not as fragmented but as an ongoing

continuum that informs human awareness. His strong sense of historical consciousness allows him to argue that the dilemmas of the present are not unprecedented, for earlier civilizations faced comparable moments of crisis. The strategies once used to negotiate such conditions, he implies, may still offer insight when reconsidered in a modern context. “T.S. Eliot used mythology in his poetry was to create a sense of continuity between the past and the present. For Eliot, the myths and legends of the past represented a kind of collective memory, connecting contemporary readers with the deep cultural and spiritual heritage of humanity.” (Kademani 775)

A primary archetype is Tiresias, the Theban prophet from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Homer's *Odyssey*, who has lived as both man and woman after a divine curse and possesses foresight. In "The Fire Sermon", Tiresias observes a mechanical sexual encounter: "I, Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see / At the violet hour" (Eliot, *The Waste Land* lines 218-220), symbolizing the poem's unifying consciousness and a bad omen for modern lust's futility. In *The Waste Land*, Tiresias emerges as the mythic consciousness through which Greek antiquity is reactivated, transforming fragmented modern experience into a symbolic reenactment of ancient myth. By invoking Tiresias, Eliot reclaims Greek antiquity as a living mythic framework, using the blind prophet to retell ancient narratives in order to interpret the spiritual barrenness of the modern world. Tiresias, as a protagonist, imparts a sense of unity to the poem as a whole. Eliot himself identifies Tiresias as the central unifying consciousness of *The Waste Land*, observing that “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character’, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest …. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.” (Eliot, *The Waste Land*, note to line 218)

Though Tiresias appears only once in the part III episode of the typist girl yet the central consciousness, which intruded through the other previous episodes now takes on the name of Tiresias. “I, Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs/ perceived the scene, and foretols the rest.” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* lines 218–19). Through Tiresias we are able to understand the contrast between the passionate love making of the past and this modern perfunctory performance. Eliot uses him as conscience of humanity, banished and disowned by thoughtless people of the modern era but he is still strong enough to prick the bubbles of their illusions, joys, hopes and fears. He is the voice of deploring the loss of spirituality in the modern world and probing into the strange disease which it has, with criminal complacency, mistaken for health. His vision pierces through this veneer of complacency and lays bare the repugnant cares and indolent pursuits, the boredom and sheer vacuum, of which humanity in the modern wasteland has fallen prey. He, therefore, is comprehensive symbol of prophecy who gives his impressions and comments on the present day world.

Another significant mythic presence in *The Waste Land* is Philomela, drawn from Greek mythology as narrated in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Subjected to sexual violence by Tereus and silenced through mutilation, Philomela’s eventual transformation into a nightingale becomes a lasting insignia of desecrated purity. Eliot reintroduces her cry within a modern urban setting, where it is rendered meaningless to an insensitive and morally numbed society. Her voice, once expressive of suffering and resistance, is reduced to an incomprehensible sound amid contemporary indifference. Through this figure, Eliot underscores the degradation of

womanhood in modern life, where female suffering persists but no longer yields poetic transformation or redemptive expression. The enclosed domestic space further intensifies this anxiety, portraying a woman haunted by vague fears, restless sounds, and empty conversation, unable to find comfort or distraction in a spiritually barren environment. "The change of Philomel by the barbarous king/ So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale/Filled all the desert with inviolable voice/ And still she cried, and still the world pursues,/'Jug Jug' to dirty ears**."** (Eliot, *The Waste Land* lines 99–103)

Greek archetypal figures in *The Waste Land* reinforce ideas of foreknowledge and unavoidable decline through Tiresias, whose prophetic awareness anticipates the poem's pervasive sense of cultural ruin. The recurring image of collapse extends from the ancient world to the modern city, where the refrain "London Bridge is falling down" echoes legendary destructions and signals the fragility of contemporary civilization. Eliot's emphasis on sterility and drought draws indirectly on ancient rituals of renewal associated with figures such as Attis or Osiris, yet these traditions are deliberately undermined to highlight the failure of regeneration in the modern age. The poem's opening declaration that "April is the cruellest month" (Eliot, *The Waste Land* line 1) overturns inherited associations of spring with rebirth, replacing hope with unease. Through such mythic echoes and concrete symbols, Eliot employs an objective correlative that translates collective emotional desolation into recognizable images, like Tiresias as a bisexual is the symbolic of gender fluidity and moral ambiguity, while Philomela critiques patriarchal violence. The poem's allusions to Greek tragedy like Oedipus's self-blinding, parallel modern blindness to spiritual needs, with thunder's Sanskrit commands—"Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." ((Eliot, *The Waste Land* line 432)—offering faltering renewal, echoing oracular prophecies. Eliot's use of Greek myths thus transforms them into diagnostic relics, haunting a godless era with faded power.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading of *Lamia* and *The Waste Land* highlights both continuity and transformation in the use of Greek mythology as English poetry moves from Romanticism to Modernism. Keats and Eliot draw upon similar mythic figures—hybrids, prophecies, and metamorphosis—but adapt them to sharply different imaginative purposes. For Keats, myth functions as a vehicle for beauty, emotional intensity, and imaginative escape, whereas Eliot reshapes the same material to expose fragmentation, loss, and cultural exhaustion.

In *Lamia,* the serpent-woman embodies illusion as a seductive alternative to rational restraint, her tragic transformation revealing the vulnerability of love and beauty under philosophical scrutiny. By contrast, Eliot's Philomela represents violated and muted suffering, her mythic cry absorbed into a modern world incapable of empathy. Tiresias, like Lamia, occupies a hybrid space, yet his divided identity serves not union or desire but detached prophecy, reflecting Modernism's distance from Romantic immediacy. While both poets engage with uncertainty, Keats embraces it through sensuous immersion, whereas Eliot renders it through fractured structure and impersonal form.

Despite shared concerns with the fragility of beauty and the violence of demystification, their differences arise from historical context. Keats's mythic vision remains restorative and

escapist, while Eliot's post-war perspective dismantles myth to reveal the hollowness of modern life. Feminist readings further connect the poems, as both Lamia and Philomela expose systems of female silencing and oppression. Ultimately, these works demonstrate the lasting flexibility of Greek myth, revived by Keats as congruence and reconfigured by Eliot as dissonance, across shifting literary and cultural landscapes.

By reworking Greek myth across radically different historical moments, both Keats and Eliot reveal how ancient archetypes continue to articulate modern alienation, exposing the persistent human struggle to find meaning, connection, and coherence in an increasingly disillusioned world.

Conclusion

A comparative reading of John Keats and T. S. Eliot reveals two markedly different yet equally purposeful engagements with Greek myth and archetype. Keats reimagines myth to celebrate beauty, imagination, and emotional depth, humanising classical figures to evoke sensuous and tragic experience. Eliot, by contrast, fragments and recontextualises myth to give form to modern disintegration, using archetypes to express spiritual barrenness and cultural decline. Together, their approaches demonstrate that myth remains vital not as a fixed tradition but as a flexible structure through which writers reinterpret human experience across time because the lasting power of myth lies not in its ancient origins but in its capacity for continual reinvention. Through their contrasting yet complementary uses of Greek mythology, both poets affirm myth as a bridge between antiquity and modernity, capable of articulating the persistent human struggle for identity, order, and significance across time.

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