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Love and Mysticism in English-Language Poetry

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Resumen

A lo largo de diversas tradiciones literarias, la mística ha tomado muchos y variados caminos, siendo un ámbito literario de difícil delimitación. Este concepto está estrechamente relacionado con el misterio, especialmente en la literatura religiosa, donde la mística se vincula con la unión del alma con Dios y el verdadero conocimiento del mundo a través de lo divino. Ligado a ello, es de especial interés la relación entre las experiencias amorosa y religiosa, que evoca ciertas correspondencias entre el amor humano y el divino. Esta idea, que se remonta a la filosofía platónica y la dicotomía entre el amor corporal y el amor del alma, ha sido recogida por poetas de diversas épocas y tradiciones interesados en dicha conexión. Quizá por el peso de la temática amorosa en la literatura que conforma la tradición inglesa, los poetas que escriben en lengua inglesa han sido el blanco principal de estudio en el presente trabajo. Así pues trataremos de abordar cómo se han tratado temas relacionados con dichas conexiones entre amor y mística —tales como la visión de la mujer como ángel o demonio, el amor como fuerza transformadora o condenatoria, el amor divino o el amor terrenal— en el ámbito de la poesía amorosa en lengua inglesa, ofreciendo un panorama de la evolución de la mística en este contexto literario.

Palabras clave

Amor, mística, poesía, literatura inglesa, tradición literaria.

Abstract

Throughout various literary traditions, mysticism has taken many and varied paths, making it a literary field that is difficult to delineate. This concept is closely related to mystery, especially in religious literature, where mysticism is linked to the union of the soul with God and the true understanding of the world through the divine. Connected to this, the relationship between romantic and religious experiences is of particular interest, evoking certain correspondences between human and divine love. This idea, which dates back to Platonic philosophy and the dichotomy between carnal love and the love of the soul, has been taken up by poets from various eras and traditions interested in this connection. Perhaps due to the prominence of the theme of love in the literature that shapes the English tradition, poets writing in the English language have been the main focus of study in this work. Thus, we will seek to address how themes related to these connections between love and mysticism—such as the vision of woman as angel or demon, love as a transformative or condemnatory force, divine love, or earthly love—have been treated in the realm of love poetry in the English language, offering an overview of the evolution of mysticism in this literary context.

Key words

Love, mysticism, poetry, English literature, literary tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the various literary traditions where mystical incursions can be traced, the concept of “mysticism” has taken many and diverse paths. Therefore, it is a literary realm that is difficult to delineate, something that can be related to the etymological meaning of the term itself (from the Greek verb, “to close”), closely related to the word “mystery.” Thus, we see that mysticism initially presents itself as a mystery. However, in its literary wanderings, the realm where this concept of “mysticism” gained the most strength was religious literature, especially when we look at the Spanish mystical poets, its foremost representatives. Starting from this religious mysticism, where the soul or spiritual consciousness are the only sources of true knowledge, we observe key aspects that will be introduced into literature, such as the union of the soul with God, the encounter with the divine, or the access to true knowledge of the world through the divine image. From these notions, various authors from different literary traditions have established their own interpretations of mystical poetry.

Of all these, one of the most interesting aspects in this work is the one that links amorous and erotic experiences to the religious experience, as the idea of the union between the human soul and God conceals a kind of love relationship that can easily be transferred to human affective-sexual relationships. It is worth noting that this connection between the divine and the carnal has been present in Western thought since the philosophy of Plato, whose thought is largely mystical, something we can easily see if we consider Pausanias' discourse on the two Aphrodites and the two Eros included in *The Symposium*. This discourse speaks to us of the existence of two types of love: the love of the body, the “pandemic” side of it—referring to passionate and occasional, one-night loves—and the love of the soul, its “celestial” side—in relation to divine love, constant and permanent over time. This is probably one of the sources from which later authors, who speak to us of amorous and erotic experience as an almost religious event, draw. At this point, it is worth mentioning personalities from numerous traditions, both Hispanic, with names like Octavio Paz or José Ángel Valente, and French, with Paul Valéry undoubtedly, and of course the Anglo-Saxon tradition where we could mention John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry and Thomas Vaughan, and Thomas Traherne, among others.

In this way, themes related and recurrent to mystical literature, and more specifically to poetry, will be introduced, also in the history of literature in the English language. These are motifs such as the vision of the woman as an angel, as a spectre or as the very divinity, with love sometimes being a kind of religion or the force that turns women into angels, but also into their opposite, demons, when love is unrequited. Other Anglo-Saxon poets will speak to us of the existence of eternal loves, that endure after death in a sort of divine paradise, where souls live and merge. Following this line, we will address poems that speak of loves so pure that they elicit the envy of angels and demons, that turn women into angels or condemn them to darkness when love disappears, something that implies a predominantly heteroerotic male gaze that, however, should not make us think it was the only one. In this regard, we will also address the vision of certain female authors who speak of the dichotomy between the angelic and the demonic in the love experience, such as Ella Wheeler Wilcox; or who deal with the extracorporeal union of lovers, as in the case of Elizabeth Barrett Browning; and even some of them, like Emily Dickinson, reversing the male gaze that sees the beloved as an angel, will treat the loved one as a superior, almost divine being. All these versions, branches, interpretations, and transformations will also be of interest in this work, and we will consider them later.

Ultimately, we observe that numerous poems written in the English language treat love in religious terms, sometimes taking very unique and original paths. In this work, we will therefore focus on addressing some of them to offer an outline of the evolution of mysticism in amorous poetry written in the English language.

1. MYSTICAL LITERATURE

The mystical tradition in European literature finds deep connections with various religious and philosophical traditions stemming from Greco-Latin culture and various Eastern traditions. This tradition extended throughout the Western world, particularly due to the influence of Christianity, highlighting Christian mysticism and the union with the divine. At this point, we cannot fail to mention canonical authors such as Fray Luis de León, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa, St. Augustine, Meister Eckhart, and Hildegard von Bingen. Alongside the latter, other related traditions should be considered to approach mystical thought, such as the mystical stream of Islam, Sufism, Jewish Kabbalah, and Neoplatonism (Martínez Sánchez, 2010).

In the specific case of literature, we can highlight a strong religious mystical current (especially represented by the 16th-century Spanish poets mentioned earlier), where the essence is to express the feeling of union between God and the soul. This encounter is of such magnitude that it can hardly be described in words, hence the recourse to poetry, where poets use a series of symbols and metaphors from which literary developments arise, such as spiritual access to higher knowledge or all the truths of existence. Particularly interesting is the interpretation established by certain authors who, in their attempt to explain this encounter of the soul with God, employ terms of earthly love, bringing the religious experience closer to the erotic (Villalba 2011: 10-34).

1.1. Mysticism in English Language Poetry

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1911) defines a mystic as “someone who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the intellect.” In this sense, we might speak of mysticism as a doctrine that seeks to explain some of the more complex aspects of the human condition from a spiritual perspective. Thus, we can highlight numerous literary traditions that have sought to explain, for example, the world and nature following the idea that we are a microcosm that repeats its proportions and elements, as well as numerous thoughts that relate the individual to nature or creation. There are also notable literary traditions that attempt to account for the union of the soul with the divine, an ineffable experience expressed through diverse images or symbols. For instance, we can appreciate works that address human relationships in religious terms, comparing the love between men and women with the love or devotion to God,

or even seeing a correspondence between the presence of the beloved and the divine presence. Related to this is the frequent idea of accessing a higher truth or a sort of primitive human condition through either religion, in some cases, or the romantic or erotic relationship with the beloved, in others, or even through contact with the natural environment (Spurgeon 1913: 1-5).

These are some of the ideas that are often repeated in various fields of universal literature, including the Anglo-Saxon context, which is the subject of this study. We will address examples that illustrate most of the mystical incursions mentioned in the previous paragraph by examining a series of poems individually to exemplify some of these themes. However, from a more general perspective, and following the trajectory outlined by the literary critic Caroline F. E. Spurgeon in her work “Mysticism in English Literature”, we can distinguish three periods within English mysticism: the mysticism of love and beauty, of nature, of philosophy, and of religious devotion (Spurgeon 1913: 14).

Starting with the first of these periods, the author particularly mentions the work of Percy B. Shelley, who is notable for his idealism in his vision of humanity and his almost divine association with love and imagination. She also highlights Robert Browning, William Blake, and Wordsworth, authors who share the idea of knowing God through love. Similarly, Spurgeon mentions Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for whom the possession of feminine beauty was a way to attain knowledge close to the divine; likewise, she highlights Coventry Patmore and the notion that one can feel God in the love between man and woman. Ultimately, the author discusses the trajectory of John Keats with his idea that love belongs to the soul and not the body, and his quest for truth in beauty (Spurgeon 1913: 33-36).

Moving on to the mysticism connected to nature, where Spurgeon particularly considers Henry Vaughan, Wordsworth, and Richard Jefferies, there are prominent ideas that link the divine and the natural as if all the unity and meaning of existence were contained in nature. In other words, they advocate the idea that what we perceive of the world through the senses is a microcosm representing the macrocosm, the totality of existence contained, in this case, in nature (Spurgeon 1913: 57-59).

Regarding Spurgeon's discussion of mystical philosophers, perhaps the most interesting mention is of Coleridge and the pain that stems from the loss of contact with the divine. More intriguing are her observations on religious mysticism, the last of the periods, where the author introduces especially interesting terms for our study; this includes aspects such as describing a love for the divine in terms of earthly love, leaning towards an erotic mysticism (Spurgeon 1913: 72-73).

In conclusion, the exploration of mysticism in literature, as presented in Spurgeon's work, reveals the constant human search for meaning and spiritual connection in the world. From an initial definition of the mystic as someone who seeks truths beyond the intellect, to the detailed analysis of different mystical incursions in English literature, we can highlight a wide range of diverse mystical perspectives and experiences that find their best expression in poetic language. Thus, as the author demonstrates, English-speaking poets, through love and beauty, nature, philosophy, or religious devotion, have sought to shed light on the deeper aspects of the human condition, in addition to revealing the continual need for transcendence and spiritual connection present in all times and cultures (Spurgeon 1913: 111-113).

1.2. Love Theme in English Language Poetry

From medieval ballads to contemporary poetry, love has been a subject of exploration, reflection, and interest for numerous English-language poets. Going back to the most primitive treatment of the theme, when discussing love in literature, it is necessary to begin with the “courtly love” and its origins in the works of French troubadours such as Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France, versions of legends like that of Tristan, and of course, works on love such as Andreas Capellanus' “De Amore” and “Roman de la Rose”, jointly written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. With these works, which most notably succeeded in poetizing love for the first time, a key tradition in addressing love poetry began (Allen, 2015: 1-9).

Moving from this initial period and traversing different centuries, cultures, and traditions, love poetry is undoubtedly one of the inherent manifestations of Western literature, where love poems are always a constant. Despite adaptations to different realities, they always maintain a series of unchangeable elements — some of which, according to Peter Lewis Allen, include the lover's desire, their separation from the

beloved, the need for new love, and the need to express emotion in song — arranged to create a fictional world in which the reader participates, recognizing it. This latter point could help us better understand the universality of the theme we are addressing (Allen, 2015: 1-9).

Regarding the specific case of the tradition under discussion, English-language poetry, courtly love was also a literary desire in medieval ballads and romances; an example of this is the production of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), to whom the work “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” is attributed, a great reflection of the precepts of courtly love. Similarly, later authors, corresponding to the Renaissance and Elizabethan periods, echoed the theme, with the poetic works of William Shakespeare being particularly notable, along with others such as Edmund Spenser's “Amoretti”, Sir Philip Sidney's sonnets, or Christopher Marlowe's “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”. Moving forward, as expected, Anglo-Saxon Romantic poetry from the late 18th and early 19th centuries explored the theme of love, which was adapted to very personal readings in the works of quintessential Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron. This generation paved the way for continued development in the Victorian era, where sentimentality and emotion contributed a personal treatment to the theme of love. We refer at this point to the trajectories of poets as important as Lord Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, or Christina Rossetti, who bridged the gap between earlier generations and the emerging contemporary poetry. Arriving at the 20th century and beyond, the theme of love has not only not lost its strength but has been particularly vibrant, demonstrating the universality of love as a literary theme and its ability to respond to the needs of each era and society. Examples of this are the trajectories of poets who have echoed the theme, such as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, or Sylvia Plath (Gray, 2019: 9, 32, 52, 95, 101, 132, 141).

In addition, it is worth mentioning the evolution of the theme on the other side of the Atlantic, as love has also been a protagonist in many of the major works of American poetry. Various authors, in addition to those mentioned, including Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg, Bukowski, Sharon Olds, and Rupi Kapur, belonging to different movements, poetic groups, and epochs, have offered a rich and diverse range of perspectives on love (Bartra, 1984; Urtecho, 2017).

In conclusion, we can observe how the theme of love has, like in most Western poetic traditions, had a noteworthy impact on English literature in general and its poetry in particular. Likewise, as love tends to be, it has been a constant throughout the centuries, movements, and cultures, always adapting to the interests and requirements of each moment. These and the aforementioned are, ultimately, evidence of the enduring, vital, and universal nature of the theme of love, reflecting not only the great popularity it has always enjoyed but also the profound connection between love, poetry, and humanity (Fromm, 1956: 34-37).

1.3. Love Experience as a Religious Experience in English Language Poetry

Following the thread of what has been outlined in the previous section, it is worth adding that the treatment of the amorous experience as a religious experience has been a recurring theme in English-language literature, especially in poetry. This is evident in the works of Christian mystic poets, metaphysical poets, and romantics who establish correspondences between human love and divine love, attempting to explore the transcendental nature of human relationships and to seek the sacred within the earthly.

We have briefly outlined in previous sections the nature of mysticism and its literary manifestation, understanding literature, and particularly mystical poetry, as an attempt by poets to express knowledge of God through the encounter between the divine and the divine part of the human body, the soul or spirit. This poetic attempt to account for the mystical experience has always been hindered by the inert ineffability of an experience of such complexity, something that poets have tried to overcome by resorting to mechanisms such as symbols, associations, images, or allegories. Specifically, one of the most successful formulas for addressing this situation has been precisely the treatment of the amorous experience as a metaphor for the divine encounter in question.

We have already briefly discussed the mystical presence in English-language literature, so in this section, we will focus on the first of the periods mentioned by Caroline F.E. Spurgeon in her work, “Mysticism in English Literature”, where she does not hesitate to speak of “mystics of love” to refer to those poets — especially Browning, Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, Rossetti, and Patmore — for whom love is indeed the solution to the mystery of life and a form of bond between God and man. For some of the authors mentioned by Spurgeon, love is the highest aspiration to which man can

dedicate himself, so that directing one's life to it is an act of such transcendence that it is practically divine.

In these correspondences between the amorous and the spiritual, each poet, in their own way, describes the encounter with divinity in terms of a love relationship, alluding to the different elements that participate in it. One of the most important is, as it could not be otherwise, the presence of the lovers, a man and a woman who live in a romantic relationship. Spurgeon even mentions certain authors who conceive of God as a masculine force that meets the soul, with the soul being the feminine presence; from the encounter of both arises what is traditionally called “mystical ecstasy”, that encounter or communion between God and the soul, described in terms of a union not only sentimental but also physical and carnal between a man and a woman, a source of life, just like divinity. From this, we can also conclude that in the works of many English poets there is also the idea of sexuality as the origin of the natural and the divine.

In conclusion, we can highlight how, in poetry, human love is an outstanding means of accounting for the encounter between the mortal and the divine; the encounter of the mortal souls of lovers represents access to the divine part that resides in every human being, just as love reveals to man the face of God.

2. POEM ANALYSIS

As we have briefly addressed in the previous sections, English-language poetry constitutes a particularly privileged literary tradition for exploring certain universal themes related to literary history. Among these motifs, one that has especially captivated poets within the tradition of interest to us is the treatment of the amorous sentiment, a universal and primal theme like poetry itself. In its journey through various epochs, literary movements, and societies, love as a literary theme has undergone numerous changes, adapting its treatment to various currents and interests that have resulted in literary and poetic works of universal interest. One such treatment, of primary interest in the present work, is the fusion of the amorous theme and mystical poetry.

As a result of this union, we can highlight numerous verses that explore both the earthly bonds of love and the spiritual quest for the divine, blending both experiences and accounting for the union and correspondences between the earthly and the transcendent shared by love, religious experience, and poetry. Therefore, in this section, we will focus on the analysis of a series of selected poems focusing on the theme we have just presented. In this way, from romantic authors to contemporary ones, including both British and American poets, we will try to address how these visions are represented in English-language poetry, accounting for the diverse positions of different authors.

Among the sub-themes we have outlined to organize the selected corpus, we can find poems centered on the representation of woman as an angel — as well as on the celestial and spiritual connotations associated with this figure, which at times becomes a ghost or specter —, as well as on the profound union of enamored souls, exploring how poets articulate an almost spiritual connection, evoking images that emulate the fusion of the soul and divinity. Through this, we will finally delve into the theme of love of divine purity, whose expression often blends the sacred and the earthly. With all this, we hope to deepen our understanding of such a specific and special theme as the treatment given by various traditions of English-language poetry to the connections between love, spirituality, and the human condition.

2.1. Poems that Present a Vision of Woman as an Angel

One of the themes chosen to delve into the connections between love and spirituality is the traditional motif of the woman-angel, which gains special strength in mystical poetry but even transcends it, for example if we consider the Renaissance literary trope of the *donna angelicata*, which presents a vision of the beloved close to the divine and almost acting as a mediator between God and man, thus bringing the latter closer to the celestial realm, indicating the presence of religious influence. Additionally, it is worth noting that, as an aesthetic motif, the image of this *donna* represents an especially evocative figure to account for the ineffable nature of the mystical experience and serves as a particularly suitable symbol for equating love and spirituality (Sánchez & Daza, 2021: 162-175).

In the specific case of poetry written in the English language, there is also no lack of examples of poems that address the mentioned topic and the theme at hand. Numerous poets employ the powerful image of the woman transformed into an angel as a symbol that transcends the material and brings the reader closer to the ineffable, highlighting the connection between the human and the spiritual. To exemplify this theme in the context at hand, we have selected two poems that present a particular interpretation of the motif: “To Helen” by Edgar Allan Poe, where the image is used to depict an encounter with a female presence of such purity and perfection that she is practically an angel, whose presence purifies the poetic self; and “Angel or Demon” by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, which goes beyond the trope, where it is love that has the power to transform women not only into angels but also into demons. Thus, we can highlight, in the reading of both compositions, two similar interpretations regarding the theme of woman as angel, but also very personal ones, as while Poe uses the image of the woman as a motif for the purification of the beloved's soul, in Wheeler's case, perhaps due to it being a female perspective, it is the beloved himself who, through his actions, has the ability to elevate the woman to the status of an angel, or to condemn her, with his indifference, to a demonic condition.

Starting with the first of the mentioned poems, we appreciate that “To Helen” is a love-themed poem published by the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), whose recipient seems to be one of his known lovers, Sarah Helen Whitman. The possibility has been popularised that they first met in a rose garden, a space mystified in

the poem at hand. It deals with the theme of the romantic encounter between two lovers within the framework of mythical and mystified nature, a kind of locus amoenus adapted to the precepts of romanticism and mysticism (Whitman, 1860: 49-52).

Specifically, the poem narrates the encounter with a female figure of great beauty, almost a spectre, during a July night, with magical silver light emanating from the moon over the open roses, sketching an image of an almost enchanted garden. This is the conducive environment for Helen's appearance, a luminous figure dressed in white, who inexorably reaches the poetic voice by the force of destiny. It was also destiny that guided the poetic voice to the woman's figure until, at the moment of her contemplation, everything else disappeared, leaving only the light emanating from the woman.

Even after her departure, the image of her eyes and her light remains within the lover, illuminating him, with a brightness more intense than that of the sun itself. All this story is internally arranged with great narrativism, almost as if it were a tale or rather a legend; thus it consists of an introduction presenting the encounter and describing its space-time characteristics, followed by a climax when the encounter between the protagonists occurs and the woman's light surrounds the man, until finally, we find a resolution when everything extinguishes and the lady's eyes illuminate everything surrounding the poetic voice.

Formally, the poem is composed of several stanzas of irregular measure that do not seem to fit any metric computation, nor is there absolute consistency regarding rhyme, although this does not detract from the poem's rhythm or sonority, which is also achieved through resources that contribute to the cohesion of the poem, despite its length. Among these resources, we especially appreciate all those arranged to recreate the aura described in the poem and that point to a certain oneirism, almost as if it were a dream. In this sense, what is described in the poem is practically an apparition of a being halfway between the ghostly, the celestial, and the human, a pure and almost virginal soul (especially if we consider the reference to Diana, goddess of the hunt; line 101), but that also hides something sinister (especially if we focus on the moment when the light of her eyes obscures everything else and remains floating in the air).

In conclusion, the most remarkable aspect of the poem, beyond the love theme, almost mystical and somewhat cursed, would be the presence of the female being, an

ambivalent apparition as we have just outlined, together with the entire scenario that the author describes almost cinematographically, a magical aura conducive to such an apparition, it is a garden at night full of images that come from the classical tradition and that remind us of other poems by the author such as “Annabelle Lee”, which like the present poem insists on the divine nature of a woman who in “To Helen” is used to purify the soul of the beloved, thus following the tradition of the *donna angelicata* trope where the woman is practically a mediator between God and man, who appears to guide the latter's soul towards spiritual perfection.

In contrast to this vision, so purist and linked to tradition (despite the novelty provided by the poet's vision), is the case of the vision that Wheeler presents in her poem, where love is not always a source of purity, salvation, and goodness, but can sometimes be quite the opposite. Thus, in “Angel or Demon”, a poem by the American writer Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919), published in the anthology “Poems of Passion” (1883), the poetic voice questions the nature of being and its link to the angelic or demonic condition, perhaps highlighting the dual condition of all human beings. Alongside this overarching theme, in the poem at hand, there are two main ideas: first, that good and evil have the same origin—”For angels and devils are cast in one mould,/ Till love guides them upward, or downward” (lines 39-41) —and that the causes that lead people to lean towards one path or another are different; and second, that the main cause of the corruption or purity of souls is love—”Great good and great evil are born in one breast./ Love horns us and hoofs us – or gives us our wings” (lines 51-54).

Thus, the poetic voice begins by addressing its beloved, who confesses the nature and goodness of an angel because the love they feel is the cause (“If I am an angel – why, you are the cause”. line 14). But soon that love becomes corrupted, the “wheelman” abandons his place and loses the “wealth of my soul” (line 27) thus beginning the degradation of the poetic voice, which, due to her love sorrow, for being abandoned, ends up becoming, at the end of the poem, a demon: “You must thank your own worth for what I grew to be...” (lines 57-58).

2.2. Poems that Deal with the Theme of the Union of Lovers' Souls

Following with the subthemes stemming from the deep connections between the experience of love and spirituality, we can appreciate that another poetic manifestation of the longing for a transcendental connection that transcends the physical realm is the motif of the fusion of lovers' souls. Therefore, in this section, we will briefly delve into poems belonging to the English tradition that evoke this spiritual fusion of lovers, in order to provide different examples of the representation of this particular interpretation that reinterprets the theme of eternal love, perhaps as an answer to both the mystical and amorous infallibility mentioned in previous sections.

The first of the chosen poems is “How Do I Love Thee?”, one of the most representative poems of Victorian literature; it was written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) and published in the 1850 anthology “Sonnets from the Portuguese” dedicated to her relationship with her husband Robert Browning. The theme of this particular poem is undeniably romantic, addressing the love felt by the poetic voice towards its recipient, which, as we have mentioned, can be related to the husband of the dawn, and its inexorability beyond death. In this sense, we appreciate that the composition begins with a question regarding the nature of said love, so the poem provides an answer to that question by enumerating the ways in which the poetic voice loves the recipient. It is a love that encompasses everything, that starts from the lowest and reaches the highest, and that is ultimately so powerful that not even death could end it, so if God allows it, it could endure beyond death itself.

The internal structure of the poem is therefore centered around the initial question, which also gives the poem its name: “How Do I love Thee?” (line 1), and around it, various statements are inserted that try to answer it. Particularly interesting is the first response given, as it already points to the purity of said love, which is placed on the same level as Being and Grace, clear references to the supreme deity. It is also said that it is a love that starts from the lowest, alluding to its human condition, but that reaches the highest, conferring a divine nature. It continues to describe the feeling throughout the two central stanzas, where it presents a love that encompasses everything, omnipresent like the sun but also intimate and private like a “candle-light” (line 6). It is a love that preserves the purity of childhood, and that withstands the disappointments of life.

The fourth and final stanza, conclusive, adds that the poetic voice loves with every part of its body, but also of its soul, so that after the physical death of the lovers, the possibility is raised that, if God allows it, it will still love more after dying. The form used by the author to arrange all the outlined ideas is the sonnet, typical of the Victorian tradition, so we find a set of 14 verses of greater art divided into two expositional quatrains and two conclusive tercets that rhyme in an interlocked consonant rhyme according to the metric scheme ABBA ABBA CDC DCD. Additionally, aside from the aforementioned, we appreciate that formally, the most remarkable aspect of the poem is the metaphors included to describe the celestial condition of love—all of them related to God, Grace, and the soul—, in contrast to those that are linked to the human condition of the lovers—the breath, the smile, the tears.

Given all of the foregoing, by way of conclusion, we appreciate that, in the manner of Tiresias' speech in Plato's Symposium, the author presents us with a pandemic, corporeal, human love, but one that is also celestial, pure, divine, these being the two essential forms of loving with which the poetic voice responds to the question “How Do I love Thee?”. She describes, therefore, said love through images related to both conditions to finally insist on the purity of said love, to such an extent that, when her human condition is exhausted, the possibility of continuing to love after death is established if God allows it.

There are many parallels that we find in the treatment of the theme between the poem we have just discussed and the following one, also by the same author, but regarding which we can find certain evolution, as we will see below; the author goes further: from desiring that death represents an extension of love, to almost wishing for it to reach the moment when the souls of the lovers dissolve their bodies and merge in eternal life as a result of the longing for pure celestial love. In other words, it continues to give us the feeling that the author defends love by censoring the carnal.

The poem we refer to is “When our two souls,” a poem by the English writer Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), originally published in the 1850 anthology “Sonnets from the Portuguese” where it constitutes Sonnet 22; and also in the collection: “Poems” (1844). Its theme is particularly romantic, pointing to a pure love as the author often does, although in this case it goes further: instead of referring to a typical couple of lovers, it directly mentions their souls, emphasising the purity of such love and approaching the concept of soulmates. Taking into account all mentioned, we can summarise the theme of the sonnet as follows: the power of pure love between two souls that serves as both a home and armour against the world.

Thus, the composition begins as if it were in *media res*, when in the first quatrain the two souls begin to merge until they become one. The “extensions” (line 3) that is, the boundaries, break and burn, probably in an allusion to the fire of passion, and that almost mystical union with the soul of the beloved is reason enough for the poetic voice to believe, in the second quatrain, capable of overcoming all the bitterness of the world. Henceforth, we encounter a series of images and metaphors that continue to manifest the purity of the lovers, a purity that even incites envy from the angels, as they want to come between the couple.

The lovers also distance themselves from the cruel human condition, with which they share nothing, for their love elevates them to a higher plane, although we do not know exactly what it is, as we have just mentioned, nor do they feel that the angels are at their level. In relation to this latter point, the final tercet concludes with the idea of seeking a worthy place to live their love, where happiness is solely to love each other and “with darkness and the death-hour rounding it” (lines 14-15) a dark and dangerous final idea that points, as Barrett Browning's poetry often does, to constant love beyond death. In other words, it is as if such a great love has no place in life, and eternity is necessary to experience it.

As typical, once again, in the author's poetry and in Victorian literature, the strophic form that encompasses everything outlined is the sonnet, a set of 14 verses of greater art divided into two expository quatrains and two concluding tercets that rhyme in enclosed consonance according to the metric scheme ABBA ABBA CDC DCD. Moreover, formally, the most remarkable aspect of the poem is the allegory of the soulmates of the lovers in contrast to other less pure images of the human and angelic condition.

In conclusion, it is needless to say that we are probably facing one of the most extreme cases in the treatment of constant love beyond souls, especially because it even alludes to voluntary

2.3. Poems Dealing with Love of Divine Purity

The various treatments of the themes we have been proposing have led us to two very different paths: the motif of powerful and passionate earthly love that makes lovers compare themselves and feel superior to angels and divinity, on the one hand, and the motif of love whose purity is such that it is probably divine. In the case of the latter, those that interest us in this subsection, the purity of the lovers is such that they do not dare to challenge divinity by feeling superior, although they understand that their nature, so loving and celestial, is very close. However, what does occur in some of these poems is the opposite: it is the angels who feel envy of a love of such purity, so perhaps we find ourselves facing a new transgression that vindicates earthly love over the carnal, for being of greater purity, or if not of a more true purity, but in this case from a stance of false modesty.

This is the situation we find in “Annabel Lee”, a narrative poem by the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), written in 1849 but published posthumously. It deals with the theme of tragic love that leads to the death of the beloved, a death that nevertheless does not signify the end of love, as it is so pure and intense that it continues after death.

Thus, what is narrated in the composition is the romantic relationship that the narrator and Annabel Lee lived in a kingdom by the sea during their youth, almost from childhood, displaying a love so pure that it resembles the divine, as it even becomes the target of jealousy from the angels. However, one day the beloved dies victim to an illness caused precisely by the envy of the angels, who, unable to bear the existence of such love, decide to separate the lovers by sending a “A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling / My beautiful Annabel Lee” (lines 15-16). She will be buried in a sepulchre in the kingdom by the sea, leaving the poetic voice alone and desolate. However, unable to accept his loss, the narrator repeats the idea that their love is eternal, and so pure that not even death itself can end it, believing to feel Annabel Lee, almost as an angelic and transcendental figure, in the light of the moon and the stars, as well as in dreams.

The poem consists of six stanzas of irregular meter that do not seem to fit any metric scheme, nor is there absolute consistency in terms of rhyme, although we can highlight a certain tendency towards consonance rhyme in the even verses. In any case, it is a poem of great rhythm and sonority, also achieved through resources that contribute to the cohesion of the poem, despite its length. Among these resources, we especially appreciate the constant repetitions of sounds and also of elements such as the name of Annabel Lee, the kingdom by the sea, and the sea itself. It is also a poem of great symbolism, especially if we consider the “black cloud” that freezes and kills the young woman or all the references to constant love beyond death, achieved through the immortality of souls, which allows their love story to continue eternally.

Regarding the arrangement of ideas, we appreciate that this love story is narrated following the chronological order of events, so that they fit into the internal structure of the poem. Thus, the first stanza presents the story, with its spatial location (“a kingdom by the sea”, line 2) and the two main characters, the poetic voice and Annabel Lee, with the reference to the intense love that binds them (“lived with no other thought/ than to love and be loved by me”, lines 5-6).

The second stanza follows the path set by the first, alluding to their love born during their childhood and already introducing the trigger for the lovers' separation: the jealousy felt by the angels. It is this envy that, in the third stanza, causes these “winged seraphs of Heaven” (lines 11-12) to send the cloud that freezes Annabel Lee, so her relatives, relatives of high birth — emphasising the noble origin of the young woman, which intensifies her celestial connection —, take her away to bury her.

Next, the fourth stanza, perhaps as a reflection of the pain and bewilderment that the loss causes in the poetic voice, insists on highlighting the envy of the angels, who were not even happy in heaven upon knowing a love purer than theirs. After that, in the fifth stanza, the idea is introduced, as a resolution, that not even the almighty angels, or their opposites, the demons, can separate the souls of the lovers, as, as the sixth and final stanza states, the soul of Annabel Lee is present in dreams and in the light of the moon and the stars.

Taking all of the above into account, we can conclude that Annabel Lee defends an idea of love closely linked to mysticism, where the soul is defended above the corporeal and eternal pure passion, something that fits perfectly with the atmosphere and fabulous environment that the poem recreates, almost like a fairy tale, which converges with the tone and narrativism that the author employs, key aspects to insert a love story that transcends not only the earthly in defying death but also the celestial, as it practically mocks the angels. It is a love that is above the latter, almost as if it were on par with the divine and even more so, as if it surpasses it.

To compare Poe's stance, very similar to that of poets who treated women as if they were angels, we will address, next, a female perspective, that of Emily Dickinson, and the treatment she establishes about the loved one seen from the female perspective as a superior and transcendent being, a savior and a guide who, like a messiah, completely transforms the world of the beloved.

This is the case of “He Touched Me, So I Live Now”, a poem by the American poet Emily Elizabeth Dickinson where the encounter is described as a superior being as a transcendental experience. It is narrated in terms that can range from religious to romantic, practically in the manner of a mystical adoration, where being in contact with the adored being marks a before and after in the poetic voice, for since then she lives without being able to forget his touch, an experience after which she is no longer the same, but a person with greater awareness of the world and herself.

We do not know who the person touching the poetic voice is, but leaning towards a mystical and transcendental reading, it could be either the divinity itself or the beloved elevated to the status of deity. This encounter is introduced to us at the beginning of the poem, and after it, the poetic voice focuses on describing the sensations and effects that it has had on her being. She feels like a superior being, improved and more aware of her potential.

To convey these images, the author creates a religious ambiance, incorporating certain biblical allusions that center around the concept of encountering God as a means of salvation or spiritual fortification. Particularly noteworthy is the portrayal of Rebekah, the wife of Isaac in Genesis, whose enrapturement could pacify the presence that touched the poetic voice. The poem's internal structure revolves around this

encounter and its impact on the female protagonist. Formally, it is longer than typical of Dickinson's work, consisting of three stanzas of six lines each, with rhyming patterns: the first stanza rhymes with the second, the fourth with the fifth, and the third with the sixth.

Moreover, what stands out among all mentioned is the description of the encounter crafted through an ambiguous lens, which could be interpreted as both a religious and romantic experience. This, in our view, signifies an exploration into mystical poetry, where the fusion of the soul with God is depicted in terms of a romantic relationship. Additionally, the notion that a solitary touch can utterly transform one's essence suggests a connection with the soul rather than the physical body.

2.4. Poems that Defend Human Love Against Divine Love

In contrast to the poems we've just discussed, let's highlight, in the final analysis, the opposite case: poets who seek to strip away the rhetorical garments of mystical ineffability that, at times, can imprison poetic language in much the same way that religious impositions confine genuine human passions.

This is precisely what we find in “The Garden of Love”, a pre-romantic poem penned by William Blake (1757-1827) and published in the 1789 anthology “Songs of Innocence and of Experience.” It champions the notion of a human, natural love, whose desires and passions are stifled by religious authority. The reference to the garden in the title can thus be linked to the primordial paradise from which the first man and woman were expelled for defying God by partaking of the forbidden fruit (perhaps a sexual metaphor). Hence, Blake's poem proposes a return to that primal joy inherent in the human condition, free from the constraints that seek to suppress our desires. We might even perceive in the poem a sense of urgency in seizing what life offers us, akin to *carpe diem* or “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may”, for nothing remains unbroken against the passage of time, and what is not seized today will vanish tomorrow.

Ultimately, the poetic voice encounters two obstacles to the fulfillment of desires: religious mandates, in this case, and the relentless march of time, juxtaposed with childhood innocence. These ideas are laid out in an almost narrative structure, with an introduction occupying the first stanza wherein the protagonist returns to the “garden of

love” (symbolic of youth, the time of passions) after many years, only to find it disordered and withered. The crux of the matter then unfolds in the second stanza, where the garden of love has lost its liberty and allure. It is bound by commandments, by prohibitions; flowers have been supplanted by priests, vividly depicting the loss of youth and the imposition of constraints, with gravestones emerging as harbingers of death.

Finally, as a resolution, in the third stanza, we encounter the notion of joy and desires ensnared by brambles, a tree laden with biblical symbolism typically associated with the presence of God. Yet here, it signifies not a positive presence, but rather the end of the most mundane passions that the poetic voice seeks to defend. Thus, it is already too late for enjoyment, and in these closing verses, we glimpse a plea to relish what youth and passion can offer before it's too late.

Considering all of the above, the most striking aspect in formal terms is the pervasive use of allegory, which, through numerous images and metaphors, particularly religious symbols, presents to us a corrupted and debased Eden to which the poetic voice, akin to a *Homo viator*, returns after many years, unable to recognize it despite it once being a place of happiness—a past time associated with childhood or youth.

In conclusion, returning to the theme at hand, we see that Blake offers a fervent critique of mandated religion and explores themes of lost innocence, repression, and the inevitable confrontation with the realities of adulthood as symbols that champion free, passionate, earthly love over restrictive spiritual love.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can appreciate how throughout this work we have explored the varied and profound connections between mysticism and the theme of love, specifically focusing on the treatment of both topics throughout the history of English-language poetry and how it has integrated and reinterpreted the connections between these experiences. This important literary motif materializes, as we have seen, in the awareness that mysticism implies a mystery, translated into ineffability, allowing it to take on myriad forms in literature as it seeks to address the enigma of expressing mystical experience. Love, too, has an ineffable quality, a force that overwhelms and silences us, as few words can adequately describe such intense feelings. This is a primary commonality between both experiences, making them particularly conducive to helping each other in their attempt at expression.

Thus, mystical poets soon saw the possibility of narrating the union of the soul with God in terms of a romantic encounter, as if the romantic and passionate love of humans were the only comparable experience to the love a creature feels for its creator. Similarly, poets who dedicated their verses to love echoed these correspondences to express their feelings in terms of divine adoration. This gives rise to the idea of a “mystical love” or “loving mysticism,” the main focus of this work. Moreover, as I believe no poets can capture the essence of love as well as English poets, this study has focused on how English-language authors have interpreted and adapted this theme, serving different literary traditions from various contexts and particular visions.

To exemplify the different reinterpretations of both experiences, we have also attempted to trace the history of mysticism in English literature, identifying various periods and approaches that have helped us understand the evolution and readings of mystical poetry across different times and realities. Similarly, we have addressed the treatment of the theme of love in the literary tradition under study to corroborate its universality and its ability to respond to the interests and demands of each historical moment.

Regarding the specific poems we have analyzed, we have observed how certain verses speak of female presences so pure that, in the eyes of lovers, they are practically angelic. This metaphor can be used both to underline the beauty and perfection of the

beloved and to metaphorize the soul's encounter with God, interpretations we can draw from Edgar Allan Poe's "To Helen". A similar reading would be to understand the romantic relationship between man and such a pure being as a path of moral improvement where the angelic woman brings the man closer to God, transforming him into a better being. There are also poems that speak of the opposite reality, where love, with its affection or indifference, has the power to transform lovers into either a pure and divine being or its opposite, a symbol of evil, ideas highlighted in Ella Wheeler Wilcox's "Angel or Demon". This transformative power of love is especially present in the analyzed poems, particularly those that treat it as a transcendental and almost spiritual experience, where the encounter with the beloved is almost like standing before a divine being, as found in Emily Dickinson's compositions.

Other cases speak directly of a divine, pure, and heavenly love, so pure that it is as if the souls of the lovers meet, and this encounter is of such magnitude that earthly life is even depreciated in favor of eternal life where the souls can always live in love, ideas reflected by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. However, divine love does not always find such positive connotations; it can also be a source of pain when it provokes the envy of equally divine beings who do not experience the same satisfaction and, driven by envy, separate the lovers, as happens with the protagonists of Poe's "Annabel Lee". Finally, this negative contrast between the celestial and the earthly is also seen in the last poem analyzed, William Blake's "The Garden of Love," where Blake, far from continuing the tradition of linking the human and the sacred, criticizes the prohibitive nature of the latter and defends the freedom of human passions and instincts, perhaps to elevate the carnal over the celestial and to challenge the relationships between love and spirituality that are as old as human existence itself.

In summary, this dissertation has sought to demonstrate that mysticism and the experience of love are intrinsically linked in certain expressions of English-language poetry, where we can find both poems in which human love becomes a means to understand and express union with the spiritual, and verses where authors use the metaphor of love to explore mystical themes, reflecting in their poems the search for meaning and spiritual connection in the world. Thus, we can appreciate that these poems showcase the human need to understand one's own condition, the surrounding world, emotions, and the relationship with otherness and the transcendent.

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