

# **The Image of Egypt as Reflected in English Poetry: A Pre-colonial Approach<sup>(\*)</sup>**

**Ahmad Mohammad Abd Al-salam Ahmad**

Faculty of Arts, Fayoum University, Egypt

## **Abstract**

The history of ancient kingdoms such as Egypt has been a pinnacle of religious, cultural and even architectural significance. Egypt, as an organized territory, existed in the pre-colonial era as an eminent kingdom and has been the epitome of civilization in Africa. Studies of scholars and critics have focused for the last four decades on post-colonialism, showing the consequences of colonialism on different realms of the human activity. This paper is an attempt to study how poetry in Egypt may have inadvertently attracted the West to the rich culture and beauty and later on colonization. This paper examines the role of selected English poetry about Egypt that played a significant role in colonization by portraying the attractiveness of Egypt. The question is how far this image contributed not only to an academic interest like that of Napoleon but also to a materialistic objective, namely a continuation of the British colonial project? In other words, how did a cultural interest engender an imperialistic one? Actually, the pre-colonial theory in literature, especially in the nineteenth century, has played a significant role in attracting the European colonizers to Egypt. This is clearly shown in poems by Rawnsleyas, Shelly, Hunt, Lang and Melville. For the most part these poets romanticize the idea and experience of Egypt either through their descriptive imagination or narration. Therefore, these poetic descriptions portrayed the beauty of Egypt in a way that masked the misconceptions about Egypt, showing it as a fascinating place.

**Keywords: Pre-colonialism, english poetry, Egypt, pre-colonial theory**

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## المستخلص

### مصر في الشعر الإنجليزي في فترة ما قبل الاستعمار

كانت حملة نابليون بونابرت إلى مصر حدثاً فريداً ساهم في إلقاء الضوء على مصر وإمبراطوريتها القديمة التي فاقت في روعتها وهيبتها كل مكنون العقل والمشاعر، وما إن انتقلت هذه الصورة المهيبة إلى أوروبا حتى بدأ الشعراء ينسجون حولها الأساطير التي تمثلت في أشعار تمجدّ المجد القديم، وترسم صورةً خياليةً فائقةً الجمال استطاعت أن تكشف بعضاً من جوانب الدولة المصرية القديمة بحضارتها التي على شأنها وسادت الدنيا في شموخ وكبرياء. وقد تزامن هذا مع قيام الثورة الرومانسية في الأدب الإنجليزي مما ساهم في فكّ طلاسم هذه الحضارة العريقة ورسم صورةٍ مهيبةٍ لمصر دفعت قوى الاحتلال الغربي إلى المجيء إليها، واحتلالها، ونهب ثرواتها الحضارية العتيقة. وقد كتب " شيلي " في قصيدة "أوزيماندياس" عن رمزٍ من رموز الإمبراطورية المصرية القديمة وهو رمسيس الثاني، وقد شاعت هذه القصيدة بين الناس في أوروبا لترسم صورةً مهيبةً لحضارةٍ مصريةٍ عظيمةٍ. وقد أشار العديد من الشعراء إلى نهر النيل مصدر الحياة والخصوبة في مصر قديماً وحديثاً. وتناولت أشعارهم شخصياتٍ متعددةً كحتشبسوت، وكليوباترا، ورمسيس الثاني، وكذلك تلك المعابد والأهرامات الغامضة التي تحوي مكنون سرّ الحياة عند الفراعنة. لقد لعب الشعر الإنجليزي في فترة ما قبل الاستعمار دوراً كبيراً في لفت الأنظار إلى مصر، وهكذا تحوّلت الثورة الأدبية خلال تلك الفترة إلى حملةٍ استعماريةٍ لأرض مصر العظيمة. بدأت ولازالت حتى يومنا هذا.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** ما قبل الاستعمار- مصر- الشعر الانجليزي- نظرية ما قبل الاستعمار

## Introduction

The history of pre-colonial Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, is vague and ambiguous. The literary works used were mainly the descriptions of white explorers and missionaries. However, the history of ancient kingdoms such as Egypt has been a pinnacle of religious, cultural and even architectural significance. Egypt, as an organized territory, existed in the pre-colonial era as an eminent kingdom and has been the epitome of civilization in Africa. Although the pre-colonial literature in Egypt may not be as

renowned as its architecture, it has been a subject of study for more than 200 years. Studies of scholars and critics have focused for the last four decades on post-colonialism, showing the consequences of colonialism on different realms of the human activity. This paper is an attempt to study how poetry in Egypt may have inadvertently attracted the West to the rich culture and beauty and later on colonization. Ancient literature was written in different forms on papyrus reeds, on the pyramids, and on the tombs and have preserved centuries of culturally significant information. Although most of the ancient literature was based on religious beliefs, it has been transformed, with time, into the expression of daily socio-economic and political concerns. One of the distinctive forms of literature that marked the Egyptian literary works is poetry. This paper examines the role of selected English poetry about Egypt that played a significant role in colonization through its portrayal of the attractiveness of Egypt.

The question is how far this image contributed not only to an academic interest like that of Napoleon but also to a materialistic objective, namely a continuation of the British colonial project? In other words, how did a cultural interest engender an imperialistic one?

### **Pre-colonialism in literature**

The poetry on ancient Egypt was based on first hand or inferential descriptions of travelers and explorers who encountered the culture and the land for the first time. The French expedition to Egypt opened up Egypt's civilization to the world. Prior to this, Egypt was under the Ottoman Empire. In his book *Egypt in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Poetry*, Prof. Mohammad Enani elucidates the connection between Napoleon Bonaparte's Expedition in Egypt and the advent of Romanticism. Napoleon Bonaparte's Expedition aimed at preserving the interests of France and establishing the scientific enterprise in the region. In his *Orientalism*, Edward Said agrees with Enani that

For Napoleon Egypt was a project that acquired reality in his mind, and later in his preparations for its conquest, through experiences that belong to the realm of ideas and myths culled from texts, not

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empirical reality... (Napoleon) saw the Orient only as it had been encoded first by classical texts and then by Orientalist experts, whose vision, based on classical texts, seemed a useful substitute for any actual encounter with the real Orient. (80)

Although Napoleon's Expedition was failure from a military perspective, it provokes a sense of longing towards Egypt represented later in the British Occupation. Said states that

His Occupation gave birth to the entire modern experience of the Orient as interpreted from within the universe of discourse founded by Napoleon in Egypt, whose agencies of domination and dissemination included the Institut and the Description... After Napoleon, then, the very language of Orientalism changed radically. Its descriptive realism was upgraded and became not merely a style of representation but a language, indeed a means of creation (87).

Many authors and poets have been amazed and inspired by the mysteries, culture and architecture of Egypt. The creation of the field of Egyptology also elicited a lot of interest from scholars who wanted to study Egypt. The historic pyramids, temples, sphinx, and the kings' tombs along the River Nile have been very phenomenal to artists even in the Renaissance era. Many artists have designed building from studying these structures. Nevertheless, the richness of both structures and cultures that have lasted centuries and the people who have preserved their culture has also been an inspiration to many nineteenth century poets. This coincided with the romantic era of Wordsworth and Coleridge's romantic revolution and the new crop of poets like Lord Byron and John Keats of England and Emerson and Thoreau in America. North American, British and Irish poets of the nineteenth century were fascinated with the magical significance of its monuments, the historic echoes of the desolate ruins, the winding River Nile and drawn by the enduring mix of ancient culture and civilization. With more poets taking a romantic perspective they tended to portray their surrounding in a romantic way.

Even the Elizabethan drama tends to represent the Orient through Egypt. “Egypt is presented as a sovereign prosperous nation” (Bayouli 123). In his tragedies like *Antony and Cleopatra* “Shakespeare gives freedom to his imagination to create a context for the treatment of this theme... He chooses to show the Orient through Ancient Egypt and its queen Cleopatra and a poignant tragedy of love” (122) Antony describes “his Egyptian experience as the quest of an ideal he cannot find in Rome” (122). Thus, Shakespearean tragedy suggests a distinctive treatment of the idea that supports the pre-colonial image of Egypt.

The pre-colonial Egypt has been shaped by both its people and outsiders from the pre-historic Egypt to ancient Egypt, classical antiquity, the middle ages and to the early modern era or the pre-colonial era. The long history in early modern days attracted the curiosity of colonizers who view Egypt as possessing both a strategic location and established institutions.

### **Selected poems on pre-colonial Egypt**

The poem *Hermes Trismegistus* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow describes the religious influences of Egypt and the historic gods and the civilization. It describes the River Nile, its banks, the pyramids, the beautiful sphinx shrouded in mystery:

Still through Egypt's desert places  
Flows the lordly Nile,  
From its banks the great stone faces  
Gaze with patient smile.  
Still the pyramids imperious  
Pierce the cloudless skies,  
And the Sphinx stares with mysterious,  
Solemn, stony eyes.

The poet then delves into the religious theme of describing divinity and the lost meaning of the Hermes Trismegistus. His descriptions are also filled with Christian background that was common in ancient Egypt.

But where are the old Egyptian  
Demi-gods and kings?

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Nothing left but an inscription  
    Graven on stones and rings.  
Where are Helios and Hephaestus,  
    Gods of eldest eld?  
Where is Hermes Trismegistus,  
    Who their secrets held?

In his collection of poems *In the harbor*, the poet wonders about the lack of divinity in ancient Egypt except for the inscriptions on the stone walls (hwlougfellow.org). The poet rouses the facts that most of the Egypt's ancient magical essence could have been lost. Coming from a Christian perspective, it seems that the American poet was describing a theologically lost world- a territory calling for redefinition and seeking for the direction to the right beliefs. In this sense the pre-colonial Egypt was torn between divinity and the new era of civilization and self-actualization. Although the relevance of Egypt in world history was still present, the winds of change were beckoning for a better progress.

Trismegistus was itself the king, a caste and a god.

Trismegistus! three times greatest!  
    How thy name sublime  
Has descended to this latest  
    Progeny of time!  
Happy they whose written pages  
    Perish with their lives,  
If amid the crumbling ages  
    Still their name survives!

Thine, O priest of Egypt, lately  
    Found I in the vast,  
Weed-encumbered sombre, stately,  
    Grave-yard of the Past;  
And a presence moved before me  
    On that gloomy shore,  
As a waft of wind, that o'er me  
    Breathed, and was no more

In order for Egypt to secure its place in the world it craved for a new order that would not completely eliminate its past but usher it to a new level of civilization. Therefore, the missionary endeavors of the European- the need to spread the true religion was eminent. Theologians also sought to understand the Egyptian beliefs about deity and the significance of their gods.

### **The Egyptian paradox**

Andrew Lang (1844-1912) in his poem “Herodotus in Egypt” captures what has come to be known as the “Egyptian Paradox”. The poem explains the journey of Herodotus from Greece to the exploration of the Egyptian cultural and religious orientation.

HE left the land of youth, he left the young,  
The smiling gods of Greece; he passed the isle  
Where Jason Loitered and where Sappho sung

However, the character approached Egypt as a moral Greek. In trying to understand the history of Egypt, he gives the account of the two kings- Psammetichus and Amasis (Berker, de Jong and Wees 435). While Amasis used his power on the throne to denigrate the gods, the other- Psammetichus- utilizes gods as the foundation of his kingdom. Herodotus travelled through Asia Minor to Egypt and sought to describe the history, the cultural customs, the people and physical feature of Egypt (Vannicelli 215). His description as depicted in the poem *Herodotus in Egypt* portrays his views on his encounter with the priests of Memphis and Heliopolis, walking through the Nile, exploring the size of the country, observing the rituals of their religions, and their reverence for their cattle (Wilhelm and Blackman 26).

He sought the secret-founted wave of Nile,  
And of their old world, dead a weary while,  
Heard the priests murmur in their mystic tongue,  
And through the fanes went voyaging, among  
Dark tribes that worshipped Cat and Crocodile.

In his observation he also captures the cultural practices and investigates the peculiarity of their crocodiles and the phoenix as well as the Egyptian methods of embalming, the pyramids and their kings' funeral rites and burial. However, as a careful narrator, Herodotus separates his personal encounter and what he learnt by inference. Therefore, examining his narration comes with curiosity especially in the pre-colonial era. The succinct and clear description of the culture and customs inspired interest in the western world. Herodotus, himself a Greek, fused this narration with history of philosophy which gives rise of a perfect Greek literature that is simple and entertaining. Therefore, Herodotus' work was phenomenal in portraying Egypt and later on used by poets like Lang to formulate poems that clear elicited the wonder and charm of Egypt- a certain curiosity that spun the cogs of the colonizers towards appreciating the richness and greatness of Egypt as a colony.

### **The pyramids and the desert**

In his poem "In the desert", one of his most striking poems, Herman Melville (1819-1891) gives a description of the Egyptian desert. The poem "records his reaction to the Egyptian desert". (Melville 44). Melville, well-travelled American poet, loved to write about his experiences.

Never Pharaoh's Night,  
Whereof the Hebrew wizards croon,  
Did so the Theban flamens try  
As me this veritable Noon.

He loved the sea and was therefore more fearful of the desert as he records that the desert of Egypt was "more fearful to look at than the ocean" (45). Therefore, Melville makes comparison of the desert with the sea, referring to the desert as "the bed of a dried-up sea" (45).

Like blank ocean in blue calm  
Undulates the ethereal frame;



In one flowing oriflamme  
God flings his fiery standard out.

The poem also alludes to the biblical account of Aaron and Pharaoh's magicians whom Melville defines as the "Theban flamens" (45), who perform the same miracle that Aaron had done by turning his rod to a serpent. Nevertheless, the poet pits the Egyptian sorcerers against the Hebrew God in the pharaoh night. Melville postures Egypt as a battlefield for "religious orthodoxies" (45).

Additionally, Melville wrote an architectural poem "The Great Pyramid" when he saw the pyramids in 1857. He expresses the wonder and awe of standing before the "vast, indefinite, incomprehensible and awful" structure (Melville 45).

Upon seeing the pyramids in 1857, Melville recorded a rush of unordered impressions in his journal, but the permanent feeling was one of awe at the size and bulk of these human structures." (45)

"Pyramids still loom before me, something vast, indefinite, incomprehensible, and awful" Melville writes in response to the greatness of the Pyramids.

Your masonry -- and is it man's?  
More like some Cosmic artisan's.  
Your courses as in strata rise,  
Beget you do a blind surmise  
Like Grampians.

The poem is pervaded with such feelings of holiness and sublimity.

Shall lichen in your crevice fit?  
Nay, sterile all and granite-knit:  
Weather nor weather-strain ye rue,  
But aridly you cleave the blue  
As lording it.

The poet even wonders if the structure was built by man or divine beings. He describes the pyramids as possessing a timeless quality. These descriptions in the poem allude to the magical essence of Egypt itself and the historic significance and the present evidence of the awesome wonderment. Therefore, the poet portrays Egypt as a land that is rich in history, architecture and magic. Anyone who reads such poem would desire to experience what the poet has experience, and in the backdrop of colonization the consideration of Egypt was colossal and imagined.

### **The Nile**

James Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) was an English essayist and poet who wrote *A thought of the Nile*. The poet describes the way the Nile meanders through Egypt like a mighty thought. The Nile is the longest river in the world and is as old, one can say, as the earth itself. If it were a person, it could have witnessed the rise and fall of ancient Egypt and the ancient kingdoms and still flows. He elicits the idea of Egypt in the European mind. If there is one landmark whose significance and influence can be considered as both ancient and modern, enduring through the ages, it is the River Nile. Hunt writes that: “time and things” seem to use it as their eternal standard (Curl 1). He goes on to describe the glory of the Egyptian King Sesostris who is believed to have led an expedition to some part of Europe.

In a friendly competition with James Leigh Hunt, John Keats wrote his poem “To the Nile”. He shows the Nile as a holy and a life-granting river. He grants the Nile a supernatural power as it is the “ Son of the old Moon-mountains African!”. It is also the “Chief of the Pyramid and Crocodile!”. In an amazing image, the Nile is depicted as the nurse for the Africans and the one that grants life and fertility to the land of Egypt:

We call thee fruitful, and that very while  
A desert fills our seeing's inward span:  
Nurse of swart nations since the world began,

In mythology, the River Nile is associated with Hapi, the god of flooding, bringing fruitfulness and fertility to Egypt. Hence, the Nile is thought of as the cradle of Egypt civilization. Keats uses inversion and personification to add a sense of mystery and holiness to such a great river.

The thought of the Nile to the mind of the European in the pre-colonial history is so overwhelming that it leaves the world without words. The history of the world seems to be anchored on the timeless River. As “A world empty of its throng”, the insignificance of the world without the River Nile jostles many to realize the influence of the Nile on existence itself. It makes the world realize that the coming generations will still leave the river “lapsing along twixt the villages” as long as the earth exists (Curl 1). Therefore, the conceptualization of the historic, economic, cultural and existential significance of the Nile in the time of the European Empire expansion was overwhelmingly considered necessary. The pre-colonial English literature envisioned and anticipated Egypt’s heritage. The European thought of the Nile and Egypt was phenomenally shaped by such outstanding and enthralling descriptions that captured the mind, body and soul.

### **The civilization and greatness of Egypt**

The pre-colonial Egypt and its cities have been captured in Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley’s collection of poems *Idylls and Lyrics of the Nile*. In 1892 Rawnsley published his *Notes for the Nile*, a book for travellers to Egypt. In “A Return to Egypt”, Rawnsley describes the greatness of Egypt. He portrays Egypt as a “land where time no count can keep” alluding in part to its timelessness and the “imperishable works of men” (Rawnsley 1).

There is a land where Time no count can keep,

Where works of men imperishable seem,

Where through Death’s barren solitude doth gleam

Undying hope for them that sow and reap;

Yea, land of life, where death is but a deep

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Warm slumber, a communicable dream,  
Where from the silent grave far voices stream  
Of those that tell their secrets in their sleep. (Rawnsley 1)

The poem also describes the prosperity of land of Egypt by calling it the “land of life”. Rawnsley captures the mystery of death, the essence of merriment in the villages, the outstanding pyramids, and the brightness of the pure sunshine. He summarizes the greatness of the land in the life that was hid in its sands and the river:

Land of the palm-tree and the pyramid,  
Land of sweet waters from a mystic urn,  
Land of sure rest, where suns shine on for ever, (Rawnsley 1)

It seems like a paradise where one can find all kinds of beauty and goodness. It is a divine land that is deep-rooted in the heart:

I left thee- in thy sands a heart was hid;  
My life, my love, were cast upon thy river,

He is so highly affected that he expresses the longing to return to Egypt to seek divinity:

And lo! to seek Osiris I return (Rawnsley 1).

*Notes for the Nile* is followed by *Idylls and Lyrics of the Nile*. Dominic Montserrat writes in his book *Akhenaten: History, Fantasy and Ancient Egypt* that “this is a sort of poetic travelogue moving from north to south in Egypt which juxtaposes scenes of the ancient past with the daily life he observes” (146). In this respect, “Rawnsley repeats the familiar Orientalist cliché of the eternal, cyclical Egypt, in which the people appears

in an exotic environment which never changes” (147). In “The Dream-City of Khuenaten” outlines the greatness of El-Amarna built by Pharaoh Akhenaten on the eastern bank of River Nile. The poet describes the site of where the city used to be as “of greatness passed away” (Rawnsley 93).

Who through this solemn wilderness may stray

Beyond the river and its belt of palm,

May feel still fresh the wonder and the calm

Of greatness passed away.

The poet refers to the Egyptian civilization as a synthesis of the new and the ancient natural world- a dream city. The dream city of Khuenaten was vibrant and full of youth and life. The civilization of the city is seen in the presence of draughtsman who makes technical plans, the scribes full of wisdom, the potters or skilled craftsmen, the kilnman or the clay artisan, and the sculptors who work and trains on marble craft (Rawnsley 94).

No more the draughtsman from the furthest Ind

Casts on the palace-floor his vermeil dyes,

No more the scribe from clay syllabaries

Will spell Assyria’s mind.

The civilization of the city was anchored on the dream of the King who dedicated the city to his new religion- Atenism- and left a city that outlive him and many generations after him. The poet attributes the endurance of the city to new form of religion and the rise of new ideas. The remains of the city revealed the greatness of the level of technology used to makes all kinds of crafts such as the painted pavements, glass blowers’ shops, the vases, portrait sculptures and sculpture schools which were a symbol of the height of civilization at the time (Rawnsley 94). The earliest form of bilingual communication is portrayed in the tablets of the scribes used in the bilateral communication between Egypt and Assyria was also a testament of epitome of civilization that existed in Egypt.

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But who enters yonder mountains cave  
May see the form of that courageous king,  
Who felt that light was life for everything,  
And should outlast the grave.

And that dream-city Khuenaten made  
The boy-reformer by the banks of Nile  
Who broke with Thebes, her priestly power and guile  
Shall never surely fade. (Montserral 147)

In "Ozymandias", Percy Bysshe Shelley's most celebrated and best-known poem, he glorifies one of the greatest civilizations and empires.

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

He tells of a traveller he met in such an antique land. Ozymandias is the Greek name for Rameses II. The whole poem can be grasped as an extended metaphor. It is all about the statue with its massive legs lying in the desert to notify the greatness of that absolute power. He has a pride as the supreme ruler of Egypt with its vast civilization:

Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command...

Shelly’s description of the statue helps to constitute the magical power of Egypt at that time. He is the “king of kings” with the his most extraordinary prideful boast of all kings.

My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

The epitaph “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings” is ironical since it reveals a power couple with arrogance and pride but ends with destruction. However, the statue of Ozimadias shows a period of glory and civilization. Shelly wrote his poem in a sonnet form since the sonnet is a tight form of regularity to reflect this highly regulated power of Egypt during that time.

Therefore, the revelation of the ancient civilization with archaeological sites from the ancient Egypt drew many European scholars, tourists, explorers, theologians and even the empire. The portrayal of Egypt by English poet’s literature in the nineteenth century attracted intellectual and hegemonic curiosity. At any point in history, Egypt has influenced the Western forms of civilization and the West through trade and social interactions which has a mutual influence on Egypt as well. This process was quintessential in the pre-colonial era as there was a presumed connection and an assumed future. European’s impending colonization was, in a way, fanned by the pre-colonial theory in literature

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the pre-colonial theory in literature, especially in the nineteenth century, has played a significant role in attracting the European colonizers to Egypt. The pyramids of Giza are the only existing structures of the Seven Wonders of the World; the Nile is the longest and one of the most significant rivers in the world meandering over different territories and

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known as one of the most timeless sources of livelihood; the history of religion, deity and orthodoxy is merged with Egyptian beliefs; civilization of structures, cities and technology of the artisans all secure the significance and greatness of Egypt. The fascination of the colonizers, therefore, not only seeks to explore and exploit Egypt but also is a self-examination and analysis for answers to their own connection to Egypt as captured by Rawnsley in his poem "A return to Egypt". Andrew Lang romanticizes Egypt in his poem *Herodotus in Egypt* describing the landscape, the culture and the people. On the other hand, Hunt describes the river Nile as of timeless quality. All the poets mentioned the greatness of the Egypt's great pyramids. The description of this nondescript civilization of Egypt played a big role in the romanticizing of Egypt. Hunts' poem on the thought of Nile elicits the perception of the Whiteman's feeling about Egypt and the curiosity of the Nile. Melville in his poem captures the vastness of the desert and the wonder of the pyramids. For the most part these poets romanticize the idea and experience of Egypt either through their descriptive imagination or narration. Therefore, these poetic descriptions in a way portrayed the beauty of Egypt in a way that masked the misconceptions about Egypt and portrayed it as a fascinating place.



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