To Helen

POEM TEXT

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand!
Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy-Land!

SUMMARY

Helen, your beauty is, for me, like those ancient Greek ships that carried the exhausted, travel-worn Odysseus over sweetly-scented waters and back to his homeland.

I've been used to traveling far and wide over dangerous seas, but your dark curling hair, your face like a Greek goddess's, and your nymph-like loveliness have brought me back home to the splendor and magnificence of ancient Greece and Rome.

Look! Up in that shining window, I see you standing like an ancient statue, holding a marble lamp! Oh, lovely soul-goddess from the far-off sacred land!

THEMES

THE POWER OF BEAUTY

Written in honor of the mother of one of Poe's childhood friends (upon whom Poe had a terrible crush), "To Helen" sings the praises of a beloved's enchanting beauty. To the poem's speaker, this woman isn't just lovely: she's the spitting image of Helen of Troy herself, the legendary princess so stunningly beautiful that the men who squabbled over her started the Trojan war. Through passionate allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, the speaker suggests that beauty and love can make a living, breathing human being seem like an immortal deity—and transport a lover right out of his own place and time to the world of legend. Love, to this speaker, makes the ordinary world into an extraordinary otherworld—at the same time as it feels a lot like coming "home."

Completely besotted with his beloved, the speaker of this poem doesn't just see her as any beauty, but as a *mythic*, *legendary* beauty. Lovelier than even a "Naiad" (that is, a water nymph) or an idealized statue, she appears to him as "Helen" of Troy: a classical ideal, a figure who embodies beauty itself. Her loveliness has such power over him that it seems he can only think of her in these dramatic terms!

Not only does the speaker's infatuation transform his beloved into a "Helen," it transports him right out of the everyday world and into a powerful mythological past. Being in love feels to him like being flung into the classical splendor of ancient Greece and Rome—and then beyond it to a mysterious "Holy-Land" of gods and goddesses. All of these images suggest that being overwhelmed by beauty is all part of a profound, ancient tradition: a lover's world is the land of myth, not the ordinary world.

Strangely enough, all these magical transports make the speaker feel as if he's actually coming "home": while his beloved's beauty has launched him into the world of the gods, that world is somehow where he really *belongs*. Feeling that he's in the right place wherever his "Helen" is, he can stop his "wander[ings]" at last. To this speaker, gazing at his beloved's gorgeous face doesn't just mean feeling as if he were living in a heavenly, mythical dreamworld: it means feeling like that mythical dreamworld is his rightful home.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,

The very first word of "To Helen" launches the poem's lovestruck speaker into the landscape of myth. The name "Helen"—especially when it's followed up with talk of "beauty" and "Nicean barks" (or ancient Greek ships)—isn't just any old name: it's an allusion to Helen of Troy.

In ancient Greek mythology and literature, Helen, daughter of

Zeus and the mortal Leda, was the most beautiful woman in the world. In fact, she was so lovely that princes and kings fought over her, kicking off the bloody 10-year Trojan War.

This speaker thus doesn't see his beloved as merely pretty. He sees her as transcendently, overpoweringly, immortally, legendarily beautiful. And her beauty is like a "Nicean bark of yore," a Greek ship of the ancient past.

That simile might give readers pause at first: is "your beauty is just like a very old boat" really such a compliment? But by raising the image of these "Nicean barks," the speaker suggests that his Helen's loveliness belongs to a romantically mythic world. She's so classically beautiful that she might as well be a goddess in an old legend.

And what's more, her beauty has the power to take him places: looking on her beauty, this simile suggests, he feels almost literally *carried away*.

LINES 3-5

That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

Helen's beauty is so intense that it seems to transport the speaker to a whole other world: the ancient Greece of classical mythology. But paradoxically, this intense inner journey feels, to him, just like coming home.

In these lines, the speaker imagines not just his *beloved*, but also *himself* as a mythological figure. His description of a "weary, way-worn wanderer," traveling across the seas in one of those "Nicean barks," is an allusion to Odysseus, the canny hero of the *Odyssey*:

In that famous story, Odysseus angers the sea god Poseidon, who curses him to spend years and years wandering the oceans, unable to get home. But after many trials and adventures, Odysseus finally makes it back to his homeland, Ithaca, where he reunites with his brave, faithful wife Penelope (who has been busily fending off all the suitors who assumed Odysseus was long dead).

Imagining himself returning to "his own native shore" here, the speaker suggests that he's spent most of his life feeling a lot like Odysseus: alienated, exiled, and longing for home. If his Helen's beauty is like the boat that carries him back to his homeland, then, she *herself* seems to *be* that home. When he's around her, he's not lost any more.

And the journey back to this home sounds pretty delightful in itself. Those "Nicean barks" travel "gently, o'er a perfumed sea"—a moment of imagery that suggests Helen's beauty is so powerful that it scents the very air around her.

LINES 6-8

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home

While the speaker may have charted a luxurious course over a "perfumed sea" to reach his Helen, these lines hint that he had a pretty rough time of things before he met her. The seas he's sailed in the past have been "desperate" (or wild and dangerous)—and those perilous waters seem likely to symbolize his own *inner* storms.

Part of his joy and awe at finding Helen, then, is the relief she gives him from his turbulent emotional world. And that relief, again, seems to have an awful lot to do with the speaker's way of imagining the distant past. Here, he imagines his beloved not just as Helen of Troy, but as a "Naiad" (a mythological water nymph) with a "classic face"—a face as symmetrically beautiful as a Greek statue's.

But he's also imagining her in more sensuous ways. When he describes her "hyacinth hair" (using the name of a luxuriant, deep blue, sweet-scented spring flower as an adjective), that single word conjures up imagery that appeals to many senses. If Helen's hair is like a hyacinth, it might look so richly black that it almost seems to have a blue sheen. It might be as curly and abundant as a hyacinth's tower of petals. And it might smell as delicious as spring itself. The breathy alliterative /h/ sound of "hyacinth hair" even suggests the way that hair might sound as it gently shifts in a breeze.

There's a subtle note of sorrow here too, though. The hyacinth takes its name from—you guessed it—a Greek myth, in which the sun-god Apollo, mourning his dead lover Hyacinthus, transforms his spilled blood into a flower.

Helen, in other words, seems to be both a figure of immortal, goddess-like perfection and a real live woman, one whose beauty gives the speaker full-body delight. But perhaps there's grief in the air as well as love.

LINES 9-10

To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.

The speaker's emotional homecoming to his lovely Helen seems woven into his ideas about the classical world. There's something about ancient Greece and Rome in particular that seems to sing to this speaker of harmony, order, and beauty—a kind of deep *rightness*.

In that, he's far from alone. The philosophy, mythology, art, and politics of ancient Greece and Rome profoundly influenced later cultures, especially in Europe and its colonies—and Latin and Greek were once the foundation of any Western education. As a result, generations of Westerners idealized the classical world as a harmonious, magical realm of wisdom and grace. (Just take a look at the neoclassical architecture of the U.S. Capitol to get a sense of how 18th-century Americans, for instance, aspired to Greek and Roman virtues.)

It's with these ideas in mind that the speaker intones the

poem's most famous lines. Listen to his powerful alliteration and consonance as he imagines having returned to an idealized world of the past:

> To the glory that was Greece,
> And the grandeur that was Rome.

These strong repeating sounds stand as firm as pillars on a temple. And the alliterative /g/ sound in particular draws attention to the evocative words "glory" and "grandeur," conjuring a whole world of nymph-haunted groves and fabulous heroic triumphs. There's something a little wistful in these lines, too. The speaker is returning "home" to the "glory that was Greece"—a glory very much in the past tense.

All of this suggests that Helen's beauty seems to do the impossible. It carries the speaker to a legendary place he recognizes as his rightful "home"—even though he's never been there before, even though it's long-gone, even though it maybe never even really existed.

LINES 11-15

> *Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche*
> *How statue-like I see thee stand,*
> *The agate lamp within thy hand!*
> *Ah, Psyche, from the regions which*
> *Are Holy-Land!*

In this last stanza of the poem, the speaker addresses Helen in an apostrophe—but one with a certain distance baked into it. Even as he speaks directly to her, it doesn't seem that she can hear him: he's spotted her from afar through her window.

This fairly ordinary incident takes on mythic dimensions in the speaker's imagination. The window becomes a "brilliant window-niche," glowing with an intense radiance that seems like it has more to do with Helen's presence than the fact that the lights are on inside.

And in fact, Helen seems to be the source of all the light here in more ways than one. She's holding an "agate lamp," and looks so perfectly, classically beautiful that it's as if she might be made of agate (a kind of marble) herself. She's "statue-like"—a simile that again suggests her beauty evokes all the virtues and graces of the ancient world. In the speaker's eyes, she might as well be the Venus de Milo.

Standing there in the window like a statue, holding a lamp, Helen here seems to become even more deeply symbolic to the speaker. The feelings he's expressing here aren't the down-to-earth feelings he might have about a crush: it's not that he really likes Helen and thinks she's pretty and wants to kiss her. It's more as if she's an image of his very deepest desires, his longing for a blissful, restful home in a "Holy-Land" of beauty. That "agate lamp"—which should be imagined as an ancient oil lamp, not a table lamp!—works like a lighthouse's beam, guiding him to the heavenly peace he longs for.

That point only gets clearer when he calls her "Psyche." Psyche was the goddess of the soul, bride of the love-god Eros. This allusion seems to deepen the speaker's feelings even further. If Helen has become Psyche, then she's gone from being a beauty to being a real soulmate—a figure who offers the speaker a feeling of deep and eternal rightness and rest.

But she's still very much on the other side of a pane of glass. The speaker may be utterly hypnotized and transported by his beloved's beauty, but he's still separate from her, somehow. (And the biographical context of this poem gives that separation a tragic edge: Poe wrote this poem in honor of a woman named Jane Stanard, who had died several years earlier.)

Perhaps, though, the distance between Helen and the speaker doesn't matter. Her beauty alone has done the impossible for him. As he gazes at her, he might be alone, but he's also "home."

SYMBOLS

THE LAMP

The "agate lamp" that the speaker imagines in his beloved's hand at the end of the poem symbolizes guidance, comfort, and wisdom.

All through "To Helen," the speaker suggests that a big part of his intense love for his "Helen" is his sense that he's come "home" when he's around her. When she appears at the end of the poem holding a lamp, it's as if she's a lighthouse keeper, beckoning him to the place where he belongs by shining out a light in the darkness. (And remember, this poem was written in the 19th century and refers to the ancient world: this lamp should be imagined as a romantic-looking oil lamp with a burning flame, not an electric one!)

Perhaps the speaker even feels as if his beloved offers him a kind of *inner* guidance: a lamp often suggests wisdom, the kind of metaphorical "illumination" that helps people to see the truth.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** " How statue-like I see thee stand, / The agate lamp within thy hand!"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"To Helen" is riddled with allusions to Greek and Roman mythology. Those allusions suggest how utterly blown away the speaker feels by his beloved's beauty: he can only begin to describe her in terms of the goddesses and legends of the past.

The poem's classical allusions start in the very first line, where the speaker addresses his beloved as "Helen." That name is a reference to none other than Helen of Troy, the gorgeous Greek princess who often gets blamed for kicking off the bloody 10-year Trojan War (in spite of the fact that the blame might more rightfully be laid on the various princes and kings who squabbled over her). If the speaker's beloved is "Helen," then she's the picture of beauty itself, a goddess among women.

The speaker drives that idea home when he imagines his "Helen" as "Psyche" herself in the final stanza. Psyche was the goddess of the soul, but she began her life as a breathtaking mortal princess, so beautiful that Eros, the god of love himself, fell in love with her. (She eventually earned her goddesshood after undergoing a series of dreadful trials.) As "Psyche," the speaker's beloved seems like more than a mere beauty: she's a real soulmate, a figure who touches him in the deepest part of his heart.

The poem's references to the beloved's "Naiad airs" (i.e., her nymph-like charms) and her "classic face" (like the perfectly proportioned face of a classical statue) underline the idea that her beauty is both powerful and timeless. The speaker is here imagining a figure of idealized loveliness, of the sort that many 19th-century artists and thinkers associated with the "glory" and "grandeur" of ancient Greece and Rome.

And the speaker thinks of himself in classical terms, too. He imagines himself in the role of Odysseus, the famous Greek hero who was cursed to wander the seas for years after he angered the sea god Poseidon (those are his "barks," or ships, in line 2). This allusion gets at the speaker's deep alienation—and the way that the sight of his beloved Helen seems to cure that alienation. This speaker doesn't ever seem to have quite felt at home in the world, but when he sees the beautiful face of his beloved, he feels like Odysseus did when he finally crawled back onto the "native shore" of his homeland.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Helen"
- **Line 2:** "Nicean barks"
- **Lines 4-5:** " The weary, way-worn wanderer bore / To his own native shore."
- **Lines 7-8:** " Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face, / Thy Naiad airs"
- **Line 9:** "the glory that was Greece"
- **Line 10:** "the grandeur that was Rome"
- **Lines 14-15:** " Ah, Psyche, from the regions which / Are Holy-Land!"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's apostrophe to his beloved Helen helps to give this poem its impassioned tone. Directly addressing his words to his beloved, the speaker seems to be presenting her with a worshipful tribute.

The very first lines of the poem use apostrophe to suggest just how powerfully moved the speaker feels by Helen's beauty. The first word of the poem is her name—and that name is itself an allusion to the legendary Greek beauty Helen of Troy. In calling her by a pseudonym that suggests breathtaking gorgeousness, the speaker at once reaches out to his beloved directly and (rather flatteringly) makes her into a powerful, goddess-like figure. The same sort of feeling persists in the second stanza, in which the speaker lists all of Helen's (very classical) charms, as if he's praising her to her face.

But the mood of the apostrophe changes a bit in the last stanza. Here, the speaker imagines that he sees Helen standing "statue-like" in a window. At this moment, there's the feeling that, even as he cries out to her directly, he's also *separated* from her, watching her from afar through the glass. There's a paradoxical feeling of both intimate connection and longing distance here: perhaps Helen can't even hear all the speaker's lavish praise. (And in biographical context, that makes a sad kind of sense: Poe wrote this poem as a tribute to a long-dead female friend.)

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Helen, thy beauty is to me"
- **Lines 7-8:** " Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face, / Thy Naiad airs have brought me home"
- **Lines 12-13:** " How statue-like I see thee stand, / The agate lamp within thy hand!"

ENJAMBMENT

The many enjambments in "To Helen" create a sense of hypnotic momentum—and sometimes interrupt that momentum in surprising ways.

For example, take a look at the way the speaker enjambs the poem's very last lines:

> Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
> Are Holy-Land!

The enjambment here breaks this sentence at a place a reader would never pause in everyday speech. That makes readers want to hurry on to the next line. And once they get there, they're forced to stop in their tracks: the poem's closing line cuts off abruptly, shorter than any line before it.

And that effect mirrors what's going on for the speaker emotionally here! He's just spotted his beloved standing in her window, looking like a marble statue of the goddess Psyche herself. That sight first gives him a speedy rush of feeling—then stops him short, as if it's taken his breath away. The enjambed lines here thus help readers to feel the speaker's feelings right along with him.

The poem's first lines also use an evocative enjambment:

> Helen, thy beauty is to me
> Like those Nicean barks of yore,

Here, the line break urges the reader to read on: this idea clearly isn't finished yet. The momentum of this enjambment thus pulls the reader onward, just like Helen's beauty draws the speaker forward like a gliding "Nicean bark" on a "perfumed sea."

This poem's enjambments, in other words, tend to reflect the speaker's experience—and thus help readers to feel that experience viscerally.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "me / Like"
- **Lines 2-3:** "yore, / That"
- **Lines 3-4:** "sea, / The"
- **Lines 4-5:** "bore / To"
- **Lines 8-9:** "home / To"
- **Lines 11-12:** "window-niche / How"
- **Lines 14-15:** "which / Are"

IMAGERY

The sensuous imagery in "To Helen" evokes the speaker's sheer delight in his beloved's beauty.

When Helen's gorgeousness seems to transport the reader back to his "own native shore," his metaphorical journey might as well take him through fairyland. He imagines not merely crossing the ocean but crossing a "perfumed sea"—as if the mere thought of her scents the very air he breathes.

And his images are no less striking when he describes Helen directly. In line 7, for instance, he imagines her "hyacinth hair." This image, which suggests that Helen's hair reminds the speaker of a kind of lush spring flower, touches a bunch of senses at once: her hair must *look* so richly dark that it takes on a purplish-blue sheen, *feel* as abundant and curly as a hyacinth's petals, and *smell* as fresh and delicious as spring itself.

Later on, when the speaker spots Helen in her window, she seems to glow:

> Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
> How statue-like I see thee stand,
> The agate lamp within thy hand!

Here, that "window-niche" shines with "brilliant" light, not just because the lights are on inside, but because Helen is standing there, lovely as a classical statue, holding a lamp. The intense brightness of this image suggests that her beauty actually dazzles the speaker, as if he were trying to look straight at the sun.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-4
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 11-13

SIMILE

The poem's similes conjure up the intensity of the speaker's infatuation.

In the poem's first lines, Helen's beauty is like "Nicean barks," or Greek ships—in particular, the Greek ships that brought the wandering Odysseus back to his "native land."

"Your beauty is like a boat" might sound more perplexing than romantic at first. But this image gets at how deeply *moved* the speaker feels by Helen's beauty. He imagines her loveliness as *transporting*, something that physically carries him forward. And more than that, it carries him home, to a feeling that, when he's with his beloved, he's in the right place at last. (And it doesn't hurt that this journey itself sounds pretty pleasant, taking the speaker over a luxuriant "perfumed sea.")

Later, the speaker imagines Helen as "statue-like," an image that, in this context, doesn't mean that she's cold and stony. Rather, it evokes all the "glory that was Greece"—and more particularly, the glory and the beauty of Greek sculpture. If Helen is like a statue here, she's like an idealized image of beauty—a perfect stone goddess who will never age and never die. This simile also suggests that the speaker's passion for her will be just as immortal as her beauty.

There's something poignant in this simile, too: the real-life subject of "To Helen", Jane Stanard, was already long dead when Poe wrote this poem.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "thy beauty is to me / Like those Nicean barks of yore,"
- **Line 12:** " How statue-like I see thee stand,"

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "To Helen" helps to give the poem its dreamy music and to evoke its images through sound.

For instance, take a look at the alliterative sounds in the first stanza:

> That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
> The weary, way-worn wanderer bore

Those repeated /w/ sounds suggest the steady, hypnotic motion of the waves carrying that "wanderer" back home. (They even look a little bit like waves on the page!) Elsewhere, the /h/ sounds in "hyacinth hair" are evocative in a similar way:

they feel soft and breathy, and suggest an image of dark curls stirred by the breeze.

Alliterative sounds also help to give the poem's most famous (and oft-quoted) lines their punch:

> To the glory that was Greece,
> And the grandeur that was Rome.

The steady /g/ sounds here feel grand and dramatic. And all those weighty matched sounds in a row bring to mind the landscape and architecture these lines allude to: they feel as elegant and symmetrical as a long row of columns on a temple.

The poem's last moment of alliteration is also a good example of sibilance:

> Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
> How statue-like I see thee stand,

Here, the hushed /s/ sounds make it seem as if the speaker is whispering in awe as he looks at his beloved in her window. But two of these sibilant sounds also come with a strong /t/: the /st/ of "statue" and "stand." That gives this line a subtle firmness that evokes the beloved's calm, statuesque beauty.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "weary, way-worn wanderer"
- **Line 7:** "hyacinth hair"
- **Line 9:** "glory," "Greece"
- **Line 10:** "grandeur"
- **Line 12:** "statue-like," "see," "stand"

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance helps to make this poem sound musical and to suggest just how entranced the speaker is by Helen's beauty.

For instance, take a look at the tightly-woven vowel sounds in the final stanza:

> Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
> How statue-like I see thee stand,
> The agate lamp within thy hand!
> Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
> Are Holy-Land!

The strong assonance on /ih/, /a/, and /ee/ sounds here makes these closing lines feel intense and hypnotic, as if the speaker is completely caught up in the sight of his beloved at the window. That mood is especially clear in lines 12-13, where the speaker describes Helen's beauty and the lamp she holds. There, /a/ sounds carry over from one line to the next, connecting Helen's "statue-like" loveliness to the "agate lamp" in her "hand"—and making it seem as if, to the speaker, she and her lamp truly look like a perfect carving, all in one beautiful piece.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "yore"
- **Line 3:** "o'er"
- **Line 6:** "long," "wont"
- **Line 7:** " Thy hyacinth," "face"
- **Line 8:** "airs"
- **Line 10:** "And," "grandeur"
- **Line 11:** "brilliant window-niche"
- **Line 12:** "statue," "see thee," "stand"
- **Line 13:** "agate lamp," "hand"
- **Line 14:** "Psyche," "regions"

VOCABULARY

Helen (Line 1) - A reference to Helen of Troy, the mythic Greek beauty who was abducted by Paris, a Trojan prince. Helen's husband Menelaus, not liking this much, started the legendary Trojan War, in which Greece laid siege to Troy for 10 years.

Thy (Line 1, Line 7, Line 8, Line 13) - An old-fashioned way of saying "your."

Nicean barks (Line 2) - Ancient Greek ships. A "bark" is a boat, and "Nicean" (pronounced ny-SEE-an) means "from Nicaea," an ancient Greek city in what is now Turkey.

Yore (Line 2) - Olden times.

O'er (Line 3) - A contraction of "over," pronounced "oar."

Way-worn (Line 4) - Worn out from long travels.

Bore (Line 4) - Carried.

Desperate (Line 6) - Dangerous, wild.

Wont to (Line 6) - Inclined to, habitually.

Hyacinth (Line 7) - A hyacinth can be a deep purple flower or a gemstone. But here, the word is used as an adjective, poetically suggesting that the speaker's beloved has dark, rich hair, perhaps so black it has a blue or violet sheen.

Classic (Line 7) - Here, "classic" means "idealized in the style of ancient Greece and Rome": the beloved's features have the perfect proportions of an ancient statue of a goddess.

Naiad (Line 8) - A water nymph.

Airs (Line 8) - Ways of being, attitudes, qualities.

Lo! (Line 11) - An exclamation meant to draw attention to something—a bit like "Behold!"

Yon brilliant window-niche (Line 11) - In other words, "that glowing window over there."

Thee (Line 12) - An old-fashioned way to say "you." While "thee" sounds fancy to a modern-day reader, it used to work a

lot like the Spanish or Italian "tu": it was the informal or affectionate way to say "you," a word you'd use to address someone you knew well.

Agate (Line 13) - A kind of richly-colored marble or gemstone.

Psyche (Line 14) - The goddess of the soul. Psyche was married to Eros, the god of love—and had to undergo a series of trials to win him back after she disobeyed his command to never look at him. The "lamp" the speaker mentions in line 13 alludes to the part of the myth in which Psyche, her curiosity getting the better of her, goes to peek at her husband while he sleeps.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To Helen" has a deceptively simple form. At first glance, it appears to use three identical five-line stanzas (or cinquains). But on a closer look, those stanzas are all subtly different: their rhyme schemes and meters are never exactly the same twice. (Check out this guide's Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections for more detail on that.)

This mixture of consistency and change—a repeating stanza structure that evolves and shifts a little every time it reappears—cleverly suggests what it feels like to be completely hypnotized by a beloved's beauty. The speaker could stare at his beloved forever: consistency! But every time he looks at her, he's struck afresh by some new aspect of her gorgeousness: change!

METER

The basic meter in "To Helen" is in iambic tetrameter. That means that most of the lines here use four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. As an example, here's how that looks in line 13:

The a- | gate lamp | within | thy hand!

But the poem breaks from this meter often and with gusto. For instance, the very first line starts with a trochee—the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm:

Helen, | thy beau- | ty is | to me

That strong stress right up top makes the speaker sound urgent and passionate—an effect that turns up again when he starts line 11 with a cry of "Lo!"

The speaker also plays with meter in the last lines of the first and last stanzas. The first stanza's last line is in iambic trimeter, using three da-DUMs:

To his | own na- | tive shore.

And the last line of the whole poem is even shorter: it uses a lone dactyl (a foot that goes DUM-da-da), like this:

Are Holy-Land!

These short, short lines make it feel as if the speaker has been stunned into silence by the sight of his lovely "Helen": she seems to take his breath away, cutting him off short.

RHYME SCHEME

"To Helen" uses an unusual and unpredictable rhyme scheme: no two stanzas run the same. Here's how the scheme breaks down across the whole poem:

ABABB CDCDC EFFEF

These patterns aren't consistent, but they are all musical and harmonious, and often subtle: many of the rhymes here, like "face" and "Greece" in the second stanza, are slant rhymes rather than full rhymes, which gives the sounds a misty, diffuse quality.

These wandering, dreamy rhymes all work together to evoke the speaker's captivation and awe as he thinks of his beloved "Helen." And by crossing some of the usual bounds of rhyming poetry, the rhymes here also suggest the speaker's sense that his love is similarly boundary-crossing and unusual: it belongs, not to the everyday world, but to the world of myths and legends.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "To Helen" is a dreamy, impassioned, and deeply romantic young lover. Clearly fed on a rich diet of classical mythology and history, he sees his beloved as the legendarily beautiful Helen of Troy—and himself as a "wanderer" like Odysseus, the Greek hero who was cursed to roam the world after he got on the sea-god Poseidon's bad side.

Those references hint that this speaker feels like an outcast, a person who doesn't quite feel at home in the world. He doesn't just adore his "Helen" because she's stunningly beautiful, but because she makes him feel as if he's returned to his "own native shore" at last.

With all this in mind, it's pretty reasonable to read the speaker as Poe himself. Poe wrote this poem in honor of a friend's mother, a woman named Jane Stanard, upon whom he had a massive, puppyish crush when he was a young man. Sadly, like many of the women in Poe's life, Jane Stanard died young.

SETTING

This poem is mostly set in the dreamworld inside the speaker's head—a dreamworld heavily influenced by the myths and

legends of ancient Greece and Rome. The speaker's body might be in a normal town, but his mind is on Mount Olympus, the home of the gods: even catching a glimpse of his beloved through a window puts this speaker in mind of classical statues, figures of idealized beauty.

All the poem's allusions to the "glory" and "grandeur" of Greece and Rome suggest just how overpowering the speaker's infatuation feels. Totally smitten, he's living in a private world of epic loves, perilous journeys, and shining goddesses.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was an innovator. Most famous for his macabre short stories, he's credited as a founder of literary genres from horror to science fiction. But he was also an accomplished poet, and some of his poems, like "The Raven," are household names. While "To Helen" isn't quite as famous as that raven and its ominous "Nevermore," the lines "To the glory that was Greece / And the grandeur that was Rome" developed a life of their own and are still widely quoted.

Poe is often considered a major American Romantic, and "To Helen" shows some of the marks of the wider Romantic movement. In its fascination with love, its interest in intense and transcendent emotional experiences, its sensuous imagery, and its use of classical mythology, this poem has more than a little in common with the work of earlier English Romantic poets like Keats or Byron.

Poe was also a huge influence on generations of writers who followed him. The writers and artists of the turn-of-the-20th-century Symbolist and Surrealist movements, for instance, were inspired by Poe's decadent language and strange, dreamlike imagery. And while Poe died poor and troubled, he's led a mighty literary afterlife: to this day, he's one of the best-known and most profoundly influential of all American writers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poe led a notoriously tragic and tormented life, and this poem quietly pays tribute to just one of his many painful losses.

Poe's parents died while Poe and his siblings were very young, and the children were all sent to separate foster homes. The grieving, lonely young Poe got into the habit of developing intense attachments to substitute mother figures—who had an unfortunate way of *also* dying young. His beloved foster mother Frances Allan, for instance, passed away when he was only 20.

This particular poem honors another of Poe's substitute parents: Jane Stanard, the mother of his school friend Richard. Poe met Jane when he was only 14 or 15, and seemed to absolutely worshiped her, often going to her for comfort when he was having trouble with his foster father John Allan (with whom he always had a turbulent relationship). The affection Poe felt for Jane blossomed into an intense crush: he later wrote that she was "the first, purely ideal love of my soul."

But sadly, Poe only got to enjoy Jane Stanard's company for about a year before she died, possibly of tuberculosis, in 1824. Poe never forgot her. He first drafted "To Helen" in 1831 (eight whole years after Jane's death), and regularly visited her grave for years.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poe Museum — Visit the website of the Poe Museum to learn more about Poe's life and work. (https://www.poemuseum.org/index)
- A Brief Biography — Learn about Poe's life at the Poetry Foundation, and find links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgar-allan-poe)
- Poe and Jane Stanard — Learn more about Poe's sweet, sad relationship with Jane Stanard, the woman "To Helen" honors—and read an early draft of the poem. (http://poecalendar.blogspot.com/2009/04/death-of-poes-first-love.html)
- The Poem in Pop Culture — See Tom Hanks reciting this poem (to sleazy effect) in the Coen brothers' version of The Ladykillers. (https://youtu.be/bgtfcf9WC0U)
- Poe's Legacy — Learn more about Poe's poetic reputation (and about the afterlife of "To Helen" in particular). (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/apr/26/poem-week-edgar-allan-poe)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDGAR ALLAN POE POEMS

- A Dream Within a Dream
- Alone
- Annabel Lee

HOW TO CITE

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