

H.D.'s "Helen"

H.D.'s "Helen": Contemplating the Classics and Confronting Poe

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Hilda Doolittle, more commonly known by the initials H.D., merges classical mythology with personal perception in "Helen," a poetic portrait of the infamous Helen of Troy. Just as she shortens her given name to a succinct identification of only two letters, H.D. presents a compact but complete image of Helen, compressing the tradition of myth and the innovation of modernism into a poem of three short stanzas. H.D. draws from her classical knowledge and familiarity with previous poetry to place "Helen" both in the context of Greek mythology and in conversation with Edgar Allan Poe's "To Helen." While H.D.'s "Helen" seems to relate the classic story of Helen and appears to mimic the form of Poe's poem, her variations in tone, metrical structure, and imagery critique these precedents and contemplate the woman Helen rather than the men who have objectified her. By choosing the famous story of Helen as her subject and the three-stanza poetic form of Poe's work as her structure, she begs comparison to the past in order to present a truly modernist poem that renders her own perspective on tradition and gender.

Before H.D. can present her take on the story of Helen of Troy and its gender implications, she must hold her poem up next to those views she wishes to confront and criticize. T. S. Eliot, H.D.'s contemporary and fellow modernist poet, recognizes the importance and difficulty of this in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot (1919) suggests that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," and argues that such poet's "significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (p. 1582). According to Eliot (1919), no poem can possess value if it stands apart from tradition entirely because one must "set [its author], for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (p. 1582). This association is crucial for the understanding and appreciation of H.D.'s "Helen." If she is to satisfy Eliot's demands of placing her poem within literature's "idea of order" before garnering any true significance for the work, H.D. must establish and explain its thematic connections to Homer, as well as its structural and topical ties to Poe (Eliot 1919, p. 1583).

To place "Helen" within the appropriate literary context, H.D. must first establish a connection with the classical myth of Helen of Troy, relying on her scholarship of the classics to include enough allusions to be clear, but not so many that she drowns her interpretation in exposition. According to editor Mary Loeffelholz's (2007) prefatory remarks regard-

ing H.D. in the Norton Anthology of American Literature, the poet immersed herself in "her favorite Greek poets" and was heavily influenced by their "Mediterranean settings" (p. 1515). Her fascination with Greek mythology, and particularly her "attract[ion] to the image of Helen... as an image of herself," provides the background knowledge to write poems such as "Helen" (Loeffelholz 2007, p. 1515). H.D. alludes to the story of Helen throughout her poem in order to establish the necessary relationship between her work and Homer's. The title, "Helen," is H.D.'s first indication of the subject matter of her work. She relies on the fame, or perhaps infamy, of Helen of Troy to create instant association with the story she wishes to revise. Her inclusion of "Greece" in each stanza confirms that the Helen of the title is indeed the kidnapped queen of Homer's Iliad (H.D. 1924, lines 1, 6, 12). H.D.'s (1924) final identifying allusion appears in the second line of the final stanza, referring to Helen as "God's daughter, born of love" (line 13). This epithet evokes Greek mythology and the legendary birth of Helen following the rape of the mortal woman Leda by the god Zeus. By including brief allusions to Homeric myth, H.D. places "Helen" in a classical context without allowing the poem to be absorbed by it, building a springboard with which to launch her own ideas about Helen's story.

H.D. is not the only poet who practices Eliot's prescribed attention to the classics. Even before Eliot establishes classical knowledge as a prerequisite for great poetry, Edgar Allan Poe illustrates his knowledge of and participation in literary tradition. Poe includes multiple allusions to Homer in "To Helen" to align it with the myth of Helen in the Iliad. The common Homeric allusions and mutual concentration on the story of Helen of Troy automatically connect H.D.'s "Helen" and Poe's "To Helen," and place them in conversation with one another. However, H.D. strengthens her work's connection to the earlier poem of Poe through structural mimicry and parallel imagery. The titles of the two poems provide the simplest association, making the common subject and classical associations immediately apparent before they even begin. Not only do the titles look alike, but the poems themselves appear similarly on the page. Obviously familiar with Poe's poem, H.D. shapes her poem into a form so similar to his that it begs comparison. Both poems are composed of three stanzas of similar lengths, Poe's at five lines each and H.D.'s varying from five to seven lines. However, the commonalities of these two poems do not end with structure. H.D. also borrows Poe's statue imagery in her description of

Helen, although she does not name it as he does and presents it in a different fashion. This statue motif, along with the structure and title of "Helen," places the poem in conversation with Poe's "To Helen," another rendition of a classical myth. H.D. revisits the story of Helen in order to reexamine the concept of gender in classical myth and reprove Poe's notion of it in "To Helen."

Once H.D. places "Helen" within the context of works by Homer and Poe through topical and metrical associations, she draws attention to the important differences between her work and that of Poe. She uses the similarities in the two poems to draw out specific disparities that present her modernist viewpoint of the classical story of Helen. H.D. begins her project of contrast by comparison before penning a single line when she titles the poem "Helen." While it only differs from Poe's title by one small word, that deletion in H.D.'s title changes the tone of the entire poem and gives Helen more agency and power than in Poe's "To Helen." By including the word "to," Poe makes the name "Helen" the object of a preposition, much like he objectifies the woman herself. Before he even begins the poem, Poe has already placed Helen in the traditional place of the female, as an object addressed by a man. While H.D. includes Helen's name in her title to imply association with Poe's poem, she removes "to" in order to make "Helen" the entirety of the title and critique Poe's placement of Helen as object. H.D.'s Helen is not the auditor or the object, but the image. In this poem, the poet does not praise Helen's beauty, but uses a more contemplative tone to consider her as more than an object, to comment on her being and her situation. H.D. uses a simple title both to provoke comparison with Poe and to reprove his objectification, but also to place her work in keeping with modernist poetry's direct treatment of its subject matter.

H.D.'s modernist tendencies also appear in the structure of "Helen." While she mimics Poe's stanzaic structure to promote comparison, she does not follow it exactly, deviating from tradition into modernism. In his article "The English Professor's Dilemma," Wallace C. Brown (1944) comments on the form of Poe's poem, saying that "in structure the parts are tightly knit" (p. 383). Poe demonstrates his adherence to conventions of form through consistency of stanza length and meter. Each stanza includes exactly five lines, and most of the poem appears in regular iambic tetrameter. Though the rhyme scheme of each stanza differs slightly from the one before it, they follow similar patterns and rely only on

exact rhymes without the inclusion of sight rhymes or off rhymes. H.D. recognizes and rejects the tradition of Poe's structure while maintaining enough semblance of it to inspire questions about the differences. H.D.'s "Helen" appears in three stanzas just as Poe's "To Helen" does, but she does not confine herself to the rigid five-line structure of his stanzas. Her almost-mimicry continues in the rhyme scheme. The presence of a rhyme scheme at all is rare in modernist poetry, but H.D. includes an irregular one in this poem so as not to remove it completely from traditional works. Though she conforms slightly by including rhyme, she does not adhere to traditional meter. While Poe uses conventional iambic tetrameter, H.D. creates rhythm through meaning rather than relying upon a strict metrical pattern. Her modernist structure in "Helen" contrasts with Poe's traditional form and prepares the way for her modern take on an ancient story.

Numerous poets have participated in the conversation about Helen of Troy. According to James W. Gargano (1960) in "Poe's 'To Helen'," Poe "assume[s] the poet's prerogative to reinterpret or recreate the Helen myth in terms of his own artistic disposition and needs" (p. 652). His interpretation relies on Helen as the "unifying symbol of the poem," but it considers her in relationship to the poet (Gargano 1960, p. 652). The poet's role in "To Helen" asserts itself in the first person pronouns of all three stanzas. In the first two lines, Poe qualifies the appraisal of Helen's beauty by saying, "Helen, thy beauty is to me/ Like those Nicean barks of yore" (1835, lines 1-2, emphasis added). He describes the benefit of her beauty to him when he says, "Thy Naiad airs have brought me home" (Poe 1835, line 8, emphasis added). In his article "Poe's 'To Helen,'" Warren S. Walker (1957) suggests that Poe considers Helen's beauty on multiple levels and that "the contemplation of her beauty has brought the poet 'home' spiritually" (p. 491). However, while Walker (1957) recognizes the importance of Helen's beauty, he argues that "the crux of the poem is the metaphoric function of the classical characters with whom the poet and his beloved are compared" (p. 491). Poe uses complex imagery and elaborate diction, veiling his meaning in metaphors that operate classical allusions. For Brown (1944), the "Psyche" allusion in the third stanza "illustrates Poe's effective use of intentional ambiguity" by presenting a single word that simultaneously refers to myth, the mind, and the soul (p. 384). He also creates distance through use of

the simile when he says Helen is "[l]ike those Nicean barks of yore" and "statue-like" (Poe 1835, lines 2, 12). While these similes maintain Poe's classical theme, Walker (1957) argues that they "do not bear a corresponding relationship to each other," thus presenting a metaphor that ultimately complicates rather than condenses (p. 492).

While Poe's barrage of metaphors complicates his poem to the point of ambiguity, his comparison of Helen to a statue provides a clear image that H.D. plucks from "To Helen" and uses in her imagist poem "Helen." Rather than overpowering her poem with allusions and metaphors, H.D. presents a single, unified image throughout whose details paint a picture of Helen as a statue and provoke contemplation of her situation. In "Doolittle's 'Helen,'" Donna Copeland (1988) recognizes that "Helen's own feelings and Greece's reaction to her are not part of the myth" that appears in classical literature (p. 34). She argues that "Hilda Doolittle has filled that gap" between Homer's narrative and the contemplation of the woman he describes and the country that comes to hate her (Copeland 1988, p. 34). H.D. (1924) mentions the "past enchantments/ and past ills" always associated with Helen, but she does so as she describes the effect their remembrance has upon Greece and Helen herself (lines 10-11). Not only does H.D. remove the focus from the events of the Iliad, but she even uses the famed beauty of Helen in a nontraditional way, presenting an image of staid emotion. The opening lines of the first two stanzas express the Greeks' extreme hatred of Helen, indicating that the entire group of people that is Greece "hates" and "reviles" her face (H.D. 1924, lines 1, 6). The third stanza begins with "Greece sees unmoved/ God's daughter," suggesting that nothing, not even the beauty that Poe and others praise, can persuade them to leave behind their hatred of her existence (H.D. 1924, line 12).

H.D. reinforces Greece's feelings toward Helen and the pain of Helen's situation with the word "wan" in both line seven and line nine, as well as the statue imagery she weaves throughout the poem. According to Copeland (1988), the glory of Helen's appearance does not appear in bold metaphors or grand allusions, but instead "her beauty creeps into a description that strives to be emotionless" (p. 34). The imagery of "Helen" plays on Poe's (1835) description of Helen as "statue-like" (line 12), but uses such detail that it removes

the need for the inclusion of the word "statue" in the poem. H.D. (1924) describes the haunting image of

the still eyes in the white face,
the lustre as of olives
where she stands,
and the white hands. (lines 2-5)

H.D. (1924) also uses the word "white" in the next two stanzas to describe Helen's face and the "white ash amid funereal cypresses" (lines 9, 18). Copeland (1988) suggests that H.D. uses this "white motif" to indicate that "physical beauty has burned out," and that the only way Greece can stop hating Helen is if her beautiful form "is laid in death's cold embrace" (p. 34). However, the repetition of "white" serves a greater purpose when viewed in the context of the statue motif rather than confining it to Copeland's view. Greece and male historians may hate Helen, but H.D. immortalizes her both through her poem and through the conceit of the statue.

Not afraid to take on historians and other poets, H.D. presents a new perspective on the myth of Helen. Unlike Poe, who describes Helen's beauty and its ability to bring him home, H.D. takes on the dominant patriarchal ideas about Helen. Her imagist rendering of Helen is a feminist challenge to the notions of Poe and others. While historians chronicle the exploits of the male heroes of the Trojan War, and poets objectify the beautiful woman Helen, H.D. identifies with Helen and presents a poem centered on her experience. In her article "Making It Really New: Hilda Doolittle, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the Feminist Potential of Modern Poetry," Gertrude Reif Hughes (1990) speaks of H.D.'s use of the Helen myth for the purpose of commenting on patriarchy. She points out that many of H.D.'s poems "take place in stylized locales saturated with legends," stories also saturated with dominant views (Hughes 1990, p. 378). According to Hughes (1990), H.D. presents Helen as the protagonist of an "anti-heroism" that "can be used to challenge values that are too shared" (p. 384). H.D.'s nontraditional consideration of Helen employs imagism to assert the poet's modernist and feminist ideas.

H.D. chooses to place "Helen" in the context of a classical myth in which the woman is the storyline and a poem by Poe in which the woman is the object. She uses a well-known

story that has already been taken on by other poets, assimilating her style closely enough to that of Poe to confront and criticize traditional ideas about Helen. The similarities of title and tone, metrical structure, and statue imagery give H.D. a position in which to insert her work in the existing body of poetry, but her divergence from those conventions sets her apart and parallels the unconventional perspective she presents. In "Helen," H.D. immortalizes a woman hated by history and objectified by men, contemplating Helen through the method of imagism and setting her free from the bonds of tradition through the radically objective lens of modernism.

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