

Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

To Helen (1831)

Helen, thy beauty is to me  
Like those Nicean barks of yore,  
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,  
The weary, wayworn 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!

#### ANALYSIS

“Although Poe tacitly sanctioned the claim that this poem was written when he was only fourteen, it seems more likely that it was produced between 1829 and the year when it was published, 1831. It is, nevertheless, a tribute to Poe’s boyhood idol, Mrs. Jane Stith Stanard of Richmond, who died in 1824, and whom he called ‘the first pure ideal love of my soul’.... Some lines were felicitously revised in the 1845 edition, here reproduced.

The unity of this poem derives from both its feeling and its metaphorical expression. The imagery not only makes its heroine a haven for a desperate wanderer in darkness; it also increasingly associates Helen’s type of classical beauty with the immortal splendor of Greece and Rome. In the first stanza, Helen’s beauty is like ‘barks of yore,’ which carried the wanderer to his homeland, and the words ‘Nicean,’ ‘perfumed,’ and ‘weary, wayworn wanderer’ (Ulysses) vaguely connote classical associations. In stanza two the classical quality of Helen’s beauty is more clearly suggested and ‘home’ becomes ‘the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome.’ These opening stanzas hark back to the past; the third stanza, in the present tense, likens Helen to a statue standing in a lighted window-niche, thus attributing to her not only physical beauty but also immortal beauty of soul.”

Walter Blair  
*The Literature of the United States I*, 3rd edition  
(Scott, Foresman 1966) 837

“‘To Helen’...[like ‘Sonnet--To Science’] is also saved from banality by what Poe does in it with images that are more conventional than those in ‘Romance’ but that cease to be conventional as Poe uses them. Superficially, ‘To Helen’ has the appearance of an old-fashioned idealistic love poem combining traditional praise of the lady’s beauty with the equally traditional theme that love can be redemptive. Thoughts of Helen’s beauty transport the speaker at last into ‘regions which are Holy Land,’ an image that might suggest Beatrice’s guiding Dante to a glimpse of the divine.

But a closer look at the poem suggest that thinking about Dante’s praise of Beatrice as we read ‘To Helen’ will mislead us. Poe’s meaning is not traditional but novel. The poem’s subject is not really Helen,

but Helen's beauty considered as an attribute of the speaker: 'Helen, thy beauty is to me...' Though the speaker addresses Helen and praises her beauty in terms borrowed partly from the 'religion of love,' there is no suggestion anywhere in the poem that the speaker really loves Helen. What he 'loves,' one gathers, is the *feelings* produced in him by thoughts of her beauty. What opium or alcohol have done for some, contemplation of Helen's beauty does for Poe. 'Helen' is the name the speaker gives to a datum in his awareness having the power to provoke in him certain sensations. 'Helen' is wholly his own.

Exploring the nature of the feelings stimulated by Helen's beauty, the speaker uses images of security, inspiration, and faith. He first thinks of himself as the hero of myth dwelling against his will in an alien land. In this image he is a modern Ulysses nostalgic for his 'native shore,' a 'weary, way-worn wanderer' on 'desperate seas.' Helen's beauty is the ship that will take him home. In the next stanza he becomes the artist and thinker whose intellectual home is Greece and Rome, which he is reminded of by Helen's 'classic' face.

In the final stanzas images of travel and of art become images of spiritual illumination, as the lamp in Helen's hand lights up a 'Holy Land' for a spiritual quester who has found his true home at last in the ideal, in the psyche itself. It is not quite clear whether the 'Psyche' addressed in the last two lines is 'Helen' or the speaker's own soul, but by this time it does not much matter. If Psyche is not literally his own imagination, at least her only interest for the speaker lies in her effect on him. In its egocentricity, the poem reminds us of some of Emerson's more clearly Transcendental comments on the spiritual uses of friendship. (Friends who make no demands upon us are excellent to have, for they stimulate our own best thoughts.)"

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 140-41

Michael Hollister (2015)