

These two poems are about a woman named Helen, an important figure from Greek mythology. Helen, known far and wide as the most beautiful woman in the world, was the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta when she fell in love with Paris, a handsome prince from the city of Troy. When Paris and Helen ran away together to Troy, Menelaus formed an army of Greek soldiers and declared war on Troy, launching the ten-year Trojan War. Read the two poems below and then answer the questions on a separate sheet of paper. Be sure you answer in complete, thoughtful sentences.

## To Helen

Helen, thy beauty is to me  
Like those Nicéan barks<sup>1</sup> of yore,  
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,  
The weary, way-worn wanderer<sup>2</sup> bore  
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,  
Thy hyacinth<sup>3</sup> hair, thy classic face,  
Thy Naiad<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup>, from the regions which  
Are Holy Land!  
- Edgar Allan Poe, 1845

1. Greek ships

2. This refers to Odysseus, a Greek hero who was thrown off-course on his travels home from the Trojan War by Poseidon.

3. Hyacinth is a type of curly petaled flower.

4. Naiad means "nymphlike." Naiads were water spirits that were believed to have magical healing powers.

5. Psyche was a beautiful woman who captured the heart of Eros, the god of love. In some versions of the myth, Psyche is the wife of Cupid.

## Helen

All Greece hates  
the still eyes in the white face,  
the lustre as of olives  
where she stands,  
and the white hands.

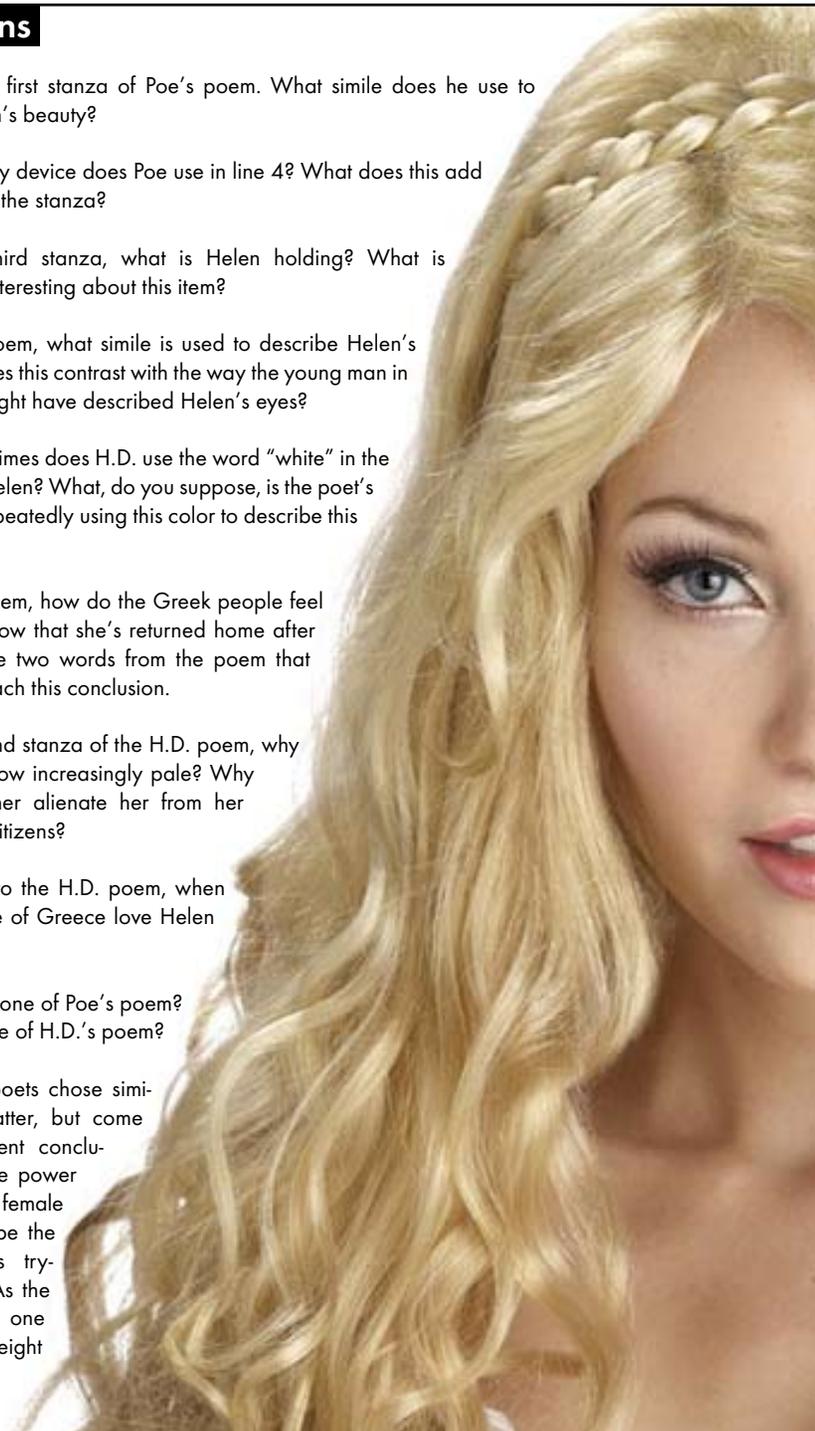
All Greece reviles  
the wan face when she smiles,  
hating it deeper still  
when it grows wan and white,  
remembering past enchantments  
and past ills.

Greece sees unmoved,  
God's daughter,<sup>6</sup> born of love,  
the beauty of cool feet  
and slenderest knees,  
could love indeed the maid,  
only if she were laid,  
white ash amid funereal cypresses.  
- H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), 1924

6. Helen was a mortal woman, but rumored to be a daughter of Zeus. Her mother was Leda.

## Questions

1. Look at the first stanza of Poe's poem. What simile does he use to describe Helen's beauty?
2. What literary device does Poe use in line 4? What does this add to the effect of the stanza?
3. In Poe's third stanza, what is Helen holding? What is symbolically interesting about this item?
4. In H.D.'s poem, what simile is used to describe Helen's eyes? How does this contrast with the way the young man in Poe's poem might have described Helen's eyes?
5. How many times does H.D. use the word "white" in the poem about Helen? What, do you suppose, is the poet's purpose for repeatedly using this color to describe this woman?
6. In H.D.'s poem, how do the Greek people feel about Helen now that she's returned home after the war? Write two words from the poem that helped you reach this conclusion.
7. In the second stanza of the H.D. poem, why does Helen grow increasingly pale? Why does this further alienate her from her fellow Greek citizens?
8. According to the H.D. poem, when will the people of Greece love Helen again?
9. What's the tone of Poe's poem? What's the tone of H.D.'s poem?
10. The two poets chose similar subject matter, but come to very different conclusions about the power and effects of female beauty. Describe the point each is trying to make. As the reader, which one holds more weight for you? Why?



## Helen of Troy, Compare/Contrast Poetry Lesson

1. Look at the first stanza of Poe's poem. What simile does he use to describe Helen's beauty? He compares her beauty to the Greek ships that Odysseus guided on his way home after the war. Her beauty makes him feel like a warrior coming home.
2. What literary device does Poe use in line 4? What does this add to the effect of the stanza? He uses alliteration of the "w" sound in "weary, way-worn wanderer," which creates a lyrical quality to the writer's voice.
3. In Poe's third stanza, what is Helen holding? What is symbolically interesting about this item? Poe says that he sees Helen holding a lamp made out of a precious stone. Symbolically, the light could represent goodness and purity. Also, given the earlier stanzas, the lamp evokes a feeling of homefires burning, lighting the man's way home.
4. In H.D.'s poem, what simile is used to describe Helen's eyes? How does this contrast with the way the young man in Poe's poem might have described Helen's eyes? H.D. refers to her eyes as having the gloss of olives, which is an odd, unflattering comparison. In Poe's romantic poem, the narrator would refer to Helen's eyes as stars or sunlight, illuminating the path home. Here, though, it's clear to the reader that H.D.'s poem will be less flattering than Poe's. Olives are also either green or black, which may have a symbolic link to H.D.'s view of Helen. If the reader imagines green olives, then jealousy is what comes out of Helen. If the reader imagines black olives, then death and pain are what she will create.
5. How many times does H.D. use the word "white" in the poem about Helen? What, do you suppose, is the poet's purpose for repeatedly using this color to describe this woman? She uses the word "white" four times in the short piece. She uses the word repeatedly to build irony and emphasize that Helen is just the opposite of what she appears to be. White is the color of virgins, purity, and angels, yet this is a fallen woman with the blood of thousands of dead men on her hands. The "white hands" mentioned in line 5 should make us pause, realizing that this is NOT an innocent or blameless woman.
6. In H.D.'s poem, how do the Greek people feel about Helen now that she's returned home after the war? Write two words from the poem that helped you reach this conclusion. The people are angry with her, blaming her for being the cause of the Trojan War and the deaths of so many of their husbands, brothers, and sons. Words that show this are found in the second stanza and include "reviles" and "hating."
7. In the second stanza of the H.D. poem, why does Helen grow increasingly pale? Why does this further alienate her from her fellow Greek citizens? She grows even more pale when she remembers and grieves over her troubled past. The citizens would find it insulting that Helen feels sorry for her own losses. She's still alive, while so many of their beloved are dead.
8. According to the H.D. poem, when will the people of Greece love Helen again? They'll love her only when she's dead.
9. What's the tone of Poe's poem? What's the tone of H.D.'s poem? Students' answers will vary a bit, but Poe's poem has a romantic tone, while the tone of H.D.'s poem is bitter.
10. The two poets chose similar subject matter, but come to very different conclusions about the power and effects of female beauty. Describe the point each is trying to make. As the reader, which one holds more weight for you? Why? Poe is clearly moved by the physical desire that the woman's beauty creates, giving him a reason to fight through the rough world and make his way home. H.D. is far more cynical, commenting upon the death and destruction that comes from the pursuit of the beauty that Poe describes. Students' answers to the last two questions will vary and always make for a lively debate when we discuss their answers in a full-class review of these questions. Be sure to raise the question of the gender of each poet. Why does Poe view the Helen of Troy myth so differently than Doolittle? Be prepared to stir up a bit of a gender war discussion amongst your students.