Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

To Helen

by Edgar Allan Poe

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5



Poe wrote the first version as a teenager, inspired by Jane Stanard, the mother of a school friend, who was kind to him and died young. It was published in 1831 and revised in 1845. The poem is full of classical allusions: Helen of Troy, Greek ships, Naiads (water nymphs) and Psyche (the soul in Greek myth). It has three five-line stanzas.

THE POEM

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,
To 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!

VOCABULARY

barks — ships

yore — long ago

wayworn — tired from travel

wont — accustomed, used to

hyacinth — a flower; also a curly, dark hair color in classical poetry

Naiad — a water nymph in Greek myth

grandeur — splendor, greatness

niche — a small recess in a wall

agate — a striped semiprecious stone

Psyche — in Greek myth, a beautiful woman who stands for the soul

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the speaker compare Helen's beauty to in stanza 1?

2. Who is the "weary, wayworn wanderer," and where is he going?

3. Where has Helen's beauty brought the speaker in stanza 2?

4. How does the speaker see Helen in stanza 3?

5. Why might Poe fill a love poem with references to ancient Greece and Rome?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a poem of 3 stanzas comparing someone who helped you to a journey home. Use at least one reference to a myth, story or history you know.

To Helen — Answer Key

1. To “those Nicean barks of yore,” ancient ships that carried a traveler gently over a perfumed sea.
2. A tired traveler (like Odysseus, or the speaker himself) being carried “To his own native shore.”
3. Home “To the glory that was Greece, / To the grandeur that was Rome”: to the ideal beauty of classical art.
4. “statue-like” in “yon brilliant window niche,” holding “The agate lamp,” like Psyche, the soul, from “Holy Land.”
5. Accept supported answers: to make her beauty timeless and ideal, like classical art.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/to-helen-edgar-allan-poe/