

Helen in Egypt



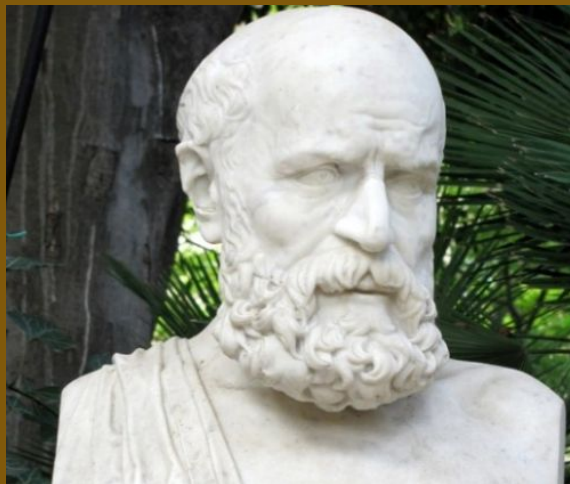
H.D. (Hilda Doolittle)

- Modernist poet
- Lived through both world wars
- Started *Helen in Egypt* in 1952, but it was published in 1961, right before her death
- Consistently wrote about Classical Greek Myths, did many translations
- Wrote *Helen in Egypt* while experimenting with spirituality and blending Egyptian and Greek mythos
- Explores themes of love and war, tells the story of the Trojan war primarily through Helen's perspective, but occasionally other characters speak as well.
- Helen takes on many roles throughout the poem
- "Intervention" with strong anti-war stance, aligned with the modernist movement

Why is Helen in Egypt?

“We all know the story of Helen of Troy but few of us have followed her to Egypt. How did she get there? Stesichorus of Sicily in his *Pallinode* was the first to tell us.... According to the *Pallinode*, Helen was never in Troy. She had been transposed or translated into Egypt. Helen of Troy was a phantom, substituted for the real Helen, by jealous deities. The Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion.”

- HD, *Helen in Egypt*, (pg. 1)



Stesichorus of Sicily

- Greek Lyric Poet
- Wrote a lyric poem blaming Helen for war
- Went blind as a consequence
- Wrote the first *Pallinode*/*Palinode* (a poem which rescinds an earlier statement) apologizing to Helen
- “Helen couldn’t have caused the war because she wasn’t even there, she was in Egypt. Helen of Troy was an illusion.”

Helen & Achilles

- Helen is in a random temple in Egypt, trying to decipher the hieroglyphs there
- H.D. starts blending Greek and Egyptian mythology (Amen-Zeus, Isis = Thetis & Aphrodite, Achilles is Horus)
- Achilles washes up on the shore and meets her but doesn't recognize her
 - In this story, Achilles survives because of some mysterious circumstances that are best understood as:
 - Achilles sees the phantom of Helen on the wall and falls in love with her, making the arrow that pierces his heel love's arrow and not a real arrow
 - When he is shot, his body dies, but Thetis spirits him away to this distant shore. He loses his immortality in the process and becomes mortal
 - Helen-phantom throws her scarf down to him and somehow that binds them together to meet again in Egypt in this "place out of time"
- Both Helen and Achilles blame each other for the war:
 - Achilles thinks Helen is responsible for the deaths of all of his men who he loved
 - Helen blames Achilles for leading her twin brothers, the dioscouri into battle and possibly their death

Helen sees herself as both Achilles' lover and Thetis, his mother.

- The story of Oedipus appears later in the story, and there's this recurring idea of who Helen is responsible for and who she supposedly belongs to
- She wants to take care of Achilles, but they're both arguing about whether or not it's better to forget about what happened in Troy or to remember their experiences there.
- Achilles and Helen are matched together because they both represent war in different ways
- Achilles is argued to be the most important and lasting suitor once Helen visits all of them. Ultimately, he and Helen are each others' escape from the war which kind of revolves around them

Helen & Paris

Suddenly Helen is on Leuké, the island of Achilles.

Paris is here in this chapter:

- Helen is unsure whether or not Paris or Thetis should be at fault for the war
- In this story, Helen seemingly went willingly out of love for Paris
- Her relationship with Paris is framed as a relationship of adolescence and youth, and ultimately by the end of this chapter she rejects him.

Leuké is a kind of mysterious limbo space, just like Egypt, but this time we know Paris is dead

Things we learn from this:

Helen WAS in Troy with Paris, but when Philoctetes's arrow strikes him, Helen disappears to Egypt

Helen wanted to return to Greece at this point, and was trying to escape from Paris. He isn't able to understand her in the same way Achilles is, and so he is left behind.

When she runs down the spiral staircase in Paris's palace, Thetis rescues her and spirits her away

Paris is abandoned by Aphrodite and Helen simultaneously, leaving him dying and loveless because he failed to understand her.

Also, Paris represents Troy, and when Helen deserts him, he and the city perish.

Helen & Theseus

According to H.D., Theseus once abducted Helen when she was a child to be his bride, before he went to Crete or fought the minotaur.

He then left with his friend to try to abduct Persephone so they could both have 'goddess-wives' but on their journey his friend died, and while he was away, Helen was returned home to Sparta.

This chapter is Helen reflecting on her childhood, and she talks with Theseus almost as a mentor figure, who advises her to seek her own path.

He claims that the minotaur was more of a metaphor than a real monster, and that she has to face her past and memories in a similar fashion to his handling of the minotaur.

Helen & Helen

After talking to her suitors throughout time, Helen talks to different iterations of herself to come to terms with her identity.

Spartan Helen argues that she's born of war and Dendritic Helen argues that she's passive

She reconciles them and finds peace within herself

Helen is defined as goddess, demon, and phantom throughout the poem, so a lot of this is her escaping from the labels assigned to her and eventually finding a reason to return to Greece

Helen's Perspective and Feminism

H.D. talks about Clytaemnestra, Iphigenia, and Orestes in *Helen in Egypt*. Helen initially blames Achilles for Iphigenia's death, since her sacrifice was disguised as a wedding with him. However, she ultimately decides that he is a tool in the larger problem which is the war itself.

Helen reflects a lot on Clytaemneestra and Iphigenia, saying:

“Does it even the balance if a wife repeats a husband's folly? Never; the law is different; if a woman fights, she must fight by stealth, with invisible gear; no sword, no dagger, no spear in a woman's hands can make wrong, right;”

- H.D. *Helen in Egypt*. (pg 97)

Achilles, Paris, and Theseus all have a different 'Helen' in their minds who they try to enforce on her when they speak to her, but she resists them and instead focuses on the hieroglyphs