

## Helen of Troy, 1993

A modern retelling of the myth of Helen of Troy, reimagined as a young woman living in small-town Tennessee in the 1990s. Zoccola's *Helen of Troy, 1993* reframes the legendary figure of Helen as a fully realized, self-reflective woman whose story is not about war or beauty, but about agency, rebellion, and the weight of female mythos in a patriarchal society.

### Major Plot Points:

#### Backstory + Helen as a character

- Helen's early life, societal expectations, and beauty are central to her local identity. She's known for her beauty and was a beauty pageant queen. She is typically always the talk of town. She previously lived with her mother and is close with Clytemnestra. However, their relationship is almost removed in a way as they're only able to talk about tragedy and violence and never discuss their children or personal lives. She lives with Menelaus (the big cheese) and their daughter Hermonie on a homestead and is isolated from town. She used to have the favor of everyone until she left with the stranger (Paris).

#### Marriage & Disillusionment:

- Trapped in a stifling domestic life with her first husband. Throughout the poems Helen shows she is bored with life. She's disinterested in Menelaus and their daughter even though they've not done anything egregious to her. In the poem *helen of troy in february* she gives more on why she stays. "do i love him? who the big cheese? enough to be stood here in this walgreens with his gut pills in my purse and the baby slung on my chest, with bing crosby piped through the speakers and the slip-choke of pink and red and puff snowed in on every shelf, cards like you wouldn't believe, my honey bear, my shining star. **his name is on the mortgage. On the title of the car.**" (Zoccola, lines 1-10)
- Throughout the collection she gives more insight into their past and we learn that their marriage didn't start off terribly, but the monotonous lifestyle that Menelaus lives becomes suffocating. "...it wasn't always so gory, is what I'm saying/ or maybe i mean that if there were any problems, i was still digging their roots" (Zoccola, lines 22-25;)
- As the affair goes on, Helen becomes more disinterested in married life and her child. She cites many times how she's a neglectful mother, but she can't force herself to be better. Due to the affair which consumes her for a time, she divorces herself from wife which also strips her of her motherhood to continue to see Paris. She does eventually return, but she doesn't regain her motherhood, and her daughter resents her for leaving.
  - o Their child Hermione is only ever known to be 'the kid' throughout the collection and only once does Helen refer to her as her daughter and it's when she's distressed by gossip. "and i don't blame the kid for going ghost—i'm sure i'd've done the same were i the scion of the town slut arrived home from weeks of

unauthorized pornographic ignominy, crawling back to her slighted husband like a flighty bit of chaff of which the worthy wheat had been well-rid—but man-eater or no, in the jaws of the maternal sanctum of first-baptist ladies’-association busybodies i suddenly need my daughter like i need my own skin, like seeing her scowling face is going to be the only thing that keeps all my wobbly insides from spilling across sprite-sticky linoleum like the bottom ripping out of a garage bag, and i think i last about ninety seconds quivering at the center of the holy maelstrom of gleeful gossip before turning tail to hunt her down, this girl” (Zoccola, pg 57)

- Although Helen shares that her marriage isn’t terrible, she does hint at Menelaus being controlling at times. They buy a mac, and he doesn’t want her using it ever, and when she returns home from her affair, he follows her everywhere. However, he is mostly seen as a man of no action even though he has moments like this, which still frustrates Helen.

**Escape/Affair:** Falls for a mysterious man (“The Stranger,” a modern Paris figure).

#### **Departure:**

- Helen has been engaging in her affair for a while before she leaves with Paris, who is never named in the collection. He’s from the north and it’s not specified exactly where, and he represents a new freedom to Helen. Even though the affair is something that is significant it isn’t the bulk of the poetry collection. Through Paris, Helen has a lot of internal conflict and doesn’t know what she wants out of the relationship or life. When she leaves the form of the poems following become fragments of her time away. “he said have you ever been north before—and i hadn’t” (Zoccola, lines 1-2, *about the affair again*.)
- In this adaptation of the Iliad Helen does go with Paris willingly and states multiple times in different poems how she chose to go with him. Again, their affair has been going on for a while before she finally leaves. The women of Sparta also comment on Helens leaving and view it as Helen stealing away the stranger, who they also refer to as a coyote. “the day she left, we examined the thing from every angle, this puzzle of biology: abnormal, shocking, a swan who’d do the stalking, a coyote, strange to these parts, willing to be stolen from his life, taken away” (Zoccola, lines 9-14, *the spartan women discuss the stranger*)
- Menelaus/the big cheese has no reaction when Helen leaves, there is no search party. He doesn’t come looking for her and it’s a very different characterization of the Menelaus from the Iliad “my husband, he’ll bomb squad. he’ll sniffer dog. He’ll fly in the army. He’ll call up the fuzz. He’ll swat team, he’ll fire truck, he’ll ambulance. I’ll wake up one morning to green berets. But he doesn’t” (Zoccola, lines 1-5, *about the affair again iii*)
  - o “Lord Zeus! Grant that I punish this man who wrong me first, this godlike Paris! Bring him down low beneath my hands, so that all people in the future shrink

from harming a host who treated them with love and friendship” (Homer, Iliad, lines 353-357)

- During her fleeing she is free, no one is hunting her down, but Sparta is talking. There is also no band of men coming to get her because there was no oath sworn, so Menelaus is left to deal with this alone.
- This time away is brief and again there is barely any mention of the stranger/Paris. He’s more so a foil for Helen and a what-if situation handed to her. As opposed to the Iliad where Helen has been away for 10 years.

## Connection to Homer’s Iliad and Works from Antiquity

### Differences between the Iliad Helen and Helen of Tennessee

- The collection does follow the story of the Iliad centering around the affair. Due to the setting being in America during the 90’s there are different events that are talked about to mimic the violence that is the Trojan war. Helen and Cly’s pastime are discussing tragedies that are happening during their phone calls. This is similar to the women during the war recounting the lives lost and how horrid war is from the sidelines. “...three boys in Memphis, seventy-six Waco Branch Davidians, ten thousand under an earthquake in India, are you listening to me, Helen, a ferry sank in South Korea and everyone on board drowned” (Zoccola, lines 3-6, *Helen of Troy gets the news from her sister*)
- Helen’s abduction/escape with Paris sparks the Trojan War this we know. In the Iliad, however, there are many moving parts (the gods) and it’s never clear if Helen left willingly or was taken of her own volition. Which is a big difference from the poems where Helen shares, she wanted to go with Paris.
- In *The Iliad*, she is often a passive symbol of blame or guilt, while in the collection she takes charge in many aspects of her life as well as her affairs. She doesn’t feel guilty for leaving and is more so trying to piece together how this experience will shape her as a person. She’s very self-serving in this adaptation, with her not carrying about anything but herself and the stranger. While in the Iliad Helen is seen mourning men on both sides of the war and again feels immense guilt at the number of lives lost. “...Father-in-law, I love you and respect you. I wish that I had chosen painful death the day I came here with your son and left my bedroom, kinsmen, late-born precious daughter, and cherished group of women friends. I did not. That is why I have melted to tears” (*Iliad*, Book 3, lines 171-178)
  - o Seen as beautiful but dangerous, voiceless, or shamed.
- Another significant difference in character is again Menelaus. It’s mentioned above but in the collection of poems he takes more of a backseat to this story and is portrayed as caring, boring, and static man. He’s completely different from his counterpart in the Iliad, who is a brave prince in battle that has gone to great lengths to retrieve his wife. In the poems he physically is also unappealing to Helen with his large gut and assumed gut

problems. He is never mentioned to be with his brothers, which may contribute to him not going after Helen as Agamemnon was the one to spur Menelaus into his decision.

- Just like in the Iliad with the catalog of ships there's also a catalog of Helens pregnancy cravings which silly also stays true to Homer and his catalogues '*helen of troy catalogues her pregnancy cravings*'
  - o Something to note is that their daughter Hermione is not present in the Iliad, yet she is present in these poems, and we see her and her behavior through her mom. In the poem '*helen of troy explains to the gods*' she takes note how even her daughter is more align with Menelaus than herself. "why are we even going to church, says the big cheese, why are we alive at all says the kid. she says things he says, these days." (Zoccola, lines 21-23)
- Zoccola also takes the idea of chorus' from Greek plays and spreads them throughout the book. They take the form of gossiping old Baptist women in the community chatting about the drama of everyone in Troy. They have 6 choral interludes as they discuss topics such as Menelaus, Hermione, Paris, and Tennessee which is a stand in for Sparta, along with Helen of course.
  - o There are also swan interludes that are directed at Helen only. The swan is an omnipresent being that watches Helen and also seems to understand her internal world. It's also in the swan interlude that we get the first explicit mention of the gods as gods
- The biggest departure from the original text is the lack of presence of the gods and mythology. Myth is mentioned in the book, Helen's birth is about the same and she's still born from an egg and has her siblings, but the mention of a divine father is nowhere to be seen. It's not till the latter half of the collection does Helen explicitly call out to the gods and acknowledges them as such. Due to this, Helen leaving with Paris is seen as strictly her idea without divine intervention. The gods are essential players in the outcome of Troy and the length of this war is in part due to the gods and their feelings about mortal matters. "When white-armed Hera realized the Greeks were dying in the skirmishes of war, at once her words took wing. She told Athena, 'Relentless child of Zeus, this will not do! We will not keep our vote to Menelaus—that he would sack the well-built town of Troy and then come safely home—if we allow destructive Ares to rage on like this. Come, let us plan for battle and for slaughter'" (Iliad, book 5 lines 711-719).
  - o The author also starts the poetry collection with a quote from the Iliad "There was a world...or was it all a dream" (Iliad, book 3 line 219, tr. Robert Fagles) and certain poems get intro lines from the Iliad. They are from the Fogel edition, but all have to do with dreaming and characterizations of Helen. At the start of *helen of troy avoids her school reunion* the author quotes book 6, lines 408-409 which read "...dear to me, bitch that i am, vicious, scheming—horror to freeze the heart! Oh how I wish" (Iliad, 6.408-409 tr. Robert Fagels). In *one more thing about the affair* she takes us to book 3 line 199 "I don't blame you, I hold the gods to blame" (Iliad, 3.199, tr. Robert Fagels). This is of course the interaction between

Helen and her father-in-law where he's really the only person to not blame Helen for the actions of the war. Lastly in *helen of troy plants near the mailbox*, which is the last poem to have a reference, we get the lines "Zeus planted a killing doom within us both, so even for generations still unborn we will live in a song" (Iliad, 6.424-426, tr. Robert Fagels)

- The author states in the notes at the back that God, that is a stand in for Zeus. It changes the meaning of the poems (imo) to have a more myth lens, but without that note and given the context of the collection it feels like they're speaking about the Christian God.

#### IV. Major Themes

##### *1. Female Agency & Identity*

- Helen is not just a symbol—she is a woman reckoning with beauty, control, and freedom.
- Her desire is central—she chooses to leave her life, despite the costs.
- She questions whether her myth is her own or imposed on her.

##### *2. Myth vs. Reality*

- Zoccola plays with the gap between how Helen is perceived (goddess, villain, seductress) and who she actually is (confused, yearning, human).
- The small-town setting offers a contemporary myth-making lens: gossip, church whispers, and tabloid imagination.

#### Key Takeaways:

- Zoccola gives us a Helen who speaks, acts, and demands to be heard.
- The poetry reframes *The Iliad*'s passive beauty into a woman who writes her own myth.
- By transporting the story to 1993 Tennessee, Zoccola shows that ancient myths still haunt modern lives—but they can be reimagined.

## References

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