

## WOMAN REPRESENTATION IN POE'S *TO HELEN*

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### ABSTRACT

Sir. Edgar Allan Poe was recognized for his gothic yet in depth writings. Every object he put in his works ended up as an interesting center of a literary study. Therefore, the aim of this research was to analyze the representation of a woman in Poe's *To Helen*, the first version of the poem published in 1831. Meanwhile, to analyze the poem, an expressive approach and feminism approach were applied during this research. Hence, this research was a descriptive research where all the data were obtained and presented in words. Having analyzed this poem, it was discovered that in this poem, Poe depicted woman opposite to his major theme of beautiful victimized women. In this poem, the woman was represented as fair, caring, comforting and full of wisdom to the extent where a person found love and home in her.

**Keywords:** *Woman, Representation, Depiction, Poe, To Helen, Poem*

### 1. Introduction

Poetry is a work where someone can sum up ample and deep story in a short manner. However, as short as it might seem, a poem covers more than what can be imagined by the readers. Therefore, whoever or whatever the object of the poem is, they must hold a special place in the poet's heart. Despite of the reason behind it; love, lost, anger, fear, or even death, lies a special tale that promotes the writing process. Thereupon, the process to read and analyze a poem is always challenging and enlightening.

Edgar Allan Poe was a respected writer for his works where romanticism, gothic, horror and women meet. Many researchers found that women had become one of his biggest

inspirations. Women had been the subject of numerous poems written by Poe, and there were considerably amount of them are entitled after the female character. "To Helen" (1831), "Lenore" (1831), "Eulalie – A Song" (1845), "Ulalume – A Ballad" (1847), "To Helen" (1848), "For Annie" (1849), and "Annabel Lee" (1849). However, in most of those poems, especially the women mention in the poems above, were represented as vulnerable victim, taken away by death. Therefore, they were called as Poe's dark women back in the day.

*To Helen* is a poem written by Poe and published in 1831. Although it is not as popular as *Annabel Lee* but this work has got a chance to gain attention

from the readers back then. Coming from the same topic which as a woman, *To Helen* seemed to have a different vibe than Annabel Lee since in *To Helen*, the woman is depicted beautifully. However, is that so? During his career as an American writer, Poe has written many works and among them women has appeared quite a bit as the object of his works. However, the most well know works are where the women were depicted as victim or even worse death.

By then, the first wave of the feminist movement occurred in Europe and America. The oppression and marginalized by the men, created a commotion among women to be able to have an equality in voting and experience a more appropriate education. During this era, many literary works where women were objectified and victimized were all over the world. Among them, Poe was considered as a male writer who presented women with weakness and laxity.

A study conducted by Martens (2013) showed that women had appeared in Poe's poems often. In *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (the 2006 edition by Barnes & Noble), he stated that around 54% of the poem included in the book were about women. However, as far as the writer's research went, there were only a few researches were conducted about *To Helen*, especially in analyzing the woman representation in this specific poem. As women were quite often featured in Poe's poem, therefore the writer was interested and challenged to analyze the representation of woman limited in

*Poe's To Helen*. Hence, the approach used were an expressive approach, where the writer reflected the content of the poem with the life of the poet's since the writer believed that the setting for when the work was created had an immense impact into the work itself. Therefore, the feminism approach was also included since the poem was about women representation, furthermore since the poem itself was published in 1831 where the first wave of feminism took place, this approach was seen insightful for the discussion. Thus, the discussion was limited and focused only on how the woman in Poe's *To Helen* was represented through the lexicons and the way she was narrated in the poem.

## 2. Literature Review

Wherefore Sir. Edgar Allan Poe is a big name in for his phenomenal works, many studies have been conducting to analyze his poetry or tale. Hence, the studies about all the women mentioned in his works were also conducted. However, most of the studies focus more on the stories where beautiful the women became the helpless victims or murdered and dead, as in *Annabel Lee* and *Lenore*.

Besides gothic, woman is a very poplar theme in Poe's works. However, as mentioned before, most of the women appeared in his poem was pictured as helpless victims, someone who is sick, dead and even worse murdered. Therefore, considerably amount of studies about them were conducted heretofore. In early 2010, a study conducted by Grcic entitled *Poe's Ladies: Search for Perfection* stated during his lifetime, Poe had

experienced facing the death of women closed to him which most likely affected his works and drove him to unload those painful experiences to ample of his works. Grcic then wrote "Throughout his work Edgar Allan Poe is guided by the idea explained in his "Philosophy of Composition" where he says that the best inspiration for the most poetical melancholy is found in "the death of a beautiful woman"...". It explained why popular works like Annabel Lee, Lenore, Eleonora, Berenice, Ligeia, Morella, Madeline were created.

Furthermore, *The Loss of the Ideal Woman in Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry*, a study carried out by Reynaud (2014), stated similar testimony about how the experience of losing significance women had an immerse influence in Poe's works. When Poe found a beautiful, intelligent and inspiring women in Jane Stanard, his friend's mother whom he honored in *To Helen* after she died. Jane was the women whom young Poe has fallen in love with, He began idolizing her and later referred to her as his "passionate boyhood, [...] the first, purely ideal love of [his] soul" 25 in a letter to Sarah H. Whitman. As for *Annabel Lee*, Poe wrote this in grief of the death of his wife Virginia Clemm who died very young and left Poe a miserable and emotionally painful life.

A year before, a study entitled *The Representation of Women in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe* was conducted by Martens (2013). In this study he explained more about the representation of many women who appeared in Poe's works. It appeared that victim women were not the only

theme where women were represented by Poe. In fact, there were some interesting women, such as the intelligent women named Kate in *Three Sundays a Week* and Madame Lalande in *The Spectacles*. Thus, only a few studies were conducted about to Helen, especially on how the woman is depicted in the poem. Therefore, this study was conducted to focus more in analyzing the representation of women in Poe's *To Helen*.

### 3. Research Method

In conducting this research, the researcher used a qualitative research. Therefore, all the data were taken in form of words rather than numbers and it did not deal with numbers, diagram and formulas. Therefore, the data in this research were collected from relevant books, articles and documents, both from offline and online sources. In addition, the researcher divided the source into two parts; those were the primary source and the secondary sources. The primary source was a poem *To Helen* by Edgar Allan Poe. Moreover, the secondary sources that the researcher used consist of supporting books about the poet, poetry, and related articles about Poe's *To Helen* and Poe's biography.

Hence, to analyze the poem, the researcher used an expressive approach which the researcher assumed would be suitable for this research. As stated by Abrams (1979) "Expressive approach judged the work by its sincerity or genuine or adequacy to the poet's individual vision or state mind; and it often looks in the work for evidence of the author who consciously has revealed in it." Thus, to analyze the

poem, researcher was obliged to study about the life of Poe to comprehend how it affects the poem in any way possible. Expressive approach believes that the state of emotion when the poet writes a work will most likely influences the process of writing. Therefore, the poet and his poem was not separable.

Furthermore, in the discussion, the researcher also analyzed certain area of the poem by using a feminism approach. Prior to the creation of the poem which took place in 1800s, when the first wave of the feminism occurred, this approach was used to analyze the relation of the woman representation in the poem and the phenomena that was going at that time.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

To Helen was one of the first poems written by Poe in his young age and one of the first where woman was the object, especially entitled by a woman's name. Ample of researches and scholars believed that this poem was made to honor Mrs. Jane Stanard, Poe's first purely love and mother figure whom a mother of his childhood friend.

Below were the two versions of the released poems, *To Helen* (1831) version which was featured in *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (2017) and *To Helen* (1845) version from *The Raven and Other Poems* (2002).

<i>To Helen</i> (1831)	<i>To Helen</i> (1845)
<b>Helen, thy beauty is to me</b>	Helen, thy beauty is to me
<b>Like those Nicean barks of yore,</b>	Like those Nicean barks of yore
<b>That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,</b>	That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,

<b>The weary, way-worn wanderer bore</b>	The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
<b>To his own native shore.</b>	To his own native shore.
<b>On desperate seas long wont to roam,</b>	On desperate seas long wont to roam,
<b>Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,</b>	Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
<b>Thy Naiad airs, have brought me home</b>	Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
<b>To the beauty of fair Greece,</b>	To the glory that was Greece,
<b>And the grandeur of old Rome.</b>	And the grandeur that was Rome.
<b>Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche</b>	Lo, in yon brilliant window-niche
<b>How statue-like I see thee stand,</b>	How statue-like I see thee stand,
<b>The agate lamp within thy hand!</b>	The agate lamp within thy hand,
<b>Ah, Psyche, from the regions which</b>	Ah! Psyche, from the regions which
<b>Are Holy Land!</b>	Are Holy Land!

##### 4.1 Allusions

*To Helen* was a poem wrote by Poe to honor the late of his friend's mother Jane Stanard, published first in 1831 and later on was published again with minor adjustment. Following was the revised version of the poem which was published in 1845. The complete version of the poem analyzed in this discussion was featured in a book published in 2002 entitled *The Raven and Other Poems*.

*The Raven and Other Poems.*

*Helen, thy beauty is to me  
Like those Nicéan barks of yore,  
That gently, o'er a perfumed*

*sea,  
The weary, way-worn wanderer  
bore  
To his own native shore.*

In the first Stanza, this poem began with word "Helen" which believed by many as the Greek goddess of light or Helen of Troy who is the most beautiful woman ever lived. In tune with the word, "...thy beauty is to me" follows to stress the fact the woman is indeed strikingly fair and beautiful in the poet's eyes. The first line opens the poem with a fine depiction of a fair woman, in harmony with her name "Helen" as the most beautiful Goddess from Greece. Poe himself inclined to insert many Greece lexicons in his poem.

"...Like those Nicéan barks of yore..." appears to reassure and supports the name Helen, as it was related to her Story. Helen, Zeus's daughter, was the wife of Melenaus King of Sparta who happened to run with Paris, King of Troy and cause an immersed war known as the Trojan war. Nice itself was a city where major ships would anchor there. Therefore, Nicean barks refer to the situation long ago, where the small sailing (barks) took people home. Take note that Poe chose to use "barks" as an old word of ships and "yore" to indicate the period of a long time ago.

"...That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,..." this line once again emphasizes the prior line where the poet elaborate about the city of Nice, which located on Mediterranean coast. Nice (Nicaea) was founded around 350 BC by the Greeks of Massilia (Marseille), and was given the name of ("Nikaia") in honor of a victory over the neighboring Ligurians

(Nike is the Greek goddess of victory) and soon became one of the busiest ports. Located on the Mediterranean coast, made the beauty of the sea as its glory with blooming orchards on the shore whose scent can be smelled by the people on the ships near the harbor.

"...The weary, way-worn wanderer bore..." here comes the first line where the poet mentioned himself and depicted his own self as the weary, way-worn and sickened wanderer. To the poet, Helen is the fine harbor for his weary, way-worn and sickened soul. As the line goes "...To his own native shore..." the poet praised the woman as his "native" shore. This lexicon has a broad meaning, as it can also mean "mother" to his longing for a mother figure and maternal love.

*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.*

The second stanza elaborated more about the women's physical traits where the poet chooses specific lexicons to represent her fine beauty. In the first line of the second stanza, he wrote "...On desperate seas long wont to roam...". This is the second line the poet wrote to describe his emotional state, as in tune with "desperate seas". The poet is wanderer, cruiser who longs for home.



"...Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,..." this second line mentioned "hyacinth" a fragrant beautiful flower from Mediterranean whose name was derived from Greek. This special flower is also a precious flower in Rome. The poet compared the woman's hair to the beautiful, sweet-scented and classic Greece flower. Hence, her face was depicted as "classic" face by the poet. With a fair face and beautiful, sweet-scented hair, the women must have fine physical traits in the eyes of the poet.

"...Thy Naiad airs have brought me home..." is a meaningful line to enclose the praise of the woman's beauty. AS "Naiad" were actually water creature in Greek mythology, also a nature goddess in Rome mythology, and usually represented as beautiful, lighthearted, and beneficent. It can be concluded that in the eyes of the poet, this unbelievably fair woman was able to bring him home to where he belong even just by looking at her beauty.

This stanza was closed with two lines "To the glory that was Greece, And the grandeur that was Rome." where the poet compared this classical beauty woman to the Greek's glory and Rome's grandeur. There was a reason the poet chose "hyacinth" as a comparison to the woman's beauty, as the hyacinth flower was also a very special and precious flower in both Greek and Rome. Hence, Naiad was also minor nature goddesses in Greek and Roman mythology, known for its beautiful form. The way the poet see a beauty was classical, natural and romantic. Thus, the classical beauty of the woman reminded the poet of all the glory and grandeur of Greek and

Rome which consider as the powerful sovereign.

*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!*

The third stanza was started with an exclamation of a deeper comparison the poet depict the woman in this poem. He wrote "Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche..." which represents the depiction of how picturesque the woman was in his eyes. Depicted as "brilliant window-niche" could also refer to something beyond her appearance as window is also often associated with knowledge, it is eye-awakening. Thus, brilliant window-niche could also a representation of how smart that woman compared to any other women the poet known in that period of time.

"...How statue-like I see thee stand,..." follows as the second line in this stanza. This line once more emphasizes how fair and beautiful this woman in the poet's point of view. Even by looking on the way she stood, caused to emerge him a fully admiration. Statue-like is phrase to represent how goddess-like a person is, that just by standing and still the beauty radiated her surroundings.

In the third stanza, the poet wrote "...The agate lamp within thy hand! ..." to represent the wisdom of the woman. Agate lamp itself was a lamp made of a stone called agate which name was given by Theophrastus, a Greek philosopher. In ancient world,

the agate lamp was a symbol to enlightening knowledge, even more reassuring with the fact that the name itself was given by a Greek philosopher. In Greece, a philosopher was a symbol of high educated and fully knowledgeable people. This line is a clear representation of a smart and wisdomed woman.

Another impressive exclamation as the closure, the poet wrote "...Ah, Psyche, from the regions which Are Holy-Land!" where he represented the woman as Psyche, a beautiful Greek goddess of soul coming from Greece and Rome that were referred as Holy – Land in ancient time.

#### 4.2 Significance

In this session, a further discussion about the poem would be presented. Since the poem was analyzed with expression approach and a feminism theory as a complementary approach, therefore the discussion below was to relate the significance of the poem with the poet's life. Since "Expressive approach defines the romantic temperament, the author's emotions, intention, identity, and originality. That is the idea that the writer has personalities to express remain at the center, as most of the creations were authorial. The criticism included entire biography and gave a relative look to the writings." Abrams (1979), thus it was important for the writer to analyze the poem as related entity with the poet's life, feelings and thoughts. Moreover, since the object of this poem was a woman, which inspired from a real woman from the poet's childhood memory existence, therefore the writer was attempting to discover

how the feminist phenomena at the time where this poem existed, influenced the object of the poem itself. As stated by Humm (2002), "Feminism is an ideology of women's liberation, ..." as this poet was from the first wave of feminism movement, it will be discussed, how this phenomenon reflected in the character of the woman presented in this poem.

##### 4.2.1 The Woman as His "home"

Having analyzed this poem, it can clearly be seen that Poe was smitten with the object of this poem. Helen, who many scholars and researchers believed as Jane Stanard, the mother of young Poe's friend whose death propelled this poem. Shortly after her death, Poe wrote this poem to honor her for her nurturing love and wisdom that encouraged young Poe to become a writer. To his friend Mrs. Whitman, Poe wrote and described her as "the first purely ideal love of my soul". Mrs. Stanard was seen as fair, classically beautiful in Poe's eyes, made her the first woman Poe has ever fallen in love with. However, this love was not purely a boyhood love since Poe also depicted her deeper, beyond her fine physical traits. In the first stanza, Poe represented her as his "home". "...The weary, way-worn wanderer bore..." followed by "...To his own native shore..." Young Poe was a complicated teenager. He lost his biological mother when he was an infant. The man who adopted him did not support his passion in writing. Thus, when he found it was inconvenient at home, he would rush to Mrs. Stanard home to find comfort and acceptance. In her, he found the motherly love that he

desperately needed. She was the barks who brought him home, an anchor to his wondering soul.

Furthermore, in the second stanza Poe wrote "...Thy Naiad airs have brought me home...". Not only a common creature, Poe represented her as Naiad, a beautiful creature from Greece and Rome mythology, who brought him home, to where he belonged. The loss of his mother figure left an emptiness in his soul. Thus, finding someone in a beautiful form, tenderly loving him, taking care of him and comforting him became a huge deal for this lonely and complicated young Poe. Therefore, to him, Mrs. Stanard was more than just a classical beauty, fair woman, she was to him a comforting, loving, safe and a peaceful home.

#### 4.2.2 The Woman as Intellectual

According to Xi Li (2018), "in the Western academic world, like many male authors in 19th -20th centuries, Edgar Allan Poe is not regarded as a writer who supports feminism by many scholars. Indeed, Poe's works are criticized by some feminist scholars since the female characters in his stories often die and are quiet (p. 4)." This statement aroused because in most of his works, the women were victimized. In "Lenore" (1831), "Eulalie – A Song" (1845), "Ulalume – A Ballad" (1847), "To Helen" (1848), "For Annie" (1849), and "Annabel Lee" were depicted as the hopeless victim of death and the uncanny. However, in this poem, the opposite representation was discovered.

Young Poe was an excellent teenager, he excelled in literature and

languages. However, his foster father wanted him to inherit his business and abandon his dream to become a writer. In Mrs. Stanard home was where he found a true acceptance and support. She supported Poe's passion in writing and even better encouraged him to keep writing poem. For a woman in her era, to simply care about passion and dream, it was such an immense action. Especially, during the era, the feminist movement was not as immense and vocal as it is today. At that time, the movement was just begun and started to take the awareness in European countries such as England and France. In America, the first wave focused on the women's rights to vote and had an appropriate education. In a book called *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, Walters (2005) then wrote "For a married woman, her home becomes a prison-house. The house itself, as well as everything in it, belongs to the husband, and of all fixtures the most abject is his breeding machine, the wife. Married women are in fact slaves, their situation no better than that of Negroes in the West Indies." It simply depicted how mistreated and invisible the presence of women back then. Therefore, when the feminist movement aroused, organized campaigns, clubs and movements for women's rights emerged to improve female condition in terms of education, opportunities to work outside their households, reform in laws affecting married women and, for the first time, for the right to vote. Education became one of the concerns the women fought for. It seemed that in this poem, Poe depicted the woman or Mrs. Stanard herself as someone who was not a



common housewife. She had her own thoughts and ideas, and she shared it with Poe. One of the things that Poe share with his friend was, Mrs. Stanard, unlike his family, supported his dream and passion to write. Supporting and following one's passion and dream was something that resembles a feminist. That was made Mrs. Stanard special and different from any other women around Poe at that time.

Therefore, Poe later represented her as a woman who was intellectual and full of wisdom. In the second stanza Poe wrote "...The agate lamp within thy hand!...", depicted a beautiful woman with an agate lamp in her hand was a symbol of how enlightening and inspiring the woman was. The agate lamp itself was a special lamp made of an ancient stone whose name was given by Theophrastus, a Greek philosopher. Thus, the agate lamp in her hand represented an enlightening knowledge, moreover the lamp itself was named by a Greek philosopher. As in Greece, a philosopher was a symbol of a scholar, highly educated and an intelligent individual, thus for Poe to put this lamp in the woman's hand was a significant sign to represent her as more than just a beautiful woman. This woman, Mrs. Stanard was beyond fair and beautiful. Poe saw her as a perfect figure of a woman with classical beauty which cannot be denied, loving and caring like a mother figure but also enlightening for a young boy with dream. Mrs. Stanard represented in his poem, was a woman who had it all, the fairness, the nobleness, the wisdom, the love and the intelligence, she was a muse. The way Poe saw beauty was whole

package, physical traits and character were what made Mrs. Stanard, Poe's dearly Helen an impeccable woman as "To the glory that was Greece, And the grandeur that was Rome."

## 5. Conclusions

Although Edgar Allan Poe was well known for putting beautiful victimized and powerless women in his works, however not all the women who were featured in his works were ended up dead or being murdered. In this poem *To Helen*, Poe represented the woman as someone who was physically beautiful and possessed fine characters. Her beauty was compared to an ancient Nicean barks anchored near Mediterranean coast where Orchards flowers used to fully bloom and scented the ocean with its sweet scent that reminded the barks to come home. Hence, Poe praised her more represented her beauty as a classical beauty with hyacinth hair, referred to how beautifully scented her hair is like hyacinth flowers and her face was fair like how the ancient classical beauty was portrayed. Poe even compared her as Naiad, an ancient goddess creature from Greece and Rome who was beautiful and fair. To a wondering soul like young Poe, this woman was an anchor and a bark that brought him home. Furthermore, Poe represented her as caring and loving woman with wisdom that comforted him. In the second stanza Poe wrote "...The agate lamp within thy hand!...", depicted a beautiful woman with an agate lamp which in Greece was a symbol of intellectuality and wisdom since the agate was a stone whose name was given by a Greek philosopher. To Poe,

his Helen was an impeccable woman with undeniable beauty and noble character.

Moreover, although Poe's works with women were the anti-feminism literary works, however in this poem Poe was successfully represented a woman who was not only classically beautiful but he was able to honor a woman of his own love experience where the woman was also loving, caring and supporting showing her mother nature but also her liberty of expressing her concern towards one's dream and passion. Therefore, this poem was different with the rest of the poems mentioned prior in this study.

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