

# The characterization of helen in the iliad essay sample

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Often times, classical literature achieves its timeless, famous status through the integration of remarkable characters. Of course, the methods used to form such characters are usually quite complex, but not always so. For example, one might look at the character of Helen of Troy, from Homer's great poem, *The Iliad*. Helen's characterization in this story is actually done in quite simple ways, namely through simple depictions of what she does, what she says, and what others say about her. Despite that fact, however, Helen is, and will likely continue to be, one of the most well-known literary characters of all time.

To begin with, one might examine the fact that Helen is characterized by what she does. Needless to say, the first remarkable action that she really takes, and the action that creates a basis for the entire story, is when she leaves her own country for Paris and launches the war. She does this, knowing full-well that absolute horror will ensue, and that Menelaus will not rest until he has vengeance. She does it, in fact, probably despite the suspicion that she will someday be called things such as, "the bane of Troy" (Lib. II, ll. 46). This goes quite a long way towards characterizing her. This concept leaves the image of a sort of love-struck, idealistic, dreamy girl who believes her blooming love to be all-important. In the scheme of things, of course, one with more perspective would perhaps question whether her and Paris' actions are really only selfish, self-serving behavior which costs many men their lives. This, however, is a complex sort of characterization that is accomplished merely by the description of one of Helen's actions.

In the same way, Helen is further characterized by what she says. This is true despite the fact that she has relatively little dialogue, and that what dialogue there is seems exceedingly formal and archaic to modern sensibilities. For instance, in her speech about Hector at the end of Library XXIV she says,

Whom best I lov'd of all my brother-laws,

For you were so, since Paris married me,

Though when I married him accurs'd I was,

Now twenty years ' tis since I came to Troy,

And never did an ill word from you hear;

And when your kindred did ill of me say,

You took my part, and made them to forbear.

(Library XXIV, ll. 730-736)

This little speech, which Helen makes at the veritable end of the story, goes a long way towards characterizing her more deeply than she is throughout the whole of the story preceding it. There is, for instance, a bit of impetuous and childish blaming of others in the way that she says, " Paris married me" as if she had had no part in it or decision to make. There is also, though, a deep well of seemingly genuine feeling towards Hector. This contrast, so close together, really heightens the idea of Helen's emotion and of her

humanity and distress, and it is also a great example of the way in which Helen's characterization is furthered in *The Iliad* by the statements that she makes, and the way that she says those things.

Similarly, Helen is also characterized by what others say about her. In illustration of this point, one might look at what Nestor says to King Agamemnon at one point regarding Helen. In a rather long speech, Nestor relates the fact that he believes that the Trojans would probably part with a great deal of wealth and "Twenty Trojan women [. . .] Helen except" (Library IX, ll. 85-135). This of course helps to relate just how much stake everyone on both sides is putting in Helen, in and of the fact that both sides ostensibly seem to believe her to be so valuable. Contrastingly, however, there is the way in which Achilles refers to Helen after Patroclus' death, when in an inconsolable moment he refers to her as, "this accursed Helen" (Library XIX, ll. 304). This of course helps to point out the conflicting feeling that Helen is also the cause of all of the suffering and death. Combined together, these two different statements, and ones like them, help to paint a picture of Helen's character as being both of immense value and also almost unbearable cost.

In conclusion, Homer's *The Iliad* characterizes Helen mainly through her own actions and words, and the words which others speak about her. Of course, there are other manners in which Helen's character is broadened and made more lifelike, and these ways could be examined in a piece of sufficient length. It is interesting to note, however, that Helen has almost become a sort of archetypal character, despite the sort of relatively small time she

actually receives in *The Iliad*. Helen's character, it would seem, was either characterized so masterfully that it became timeless, or became so perhaps because its characterization simply strikes some sort of common chord down through the generations. Either way, however, it seems certain that Helen will continue to be an almost infamous character in literary circles, and that such discussion of her will not cease at any time soon.

#### Works Cited:

The Norton Anthology of World Literature, v. A. *The Iliad*, by Homer, 120-223.