

## George Seferis - Helen

George Seferis, whose real name was Georgios Seferiadis, was a famous Greek poet and diplomat. He was born on March 13, 1900, and is considered one of the most important Greek poets of the 20th century. Seferis is well known for writing beautiful, emotional poems that often draw from Greek history, myths, and modern-day struggles. In 1963, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature because of his powerful and touching writing that showed his deep love for Greek culture. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize four times.

In his poem “Helen”, George Seferis turns an old myth into a modern message. He uses the idea of Helen being just an illusion to show how wars can be started for the wrong reasons — for lies or dreams that are not real.

Seferis connects the ancient myth to modern times, especially the conflict in Cyprus, and warns people not to fall for blind. He also questions how women are treated in society and how they are often unfairly blamed for big problems. The poem encourages readers to look past false stories and try to find the truth.

The poem is based on Euripides’ version of Helen from an ancient Greek play. In this version, Helen says she never went to Troy at all. The entire Trojan War was fought over a phantom, a fake version of her made out of a cloud. This changes everything we thought we knew about that war.

Another character in the play, Teucer, talks about being sent to Cyprus by the god Apollo. He ended up building a new city there called Salamis, named after his hometown. His story shows how war can lead to people being exiled and forced to start new lives far from home. When a servant finds out the war was fought over a fake Helen, he is shocked and asks, “What? You mean it was only for a cloud that we struggled so much?” This question captures the pain and confusion people feel when they realise that they suffered for nothing.

Seferis starts his poem with the line: “The nightingales won’t let you sleep in Platres.” This line brings out strong feelings about memory, war, loss, and the lies people often believe. The poem is filled with both beautiful and painful images, as Seferis thinks about how war destroys lives — not for truth or justice, but often for illusions.

Platres is a peaceful mountain village in Cyprus, but Seferis shows that even a quiet place like this cannot escape the pain of the past. Nightingales are usually seen as symbols of beauty and poetry, but in this poem, their song is not comforting. It keeps people awake and reminds them of what they have lost. The nightingale becomes a symbol of

memories that won't go away. Seferis even talks to the nightingale, calling it a "blind voice" searching through the darkness of memory. It is like he is trying to remember people and moments that are gone, but the memories are too painful. He cannot even bring himself to talk about kisses, as war has destroyed all feelings of love and closeness.

Seferis blends ancient Greek myths into the poem to show that history repeats itself. He brings up Teucer again, the Trojan War hero who ended up in Cyprus, far from home. The speaker in the poem feels like Teucer, someone who fought in a war, lost everything, and now lives in sadness and regret.

Then comes a dramatic moment: Seferis brings in the myth from Euripides' play, where Helen says she never actually went to Troy. Instead, a phantom Helen was there — just an illusion. This idea is shocking because it means the whole war was fought for nothing real. Helen says, "It isn't true... I never went to valiant Troy." The beauty that supposedly started the war wasn't even there.

Seferis uses this story to show how people often fight for false ideas. He lists the sad results: "So many bodies thrown / into the jaws of the sea... so many souls / fed to the millstones like grain." These lines paint a heartbreaking picture of how many people died for something meaningless — something as light as "a linen undulation," "a butterfly's flicker," or "an empty tunic." These soft, delicate images make the destruction of war seem even more tragic.

Seferis also starts to doubt the gods and question fate. Were the gods responsible for this illusion? He asks, "What is a god? What is not a god? And what is there in between them?" These questions show how confused and hopeless he feels.

At the end of the poem, Seferis returns to the idea of fables and memories. He wonders if this story of destruction will happen again and if future generations will fight more wars for more illusions. He mentions names like Teucer, Ajax, and Priam, wondering if they will come back in some form, ready to suffer all over again. He ends the poem with a powerful question: "Isn't fated to hear / messengers coming to tell him / that so much suffering, so much life, / went into the abyss / all for an empty tunic, all for a Helen?" This shows his fear that people will forget the lessons of the past and be tricked into more pointless wars.

George Seferis's poem "Helen" is a powerful and emotional piece about war, memory, and the false reasons people suffer. Through symbols like the nightingale, references to old myths, and heartbreaking images of loss, he asks big questions: Was it worth it? What is the truth? Will we ever learn? The poem is not just about ancient times, but it is also a warning for the future.

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