

To Helen Literary Devices

Writer: Edgar Allan Poe | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Figures of Speech

Metaphor

- **Definition:** A metaphor is a figure of speech where two different things are directly compared without using “as” or “like.”
- **Example:** “To the glory that was Greece, / And the grandeur that was Rome.”
- **Explanation:** Here, Helen’s beauty is directly compared to the “glory” of Greece and the “grandeur” of Rome. Helen is not explicitly mentioned in these lines, but her beauty is presented as equal to the strength and elegance of these ancient civilizations. This makes the comparison a complete metaphor.
- **Effect:** This metaphor elevates Helen to the level of civilization, history, and ideal art. Her beauty becomes eternal, cultural, and connected to the highest form of artistic greatness.

Simile

- **Definition:** A simile is a comparison between two different things using “like” or “as.”
- **Example:** “Like those Nicéan barks of yore”
- **Explanation:** Helen’s beauty is compared to an ancient Greek ship using “like.” Just as a ship brings a tired sailor safely home, Helen’s beauty brings the poet mental peace and a sense of safe return.
- **Effect:** This simile creates a clear image for the reader. It makes Helen’s beauty feel gentle, healing, and comforting.

Imagery

- **Definition:** Imagery is language that creates vivid pictures in the reader’s mind through sight, sound, smell, touch, or emotion.
- **Example:** “Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face”
- **Explanation:** Helen’s hair is described as “hyacinth hair,” suggesting the deep color of the flower. Her “classic face” evokes the perfect beauty of Greek and Roman sculptures.

- **Effect:** The reader can almost see Helen. This makes the poem visually rich, vivid, and lifelike.

Allusion

- **Definition:** An allusion is an indirect reference to a well-known person, myth, event, or cultural idea.
- **Example:** "Naiad airs," "Psyche," "Greece," "Rome"
- **Explanation:** The poem contains references to Greek and Roman mythology and classical civilizations. These allusions connect Helen's beauty with ancient art, culture, and divine imagery.
- **Effect:** They give the poem a deeper tone of grandeur and timelessness. Helen appears not just human, but a symbol of eternal and classical beauty.

Symbolism / Symbols

- **Definition:** Symbolism is a poetic device in which an object, character, scene, or action carries a meaning that goes beyond its literal sense. In "To Helen", Poe uses several powerful symbols to express ideas of beauty, peace, ancient civilization, and spiritual light.
- **Nicéan Barks:** Symbol of mental freedom, safety, and returning home. Poe compares Helen's beauty to these ancient ships. They guided weary sailors back home. In the poem, the ships become a symbol of the poet's inner peace and emotional refuge. This shows how beauty can remove the tiredness of the human mind and bring a person back to the "native shore," meaning the calm center of the mind.
- **Perfumed Sea:** Symbol of peace, softness, comfort, and mental rest. This sea is not real; it belongs to a dreamlike and gentle world. It represents a calm place opposite to the poet's inner turmoil. Helen's beauty soothes the poet just like this calm, fragrant sea.
- **Hyacinth Hair:** Symbol of natural beauty, youth, and softness. Poe compares Helen's hair to the dark hyacinth flower. This gives her a romantic and classical appearance. Her beauty seems pure, natural, and almost divine.
- **Naiad Airs:** Symbol of spiritual grace, fluidity, and purity. A Naiad is a water-nymph in Greek mythology. Comparing Helen's movements to a Naiad makes her seem heavenly and ethereal. Her graceful presence brings emotional healing to the poet. It symbolizes "divine grace," a kind of sacred, gentle blessing.