

THE FEMALE IMAGE AND ITS DRAMATIC FUNCTION IN THE TRAGEDY “GÜZEL HELENA”

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of the female image and its dramatic function in the tragedy “Güzel Helena”. Through literary and structural analysis, the study explores how the character of Helena operates not merely as a symbol of beauty but as a catalyst of conflict, a bearer of ideological meaning, and a reflection of gendered power structures. The paper analyzes Helena’s role in shaping dramatic tension, her symbolic function within the narrative, and her relationship to themes of fate, desire, and political consequence. The findings demonstrate that Helena’s character transcends the stereotype of passive femininity and becomes central to the tragic structure of the work.

Keywords: Guzel Helena, female image, tragedy, dramatic function, gender representation, symbolism, conflict.

Introduction

The figure of Helena is most famously associated with the mythological Helen of Troy, has occupied a central and enduring position in both Western and Eastern literary traditions for centuries. From Homer’s Iliad to Euripides’ reinterpretations, and from Renaissance adaptations to modern dramatic reworkings, Helena has consistently functioned as a powerful cultural symbol. She is often portrayed as the embodiment of idealized beauty, desire, temptation, and catastrophic consequence. Yet beyond her mythological origins, Helena has become a literary archetype through which writers explore themes of gender, power, agency, and political conflict.

In the tragedy “Güzel Helena”, this mythic figure is not merely reproduced but reinterpreted within a dramatic structure that amplifies her symbolic, ideological, and psychological complexity. Rather than functioning solely as a legendary icon



of beauty, Helena becomes a multidimensional character whose presence shapes the moral, emotional, and political architecture of the tragedy. The play situates her at the center of escalating tensions, transforming her from a static symbol into an active structural force within the narrative.

Traditionally, Helena has been portrayed as the “cause” of war, an interpretation that simplifies the Trojan conflict into a romantic narrative centered on female desirability. In many classical accounts, she appears either as a passive object abducted by Paris or as a morally ambiguous figure blamed for large-scale destruction. This reduction of Helena to an object of desire reflects broader patriarchal literary conventions in which female characters are often positioned as catalysts without agency. However, such interpretations obscure the deeper dramatic and ideological mechanisms operating within the narrative.

A closer reading of “Güzel Helena” suggests that Helena’s dramatic function extends far beyond passive symbolism. Her character does not merely initiate conflict; rather, she reveals underlying tensions embedded within social, political, and gendered power structures. The war that unfolds around her is not simply the consequence of romantic passion but a manifestation of male rivalry, honor culture, territorial ambition, and fragile political alliances. Helena becomes a mirror reflecting the ambitions, insecurities, and ideological contradictions of the male-dominated world surrounding her.

Moreover, modern literary criticism is particularly feminist and structuralist approaches, encourages a reassessment of Helena’s position within tragic discourse. From a feminist perspective, Helena can be read as a figure through whom patriarchal societies project responsibility and blame. Her beauty becomes politicized; her body becomes a site of symbolic ownership. From a structural perspective, she occupies a pivotal role within the tragic arc, linking exposition, conflict, climax, and resolution. Without Helena, the narrative framework collapses; with her, it gains coherence, tension, and thematic depth.

In addition, the tragedy’s portrayal of Helena invites reflection on broader existential and philosophical concerns. Is she a victim of fate, an agent of her own destiny, or a constructed narrative device used to justify violence? The ambiguity surrounding her intentions and motivations intensifies the dramatic experience. The audience is compelled to confront not only questions of personal responsibility but also the mechanisms through which societies create myths of blame.



The significance of Helena's character therefore lies at the intersection of myth, ideology, and dramatic structure. She functions simultaneously as:

A symbolic embodiment of beauty and desire;

A catalyst that exposes political instability;

A dramatic device structuring narrative tension;

A gendered figure reflecting societal anxieties.

Through these overlapping roles, Helena transcends the limitations of archetype and becomes central to the tragedy's intellectual and emotional impact.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the construction of the female image in "Güzel Helena" and to determine its structural and ideological function within the tragic framework. By examining Helena's symbolic dimension, her role in generating conflict, her degree of agency, and her position within the dramatic architecture, this study seeks to demonstrate that the tragedy reconfigures traditional representations of femininity. Rather than presenting Helena as a passive cause of destruction, the play situates her as a complex dramatic presence whose image reveals deeper ideological tensions concerning gender, power, and collective responsibility.

Ultimately, understanding Helena's dramatic function allows for a more nuanced interpretation of tragedy itself, not as a narrative of romantic catastrophe, but as a profound exploration of how societies construct meaning around female figures and attribute to them the weight of historical consequence.

The Female Image as Symbol

In classical tragedy, female characters frequently function as symbolic constructs rather than merely individualized personalities. They often embody broader abstract concepts such as beauty, temptation, destiny, honor, fertility, or chaos. As Aristotle noted in *Poetics*, tragedy revolves around actions that reveal moral and political consequences rather than simply individual traits (Aristotle, trans. 1996). Within this framework, female figures often serve as symbolic catalysts of action rather than autonomous political agents.

In "Güzel Helena", Helena operates within this classical symbolic tradition yet simultaneously complicates it. While she initially appears as the embodiment of extraordinary beauty, her dramatic presence expands into a multidimensional symbol of political fragility, masculine rivalry, and ideological instability. Her character reflects what de Beauvoir (1949/2011) describes as the historical



construction of woman as “Other,” a figure onto whom society projects collective anxieties and desires.

Beauty as Power

Helena’s beauty functions as more than aesthetic admiration; it becomes a destabilizing force within political structures. In many mythic narratives, beauty is portrayed as passive; however, in tragic discourse, it operates as symbolic power. Butler (1990) argues that gendered identities are constructed through repeated social performance. Helena’s beauty becomes performative, it reshapes political alliances and influences masculine behavior without her direct command.

Thus, beauty in the tragedy becomes politicized. It is transformed into a symbolic capital that disrupts established hierarchies. Helena’s presence reveals how patriarchal power structures are vulnerable to symbolic challenges.

Femininity as Political Instrument

Helena’s femininity is frequently instrumentalized within the male-dominated political order. She is negotiated, protected, desired, and contested as though she were a territorial or diplomatic asset. This reflects what Showalter (1985) identifies as the tendency in patriarchal literature to treat female figures as narrative instruments rather than independent subjects.

In “Güzel Helena”, the male characters’ obsession with honor and possession exposes how femininity is commodified. Helena becomes the symbolic object around which political legitimacy and masculine pride revolve.

Desire as Destructive Force

Desire in tragedy often functions as a destabilizing element. As Girard (1977) argues in his theory of mimetic desire, conflict frequently arises not from the object itself but from rivalry between subjects desiring the same object. Helena embodies this principle. The destruction that follows is less about love and more about competition, pride, and power.

Thus, Helena’s role is not that of a direct instigator but a mirror reflecting pre-existing masculine ambitions. The tragedy reveals that violence originates not in female beauty but in male rivalry intensified by symbolic possession.

Projection and Patriarchal Responsibility

A crucial ideological function of Helena lies in the mechanism of projection. Patriarchal societies often attribute large-scale conflict to individual women,

thereby obscuring systemic causes. In the tragedy, Helena becomes such a scapegoat figure.

Her beauty becomes a convenient explanation for political collapse. Yet a deeper reading show that the true causes of conflict lie in fragile alliances, wounded pride, and power struggles. Helena’s symbolic burden reveals how societies transfer responsibility from structural systems of authority to a singular female figure.

Table 1. Symbolic Functions of Helena in “Güzel Helena”

Symbolic Dimension	Description	Dramatic Function	Ideological Implication
Beauty as Power	Helena’s beauty influences political dynamics	Escalates rivalry and destabilizes alliances	Beauty functions as symbolic political capital
Femininity as Political Instrument	Helena treated as object of negotiation	Structures conflict and rising tension	Reflects commodification of women in patriarchy
Desire as Destructive Force	Male rivalry centered around Helena	Drives dramatic climax	Exposes fragility of masculine authority (Girard, 1977)
Scapegoat Figure	Helena blamed for collective violence	Concentrates narrative responsibility	Demonstrates gendered projection (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011)
Symbol of Political Fragility	Her presence destabilizes order	Maintains structural tension	Reveals instability of power systems

Helena’s symbolic role operates at the intersection of myth, gender, and ideology. She is neither purely passive nor fully autonomous; rather, she exists within a dramatic system that assigns her disproportionate responsibility. As Butler (1990) suggests, identity is constructed through discourse. Helena’s identity is shaped by the narratives imposed upon her, making her a site of ideological struggle rather than a mere aesthetic figure.

Helena as Catalyst of Conflict

A central function of Helena in the tragedy is her role as a catalyst. The dramatic conflict unfolds around her existence, her choices, or the perception of her choices. Whether she is portrayed as willing or unwilling in her involvement, her presence initiates action.



The war or rivalry depicted in the play is not purely romantic but political. Helena becomes the pretext for masculine rivalry and national pride. Thus, her dramatic function lies in triggering events that expose deeper ideological tensions.

Agency and Passivity

An important question in the analysis of Helena's character concerns her agency. Is she an autonomous subject or merely an object within male-dominated narratives?

In some interpretations, Helena is portrayed as passive, her fate determined by male decisions. However, modern readings often reinterpret her as a figure negotiating limited autonomy within restrictive structures. Her silence, hesitation, or inner conflict may function as subtle resistance.

This duality between agency and passivity enriches the tragedy's complexity. Helena becomes both a victim of circumstance and a silent commentator on the destructive ambitions surrounding her.

Dramatic Structure and Emotional Impact

From a structural perspective, Helena occupies a central position in the tragic arc:

Exposition: Introduction of Helena's beauty and symbolic significance.

Rising Action: Escalation of conflict due to her presence.

Climax: Crisis directly linked to decisions involving Helena.

Resolution: Consequences that extend beyond the individual to society.

Her character intensifies emotional engagement. The audience's perception of Helena influences moral interpretation of the tragedy. Sympathy, blame, admiration, or critique all revolve around her image.

Gender and Ideology

The tragedy also reflects broader gender ideologies. Helena's portrayal exposes patriarchal anxieties about female influence. She is both admired and feared, idealized and condemned.

Through Helena, the playwright may be critiquing the tendency to attribute large-scale political conflicts to individual women. In this sense, her dramatic function becomes ideological: she reveals how societies construct narratives of blame and desire.

Conclusion

In “Güzel Helena”, the female image is not merely ornamental but structurally and ideologically central. Helena functions as a symbol, a catalyst of conflict, and a lens through which themes of fate, desire, and political instability are explored. Her character challenges simplistic interpretations of femininity and invites deeper reflection on gender and power within tragic literature.

Ultimately, Helena’s dramatic function demonstrates that tragedy is not solely about external events but about the symbolic meanings embedded in its characters. The figure of Helena thus becomes essential to understanding both the narrative structure and the ideological framework of the play.

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