**George Seferis**

**HELEN**

*EUCER: ...in sea-girt Cyprus, where Apollo bade me live, I built  
the city of Salamis in memory of my homeland.  
.............................................................................  
HELEN: It was not I went to Troy, but an image.  
.............................................................................  
MESSENGER: What? Were all our pains then for a cloud?*

(Euripedes, *Helen*)

"You cannot sleep in Platres for the nightingales".

Shy nightingale, hidden among whispering leaves,

you bring the echoing coolness of the forest

to the sundered souls and bodies

of those who know there can be no return.

Blind voice, fumbling in the dark of memory

for footsteps, gestures, what I dare not call kisses,

and the slave-woman's sullen anger.

"You cannot sleep in Platres for the nightingales".

Where is Platres? Does anybody know this island?

All my life I've heard strange names,

new places, the latest foolishness

of men or gods;

my fate, weaving

between the final sword-thrust of some Ajax

and another Salamis,

brought me to this sea-coast.

The moon

rises out of the sea like Aphrodite,

covering Sagittarius, then seeks

the heart of Scorpio, changing everything.

Where is truth?

I too was an archer in those wars,

my fate that of a man whose arrow strayed.

Nightingale, songsmith,

on such a night as this by the shores of Proteus' sea

the Spartan slave-women heard your song and wept,

and among them (who would have guessed it) Helen!

She, whom we sought for years along Scamander's banks.

There on the desert's cusp I touched her and she spoke to me:

"Lies", she cried, "lies,

"I never stepped into the blue-prowed ship,

never trod glorious Ilium".

Deep-girdled, sun-dappled hair, that long body,

shadows, smiles everywhere

on shoulders thighs knees,

the flaring skin, and those eyes

with their great lashes

- all there, on the bank of the Delta.

And in Ilium?

In Ilium, nothing - a simulacrum.

So the gods wished it.

And Paris embraced a shadow as if it had been flesh and blood,

while for ten long years we butchered one another over Helen.

Greece haemorrhaged.

So many bodies thrown

to the jaws of the sea, to the jaws of the earth:

so many souls

flung between the millstones like grains of wheat.

And blood bubbling up through river mud,

for a flaxen wave for a passing cloud

a butterfly's wingbeat a swandown's drift

all for an empty tunic, a Helen.

And what of my brother?

Nightingale nightingale nightingale,

what is a god? What's not a god? What falls between the two?

"You cannot sleep in Platres for the nightingales".

Sad bird,

on sea-girt Cyprus

which I was promised in memory of my homeland,

I landed alone with this fable,

if indeed it is a fable,

if it is true that men will never again

fall into the gods' ancient snare;

if it is true

that in ages to come another Teucer,

some other Ajax Hecuba or Priam

or someone perhaps nameless, unknown, who yet

has seen Scamander heave with corpses,

will be spared the words

of messengers coming to say

that so much suffering so many lives

went spinning into the abyss

all for an empty tunic, for a Helen.

LESSON PLAN ON SEFERIS “HELEN”

TITLE: War experiences through literature

TARGET: The vanity of the war and the consequences on human’s lives…victims…

METHODOLOGY: Group learning

PRE-READING LEVEL:

GROUP A:

* Inquiry of student’s knowledge about 1. the mythical hero Teukros (Homer, Iliad) and

2. the myth of Helen of Troy (Homer, Iliad, Euripedes, drama)

* Creating an atmosphere: Class listen to the poet himself reading his work.

Open Forum

MID-READING LEVEL:

* Focus on the “voice” of the narrator (Teukrus could be the poet and anyone of us).
* Make the portraits of the two heroes using certain words and phrases from the text.

GROUP B:

* Find images of peace and war in the text. How did war affected the heroe’s lives? (truth vs false)
* Read the abstract from the novel of Erich Maria Remarque, “All quiet on the western Front”, p.p 193-194.

POST-READING LEVEL:

Create a poster or draw a picture depicting the misery of the war.

**Writers of scenario: Maria Zervou & Maria Zafeiriou, Teachers of Ancient and Modern Creek Literature**