

Song Analysis

Helen Lane by Mal Webb

Well, I propose a toast to the mitosisist
With the mostest
She's a ghost who can boast
From coast to coast in every Hela cell
She's more cultured than Chanel
Cartier or YSL
But she's tired of being quite so huge
And dizzy from the centrifuge
She's quick frozen, colour-fast
Her prison cell is built to last

Dear Helen Lane
Did you know your coffin's final nail
Is bigger than a blue whale?
And so it will remain
Just as long as cell biologists
Like peering at your private bits

It's a grand humiliation
Showing now across the nation
Mutation on a huge scale
Bigger than a blue whale

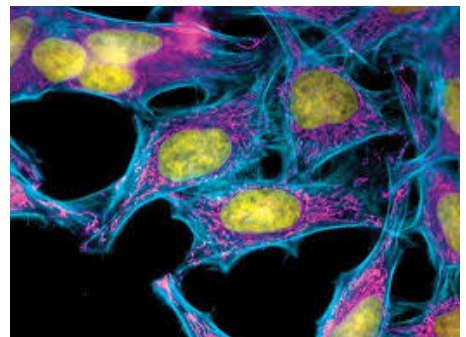
Dear Helen Lane
Did you know the bit you left behind
May help to cure its own kind?
So maybe you can claim
A saintly little perch in every church
For contributions to research

Well back in 1953, m'lady had a malady
A cervix abnormality
That led to her fatality
The cells went for a biopsy
That showed up the malignancy
But also a propensity
To multiply so rapidly
That the scientists went on to see
What other uses there could be

For her expansive quality
They shared her around extensively
To every good laboratory
Her fame was spreading globally
'Til nowadays she's said to be
The biggest lonely clone there'll ever be
Arabidopsis and drosophila
May have advice to offer her
On how it's best to keep your cool
When you've become a research tool

Dear Helen Lane
Did you know your flock of little vultures
Divide and conquer lesser cultures?
But not that you're to blame
Your name before
They diddled with the facts
Was really Henrietta Lacks

Dear Helen Lane
Did you know that part you left to science
Is now a giant among giants?
And on a higher plane
Your omnipresent question
Bids the answer
God's a black woman's cancer



1. Number the lines of the poem.
2. Look up the following words and write their meaning as close to the word as possible:
centrifuge mutation malady malignancy propensity expansive omnipresent
3. Identify the speaker's **tone**. What words and details help the reader to understand how the speaker feels?
4. What is the **mood** of the song (How does it make you, the reader, feel)?
5. The word "mitosist" (line 1) is a made up word the songwriter used. What word is it a play on? What do you infer it means?
6. Highlight the double meaning in line 5. Explain both meanings.
7. Highlight the double meaning in line 10. Explain both meanings.
8. What is the common meaning for the expression "nail in the coffin"? How was Helen's "bigger than a blue whale"?
9. A **paradox** is a set of seemingly contradictory concepts that reveal a hidden and/or unexpected truth. Identify the paradox in the 6th stanza. What truth does it reveal?
10. Look up "arabidopsis" and "drosophila". What do they have in common with Helen?
11. In what line do we finally see Helen's real name? Why do you think it is placed where it is? What effect does it have?
12. What literary device can be seen in the last line of the song?