

Bethlehem's H.D.: an artistic vision that counters the dismissal of women as spiritual leaders (13)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Arts, the, Gadfly's posts, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) April 1, 2019

Take the "Connecting Bethlehem" survey

(13th in a series of posts on H.D.)

We continue to learn about this Bethlehem-born writer (1886-1961), the "Lehigh Valley's most important literary figure," as the plaque at the entrance announces to our library patrons.

Finding H.D.: A Community Exploration of the Life and Work of Hilda Doolittle

The next event in this year-long series is a panel discussion on "H.D. and the Natural World," Tuesday, April 16, 6:30-8:00pm at the Bethlehem Area Public Library.

We've done three posts on Prof. Mary Foltz's lecture on "Challenging Limited Understandings of Gender and Sexuality" on March 6, and now we're ready to look at a fourth slice. Here's the full audio of this fourth section and below are selected sound bites from Mary's prepared text. Listening to Mary undeniably best; you know that Gadfly always says go to the primary source.

AUDIO RECORDINGS UNAVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE

Remember that in the previous post, Mary focused on the formative awareness the young H.D. had in Nisky Hill cemetery as described in *The Gift*: "when the young Hilda seemingly only finds the names of women preserved on gravestones, she is gesturing to the absence of familial, cultural, and national recognition of women's value."

Now think along with Mary and the audience after you read the following passages and ask yourself: 1) How is women's labor described in these two passages? 2) How is the father's labor described? 3) How do you understand the separate spheres for men and women in the family and larger community?



The Gift by H.D. Excerpts from the second chapter titled "The Dream"

What it was, was Mama had Uncle Fred and Uncle Hartley and Aunt Laura and Aunt Aggie and Mamalie and the old school and cousin Ed and everybody in the old town really. She had Gilbert and the new baby upstairs. She had Harold.

Ida and Annie belonged to the house and the kitchen and the baby.

What Papa had was the transit house now and his classes at the university and people who came to see him about the new instruments and reporters from the papers. What Papa had was outside, the old observatory on the hill, the walk across the bridge at night, 'like a thief or an astronomer,' as he would say. What he had was the high walled-in bookshelves here and in the old study, the same but with strips of trimmed leather with brass-headed tacks along the shelf. There was the smell of leather; his old gloves had the fingers cut off so that he could manage all those little screws that were so important on his instruments. (p. 41)

No one seemed to belong to Papa when he came in out of the cold, though Mama looked up and Ida said, "Will the Professor want his evening supper now or later?" Everything revolved around him; Mama was sweeping up the bits of gilt paper, she seemed to be thinking of something else....

Who understood what [Papa] was doing? Mama didn't. "I can't follow my husband's work," she would say to the ladies, "I don't pretend to."

Papa did not tell us what he was doing [at work].... What it was, was that he was separate, he was not really part of this table with the glass balls, with the tinsel paper, with the workbasket, with the paste pot, with the old gilt fir cones that Mama said we could paint over with some new gilt that she would get when she went to shop in Philadelphia. (p. 43)

"Women's labor in Hilda's home is child-rearing, creating activities for the children (art projects, etc.), sweeping and other forms of cleaning, and caring for the larger family. Working class white women here belong to a house, they are tied in servitude to pleasing affluent white men, women and children. Her father belongs to the world and his work matters to the world as journalists, students, and other researchers value his contributions. The young Hilda here, despite her youthful ambition to be an artist, does not have in *The Gift* examples of women from her family who have succeeded in the outside world or whose work has been valued beyond their labor to support husbands and children. Of course, Hilda, this young queer child, has ambition in *The Gift* beyond becoming a wife alone and in particular is invested in becoming an artist."

But women artists are mocked too, not only in society at large but within her own family. Look at the devastating effect her father's perhaps unwitting denigration of her mother's singing has on the mother as well as the young H.D., for whom her mother is model. *This incident cuts Gadfly deeply.*

Min. 5:25 ff.

[H.D.'s mother's story about singing in a classroom and hearing her father's disdain for her voice]

"What voice, Mama?"

"Oh, it was only Papa, it was only Papa; he said, 'who is making this dreadful noise in here?'"

"Who was?"

"Well—I was alone, I went off, I was alone, I was hiding, I was singing."

"Oh, I see—didn't Papalie know?"

"Well—I don't know—I don't think he meant to hurt me, no, I know he didn't mean to hurt me."

"Maybe it was someone else making a noise in another classroom."

"No—maybe it was—yes, but anyhow, I was so hurt, I never sang any more, not even in church."

So Mama never sang any more, though her speaking voice had a rare quality; it was low and rich and vibrant. Yet, it couldn't have been just that that stopped Mama singing, there must have been other things as well. (p. 21)



Min. 7:55

"Toward the end of *The Gift*, H.D. commits herself to offering an artistic vision that counters the dismissal of women as artists and thinkers, but also as spiritual leaders, providing insight into how communities might fight against sexism, racism, and violence in the world. The closing of the text allows her to recall a message from her Mamalie when she was a child and Mamalie began to lose her grasp on the present in her old age. Mamalie drifts back to a time when she learned about "papers" or deerskin document that told of rituals on wound island in Monocacy creek, during the time in which women were valued as spiritual leaders, when Christ was seen as feminine and masculine, when the holy spirit is understood as feminine. H.D. gives us these memories of Mamalie's story and glimpses of what occurred on wound island before the sifting time in fits and starts and it never becomes fully clear to the reader what the exact rituals on Wound Island might be."



The Gift by H.D. Excerpts from chapter four titled "The Secret"

She said *Gnadenhuetten* I do not even want them to know how much I feel when they say *Gnadenhuetten* like that. I am in the word, I am *Gnadenhuetten* the way Mamalie says it, though I do not know what it means.

"And *Wunden Eiland*," she says.

It seems as if something had come over me like the branches of a tree or the folds of a tent when she says *Wunden Eiland*. She says *Eiland* which must be an island, and the *Wunden*, I suppose, is wonder or wonderful. I do not even want her to tell me, but I want her to go on talking because if she stops, the word will stop. The word is like a beehive, but there are no bees in it now. I am the last bee in the beehive, this is the game I play. The other bees have gone, that is why it is so quiet. Can one bee keep a beehive alive; I mean, can one person who knows that *Wunden Eiland* is a beehive, keep *Wunden Eiland* for the other bees when they come back? (p. 82-83)

A hundred years had passed, since the founding of the town I mean, when Mamalie's Christian found the papers or the scroll of flexible deerskin which told the story of the meeting of the chief medicine man of the friendly tribes and the devotees of the Ritual of the Wounds. Christian, who was no mean scholar, glimpsed here a hint in Hebrew or followed a Greek text to its original, and so pieced out the story of the meeting, deciphered actually the words of strange pledges passed, strange words spoken, strange rhythms sung which were prompted, all alike said, by the power of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Ghost of the Christian ritualists and the Great Spirit of the Indians poured their grace alike; their gifts came in turn to Anna von Pahlen, to John Christopher Frederick Cammerhof, to John Christopher Pyrlaeus, who was not only a scholar and authority on the Indian languages, but a musician as well. (p. 86)

"What is clear is that the rituals involve women in leadership roles, a sharing of indigenous religious belief and Moravian religious belief, and the understanding of sacred femininity as part of the divine. Here, H.D. reminds readers of the massacre of Lenni Lenape indigenous people who share pacifist religious beliefs with Moravian missionaries that they encountered. Nearly 100 Lenape were murdered by a white militia led by Lt. Colonel David Williamson in retaliation for raids in PA, in which the group of Lenni Lenape had not participated. Mamalie and H.D. here contrast this horrendous massacre with the ritual at Wound Island where indigenous and white people honor their religious traditions together, where domination of one group of men over another is not sought, but challenged, where domination of women by men is not seen as natural but challenged by divine spirit. As white masculinity in her childhood community is believed to be superior and is supported by exploiting women's labor and by the removal and domination of indigenous populations, H.D. takes readers back to a time in Bethlehem when religious ritual actively fought against such forms of domination."

Min. 14:45

The Gift by H.D. Excerpts from the final chapter titled "Morning Star"

[As the bombs drop on London during the Blitz]

There was a promise and there was a gift, but the promise it seems was broken and the gift it seems was lost. That is why, now at this minute, there is the roar outside that will, perhaps this time, shatter my head, shatter my brain, and all the little boxes that have been all the rooms I have lived in, have gone in and out of, will fall . . . fall (p. 134)

Harken to us, sings the great choir of strange voices that speak in a strange bird-like staccato rhythm, but I know what they are saying though they are speaking Indian dialects. The two voices answer one another and the sound of Anna von Pahlen's voice as she reads the writing on the strip of paper from the woven basket that Cammerhof has just handed her, is pure and silver and clear like a silver trumpet . . .

it [the Holy Spirit and Great Spirit] comes nearer, it is the shouting of many horsemen, it is Philippus, Lover-of-horses, it is Anna, Hannah or Grace, who is answering. Now they all call together in one voice . . . the sound accumulates, gathers sound . . . "It's the all-clear," says Bryher, "Yes," I say. (p. 142)

"Sexism, racism, and homophobia are part of this problem of violence as specific groups of men write their superiority across the sky with powerful bombs, pounding their power and strength into the ground, onto the bodies, of those that they see as disposable, as waste. But at Wound Island, where men can let go of a masculinity that erects itself in its divine difference from simple woman, where European immigrant men can let go of their need to dismiss their spiritual insights of groups different from them, where men can contemplate exploring their own femininity, their own vulnerability, their love for other men, H.D. places her hope. In Bethlehem's past, there was a place on an island where the fantasy of superiority was seen as sin, and the divine feminine and masculine merged, when women were valued as equal as men, when indigenous and European came together to share their beliefs and to delight in the sacred value of each body."



Now pause for a moment. Tug at the edges of your hat with both hands. Tighten your belt. Hike your socks. Mary ends in a breath-taking rhetorical gallop.

"It will be the work of lesbian, gender non-conforming, and bisexual women at the end of *The Gift* to reach into the historical archive to show the value of sacred foremothers. It will be the work of lesbian, gender non-conforming, bisexual and feminist women to create works of art that provide beehives of words that readers can visit, in which we can live as we build communities in which diverse women can thrive.

It will be the work of all of us in all our many genders, sexualities, to engage with the language that devalues others and celebrates the few, structures that benefit the few while exploiting the many. We, too, are asked to create new narratives and structures that might challenge violence in the world, as we attempt to address sexism, racism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, in our communities.”

Trumpet flourish!

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