

H.D.: “If she went away [from Pennsylvania] her spirit would break; if she stayed, she would be suffocated” (11)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Arts, the, Fun Stuff, Gadfly's posts, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) March 19, 2019
(11th in a series of posts on H.D.)

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.

Gadfly is following this wonderful program on Bethlehem-born world-renown author H.D. (1866-1961), the Lehigh Valley’s most important literary figure – who most of us, Gadfly included, know very little about.

Here again is the full recording of Prof. Mary Foltz’s lecture on “Challenging Limited Understandings of Gender and Sexuality” on March 6.

After the intro by Jennie Gilrain, Mary introduces the overarching questions we should think about during her talk (min. 2:30), introduces H.D.’s *The Gift* (min. 5:01), discusses and interacts with the audience about two poems by Rosa Lane for context (min. 8:04 and min. 20:54), and concludes this context by showing how the Lane poems set up four themes that characterize H.D.’s work (min. 30:25). Mary turns to *The Gift* for the main focus of her talk (min. 32:18) and the Q ‘n A follows (min. 1:14:50).

AUDIO RECORDINGS UNAVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE

So now let’s think about the second slice of Mary’s lecture.

Gadfly is straight.

How can he know what’s it’s like to be . . . not straight?

How can he know what it feels like to be lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer?

Literature is a way of knowing.

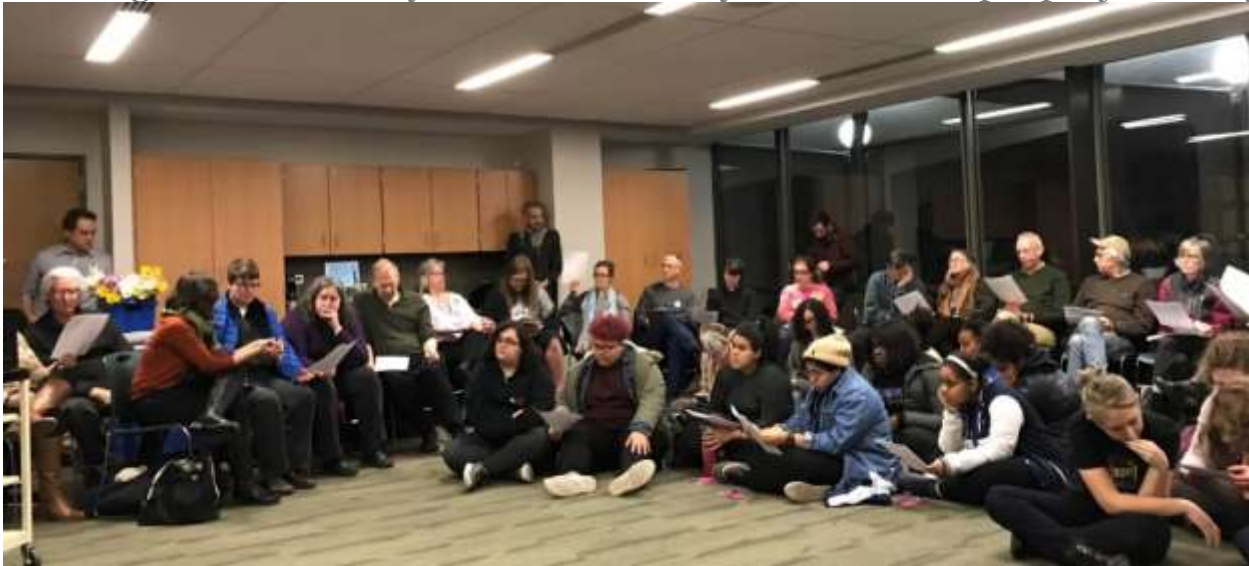
Mary tells us that H.D., the Lehigh Valley’s most important literary figure, is a bisexual feminist poet.

How can Gadfly understand H.D. and her criticism of the damages of sexism and patriarchy?

Mary fosters that understanding of people like me who “will not know the pain of encountering others’ hatred as you express femininity or masculinity because you’ve been assigned a sex at birth that does not match your gender” through a discussion of two short poems by lesbian poet Rosa Lane.

Poetry must be heard.

Gadfly encourages you to read the Lane poems printed below along with listening to them read by members of Mary’s audience — people just like you.



Read them. And think about them for a couple minutes. Then listen to Mary and her audience talk about them.

Rosa Lane, “Tomboy’s Toggle to Love”

Rosa Lane, “Boats Named Women”

<p>"Tomboy's Toggle to Love" Rosa Lane</p>	<p>"Boats Named Women" Rosa Lane</p>
<p>I was held hostage by a tribe not mine, age seven, alien. I knew this then, exactly as I know it now. I set the amber bottle afloat in the North Atlantic, where I slipped my message: <i>Find me.</i> <i>If you are a woman,</i> <i>I love you.</i> I sang my transistor's dial set to Sinatra, the only call to love I knew, transmitted from the cove's edge.</p> <p>All that summer, I listened for return air waves, Morse code of arrival, any one of you to come ashore. Instead, my mother's WGAN radio dominated the broadcast, blasted from her Protestant window, overlooking my whole irredeemable, irrevocable life.</p>	<p>Fishermen call them women: <i>Christina, Beulah, and the Marie L.,</i> chained to a piece of granite dropped into the cove. Gutted hulls of wives, daughters, granddaughters float their curves, squint painted trims through a foreground of dense fog, pull lips against moorings of weather.</p> <p>Sprocket, Chummy, Red Bickford, Tinker, and my father haul around Thumb Cap Island, their love wrapped in newspaper, brought <u>home</u>, and laid on the washboard.</p> <p>My father's feelings are simple: hover over <u>fillets</u>, gather hunger beside the knife. At two in the morning, she opens her blouse, lays the sharp edge at the side of her breast: <i>Here, if that's all you want, take it.</i></p>

Mary took the poems individually, got the audience talking about them, and then pulled things together in her words.

Gadfly would love to think you have the time to listen to the segments on each poem – but you must, YOU MUST listen to at least one!

So here are audio clips of the full segments on each poem with some teasers from Mary's wrap-ups.

1) "Tomboy's Toggle to Love"

"The child expressing lesbian desire in this poem, the longing to share love for another woman, feels like an alien in her own home. . . . What she is looking for is a community, a tribe, of others that can affirm her desire as beautiful and valuable. She sends a message in a bottle, but hears nothing back from the world, nothing washes ashore, that indicates she is not alone in her difference. . . . the desire for another woman is not something that she feels could be erased, her course is set from childhood to be lost to her community and family because of her difference."

2) "Boats Named Women"

“This poem addresses how women are the vessels that support men in their journeys through the world in this fishing community. Women’s bodies. . . . are gutted hulls, not subjects in their own right, but bodies devoted to pleasuring men. . . . sexual intimacy here is described as the mother chopping off a part of herself to give to her partner.”

Mary then finishes her introduction to H.D. by setting out four themes that characterize H.D.’s work.

- institutionalized sexism limits possibilities for white women
- normative heterosexuality defines women’s sexuality as being objects of desire for men rather than subjects of desire
- documenting the desire to surpass limited understanding of what women’s bodies are for
- imagining and enacting alternatives to gender norms for women

H.D., Mary tells us, felt suffocated in Bethlehem and Philadelphia even as she loved her family and community. “If she went away her spirit would break,” H.D. wrote of herself, “if she stayed, she would be suffocated.”

That tension tears Gadfly up.

Another slice of Mary’s lecture to think about coming in our next post. Moving there into a discussion of H.D.’s work itself.

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