

H.D.: her life's work begins at Nisky Hill (12)

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) Arts, the, Fun Stuff, [H.D. \(Hilda Doolittle\)](#) March 25, 2019

(12th 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 two 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 third slice as Mary moves into H.D.’s autobiographical narrative *The Gift*, which “opens with a discussion of H.D.’s childhood in Bethlehem.”

So, “autobiography,” and you’re thinking and expecting (yawn) to see some form of “I was born” No, *The Gift* begins in Nisky Hill Cemetery with a childhood incident involving H.D.’s mother, grandmother (Mamalie) and four dead females: Edith (her sister), Martha (her father’s first wife), Alice (daughter of her father with Martha), and Fanny (sister of Martha). Read on and/or listen to an audience member reading this passage on the link above.

The Gift by H.D. Excerpt from the first chapter titled "Dark Room"

"Why are you crying?"

Mama, who was older, said, "We are crying because Fanny died." Mamalie laughed and told us the story of Mama and Uncle Hartley crouching under the clock, which was our clock in our house now and our great-grandfather had made it and kept bees and been asked to Philadelphia to sing even at a theater or an opera house.

"They were crying," Mamalie explained, when we wondered why she laughed about it, "because Fanny died."

"But why is it funny?"

"Well, you see they couldn't possibly remember Fanny. Fanny died before Hartley was born, and your own mama was just a baby, how could she remember Fanny?"

I wondered about that. Mama was crying about Fanny. Why did Mamalie think it funny? Mamalie did not seem to think of Fanny, Mama did not speak often of little Edith, and the other little girl was not mentioned. Ida said it was better for us not to share Edith's flowers on her April birthday with the other graves, with the Lady, and with Alice. We felt somehow that this was not right, but there were things we did not understand.

We had spread Edith's pansies equally on Alice's twin grave and then borrowed from both of them for the Lady who was not our mother but the mother of the two (to us) grown men, our brothers, who were finishing their work at the university across the river; their names were Eric and Alfred. But Ida said the flowers were meant for Edith and "your mama would feel hurt." We did not follow this, but had been sent with the basket of pansies and pink-and-white button-daisies for Edith's grave, so we collected the pansies and daisies from the flat tops of the other graves and gave them back to Edith...

Why was it always a girl who had died? Why did Alice die and not Alfred? Why did Edith die and not Gilbert? I did not cry because Fanny died, but I had inherited Fanny. Mama cried (although I had seldom seen her cry) because Fanny died, so Mama had cried. I did not cry. The crying was frozen in me, but it was my own, it was my own crying. There was Alice—my own-half sister, Edith—my own sister, and I was the third of this trio, these three Fates, or maybe Fanny was the third. The gift was there, but the expression of the gift was somewhere else. (p. 3-4)

What lines jump out at you? How about H.D.'s questions "But why is it funny? [that Fanny died]," and "Why was it always a girl who had died?"

Hmm, H.D. begins an autobiography with dead girls and women. At graves we can literally easily visit.

And with questions that haunt.

So — and here's a good example of her own "Wow!" questions — Mary asks, "Why does [H.D.] open an autobiographical text with dead women? What is the significance of this artistic choice?"

The answer is powerful:

- “The loss of a girl is of no great consequence to the world for she only might matter to the family. In other words, the kind of labor that a girl, the kind of gifts that she might give to the world, is of no consequence as women’s labor is devalued and their ‘gifts’—intellectual, artistic, scientific, etc.—are assumed to be nonexistent.”
- “Hilda is forced to encounter in the Nisky graveyard the names of women that will not be in the histories of Bethlehem, that few grieve, and that others avoid so as not to confront how institutionalized sexism devalues women.”
- “The lives of white men will be celebrated as they work at the Steel, as they work at the University, as they contribute to the world with the labor, but the lives of women will be recorded on gravestones.”
- “In a whimsical way, Hilda is pointing out here through a girl child’s view of the world that the primary place where women are marked in public spaces is in their deaths, on their gravestones.”
- “She seems to say we celebrate men’s lives and just mark women’s deaths.”
- “Her gift . . . is to feel sorrow for the lost women and girls, to grieve their deaths, and to grieve for the ways that they are not valued fully in their communities both during the lives and in their resting places.”

Mary reminds us that “H.D. was born into a world where women were understood as naturally inferior.” For the first thirty years of her life women could not vote and rarely held leadership positions. She was also “born into a [Moravian] religious community that despite its history of valuing women in leadership roles and viewing equality among all people succumbed to dominant forms of sexism after the death of Zinzendorf in 1760.”

“Part of the gift that [H.D.] gets from her mother is her ability to grieve for girls.”

“She can mourn for those that others are laughing at.”



“She’s connected to the dead; she has a responsibility to the dead.”

“She’s crying inside for a culture that says women are not valuable.”

So, what does beginning with memory of an incident involving a dead girl that was a laughing matter mean to H.D. as she begins to think about the significance of her life?

“Her life’s work is this quest . . . to create narratives that might help us think differently about the sacredness . . . of gender non-conforming people.”

“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.”

There ought to be a Wow! in you somewhere for the young H.D.’s germinating moment in Nisky Hill.

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