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| H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) (1886–1961) |
| Hilda Doolittle |
| Perhaps best known as one of the founding imagists, H.D. was also a novelist, essayist, and actor active throughout the entire modernist period. From her early, iconic lyrics to her late, mythological long poems, H.D. developed an aesthetic that bridged free verse, classicism, and new conceptions of identity, most notably gender and sexuality. In addition to her own work, H.D. helped shape modernism through her many friendships with other important artists and intellectuals, including Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, D.H. Lawrence, and Sigmund Freud.  H.D. was born Hilda Doolittle in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, not far from Philadelphia. Her father was an astronomer, and her mother, Helen, had some artistic aspirations, including painting and singing. Among her early acquaintances were Pound (to whom she was briefly engaged) and Williams. While attending Bryn Mawr for a year, she met Moore. In 1911, she went to England with Frances Gregg, with whom she had an early and important romantic relationship.  One of the more iconic moments in modernism occurred in 1912, when Pound declared Doolittle, Richard Aldington, and himself to be ‘imagists’ during a gathering at the British Museum tearoom. Later that same year, Pound sent some of Doolittle’s verses to *Poetry* magazine, signing them ‘H.D., imagiste’, a name she would embrace. |
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In 1911, she went to England with Frances Gregg, with whom she had an early and important romantic relationship.  One of the more iconic moments in modernism occurred in 1912, when Pound declared Doolittle, Richard Aldington, and himself to be ‘imagists’ during a gathering at the British Museum tearoom. Later that same year, Pound sent some of Doolittle’s verses to *Poetry* magazine, signing them ‘H.D., imagiste’, a name she would embrace. H.D. married Aldington in 1913, although the union was largely an unhappy one. During this time, she developed a close friendship with Lawrence, which ended abruptly in 1918, under circumstance still not entirely clear.  In 1919, H.D. became quite ill while pregnant with her only child, a daughter, Frances Perdita. She was nursed to health by Annie Winifred Ellerman, also known as Bryher, who would become a life-long partner and travel companion. In 1927, Bryher married Kenneth Macpherson, and, along with H.D., the three became a creative and domestic unit, collaborating on films and the journal *Close Up*, for which H.D. wrote articles and reviews. In 1933–1934, another significant relationship was forged when H.D. was analyzed by Freud, an experience she recounts in *A Tribute to Freud* (1956). She was living in England during World War II and experienced the bombing of London, an event that inspired her long poem *Trilogy*.  In her early poetry, which shared many but not all of Pound’s imagist principles, H.D. deliberately reworked classical sources, particularly Greek, into compressed lyrics that attended to the material world. In her first collection, *Sea Garden* (1916), the fractured garden and battered sea of the title are used as a setting for erotic displacement, ancient deities, and sacred rituals. This concern with the classical would expand in her later verse, moving beyond imagist ‘moments in time’ to create longer narrative and personal forms. ‘Eurydice’, for instance, is a dramatic monologue retelling the myth from the perspective of the female character, chidings Orpheus for his failures. H.D. would assume the perspective of neglected women’s voice throughout her career, most notably in her late long poem *Helen in Egypt* (1961).  Along with her verse, H.D. composed a number of prose works, including *Palimpsest* (1926) and *HERmione* (1927). Through their plot and characters, these fictions often staged the dilemmas of H.D.’s writing and identity, including her lesbian relationships. Indeed, she chose to withhold some of these texts from publication, in part due to their frank treatment of lesbian sexuality. She also wrote several autobiographical works, including *The Gift* (1941–1943) and *Tribute to Freud* (1956), the latter taking psychoanalysis as an opportunity to layer personal and cultural history, archetypes, ancient symbols, and the family drama.  This palimpsestic approach to myth and the psyche became more pronounced in H.D.’s later work, a flexible version of the ‘mythic method’ that embraced fluid identities and cultural hybridity while providing a lens to interpret the present. In her *Trilogy*—comprised of *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945), and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946)—H.D. uses Egyptian and Christian iconography to comprehend the destruction of London during World War II. The alternative (at times occult) history she generates in this work anticipates *Helen in Egypt*, perhaps the culminating expression of her lifelong interests. The poem takes as its starting point a fragment by the Greek poet Stesichorus, who suggests that Helen had been transported to Egypt during the famous war, a phantom taking her place. Thus, as the narrator remarks, ‘The Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion’. The work is constructed as a lyrical sequence, with speakers ranging from Helen and Achilles to a number of other classical figures. Thematically, H.D. is able to blend many ancient symbols and religions under the sign of mutation, as the Egyptian Amen becomes the Greek Zeus, Thesis transformed to Isis and Aphrodite.  Although she was actively writing until her death in 1961, H.D. was often neglected in early accounts of canonical modernism. Since the late 1960s, however, her work has been recognized for its formal and thematic complexity, firmly establishing her place within modernism as an artistic and cultural movement. |
| Further reading:  (Collecott)  (Friedman and DuPlessis)  (Guest)  (Hollenberg)  (Robinson) |