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Academic Argumentative Writing Sample

From the paper "Dionysus, Ariadne, and the Transformative Power of the God in H.D.'s 'The God'," presented at Literati 2017. This sample follows from the establishment of Dionysus as the titular god of the poem. It was rewritten with first person plural pronouns for a conference presentation.

In situating Dionysus as the addressee of the poem, we have solved half of the puzzle; but who, then, is the speaker, and how does she relate to the god? Who would be privileged enough to speak to the god directly?

The most simplistic answer to this question would be his traditional consort, Ariadne, and this view is supported directly by the text. Consider first the setting of the poem—the speaker is on a rocky beach, evidenced by the salt-stained rocks (31-33) and the view of the sea beyond (56). Also consider the speaker's emotional condition: she seems (past-tense at the time of the poem) to have been emotionally damaged, saying that she had been "drawn away into the salt" (46), viewing the world as "evil" and herself as "lost" (16-18). Calling herself salty suggests that nothing may grow emotionally inside of her, as if a barren field, imbuing her with lifelessness and hopeless (and, if we read biblically, perhaps a proclivity for looking back). In short, the speaker is in emotional pain. As the poem explains, however, this emotional condition isn't permanent—no indeed, the poem makes it clear that the god is transformative to the speaker, "alter[ing] this" condition at his mere appearance (19-20), making the speaker weightless (22) and "powerless" (54) as the whole world is consumed by the colors of wine. This glut of evidence serves to demonstrate a single point, being that the emotional tone of the piece changes greatly when

referring to the god; the speaker is no longer dead from salt but is reborn like cyclamen flowers, no longer sunk to the evil earth but weightless. She has surrendered herself to the god, purpling her world and rejuvenating her life.

In sum, therefore, we know our speaker is on a beach, was previously emotionally hurt, and is now, "in a [mere] moment" (19), brought into a positive emotional state. This, combined with the consideration of who is being addressed—the god Dionysus—and who would be allowed to address the god, suggests this poem functions as a retelling of Dionysus finding Ariadne on Naxos, thus identifying the speaker as Ariadne.[1]

[…] The ordering of the poem follows from their first sight of each other in section I (where Ariadne first asks of the god's face) to II, wherein the transformative power of Dionysus is upon her; in III she pauses to reflect on the desperation she felt before the arrival of the god, and IV brings the action back to her transformation. This order can be detected readily in the shifting of verb tenses between past and present within the sections. In sections I and III, the speaker's actions are solidly in the past tense—"asked," "spoke," "stood," "thought," "had drawn" (1, 14, 30, 34, 46)—whereas in sections II and IV her actions are in the present tense with "have," "pluck," "place," "am," "is" (20, 22, 27, 49, 51, 54, 56). The toggling of the tenses indicates the two emotional states of the speaker—a state of emotional infertility and a state of emotional ecstasy—the "then" and the "now." The trauma inflicted by Theseus is now gone, as is the first meeting between the speaker and the god; all direct treatment of emotional pain is relegated to the past

[1] [Editorial note: there was originally a digression here comparing H.D.'s imagery to an episode of Ovid's *Heroides*.]

tense. The new reality and present of the speaker is the growing ecstasy of the god, and thus only the present tense is deemed an appropriate form.

[…]

[The speaker's] introspection and reflection focuses on two repeated images: salt and cyclamen.

The imagery of reflection is given through salt. The speaker is surprised that, despite the salt of her heart, the god is able to sprout change within. The speaker says that "I thought I would be the last / you would want," saying thus that she expected her emotional saltiness to wilt any attempt at love and emotion (34-35). Moreover, she expected this emotional infertility to extend beyond herself and wilt even the power of the god, as she feared to "scatter salt / on the ripe grapes"—that is, she feared she would spread her emotional nothingness onto the emotional development of her newfound lover (36-37). She had given herself away entirely to emotional distress, saying she "had drawn away into the salt," becoming a "shell" of her former self (46-47). To her surprise, however, she is wrong. Three times she says "I thought," suggesting again and again that what she believed in the time of her pain she now knows to be untrue (34, 36, 38); the god, indeed, was able to stir something in her apparently numbed heart. The god even explicitly defeats the salt—in 30-33, the speaker conflates the salt with the rocks upon which she stands. Yet, the power of the god renders the rocks, and therefore the salt, powerless against her ("the flat rocks / have no strength," 26-27). This imagery is especially poignant considering our identification of the god as Dionysus, a god both of fertility and emotion. His two realms become mixed here—the metaphor applied to the speaker is one of agricultural bareness that extends to emotional bareness, and Dionysus, god over both, is able to conquer it.

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The discussion of epiphany and transformation is contained, then, in the image of the cyclamen. The cyclamen is a flower whose petals are predominantly white, though at their bases they are marked with red or purple patches that bleed into the rest of the petal (see Figure 2 for an example). Throughout the poem, the speaker mentions cyclamen in a variety of colors—"fire-tipped," "red by wine-red," and "purple" (24, 50, 56), the colors of wine, tying the flower immediately to Dionysus. The colors of the flowers, of course, are not simply contained within the petals—rather, they extend into the world around the speaker, first overpowering the rocks beneath her feet (21-29) and then the surrounding sea (56-59). The color of the petals marks a transformation from white to wine, and the power of this transformation grows to consume the speaker's world, thus symbolizing the transformation brought about by the god. Her entire world, summarized in the petal of the cyclamen, is consumed by the transformative power offered by Dionysus.

Works Cited

Doolittle, Hilda. "The God." *The God*, n.p., 1917. Print.