

Whitman, eliot, and  
"a wash of cold river":  
h.d doolittle's  
synthesis of  
transcen...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Hilda “ H. D” Doolittle uses heavily-allusive imagist poetry to redefine gender-roles and contradict the characterization of women as delicate and fragile. H. D pulls from ancient Greek literature to write strong not-traditionally-feminine women into her own current culture and re-inscribe traditionally feminine figures — Helen of Troy, roses, or Mother Mary — in tougher, man-like roles. Her poems, full of natural imagery, take on Whitmanian elements to say that women must flee to the natural world to shed their feminine roles. Additionally, her style draws from classic modernism, defined by T. S Eliot’s “ Tradition in the Individual Talent,” as it confronts old tradition and customs regarding religion and the status of women. H. D’s “ Wash of Cold River” mingles harsh natural imagery with classic archetypes of feminine fragility as well as Greek and Christian allusion, deifying nature and the human experience in a Whitmanian style and following T. S Eliot’s “ Traditional in Individual Talent” ’s criticism and reinvention of traditional religious order, ultimately apotheosizing a newly-toughened idea of femininity.

In “ Wash of Cold River,” H. D describes a single image of the natural world blending together “ delicate” femininity and “ frigid” harshness and, thereby, equating classically paradoxical ideas. Beginning with the antithesized description of a “ cold river in glacial land” as filled with warm, Grecian “ Ionian water,” H. D immediately blends two natural opposites, creating the forefront for the mixing of abstract and man-made ideas. H. D places “ delicate...camellia textured...flowers” — a common symbol for womanhood — within this harsh landscape and describes them as “ frozen”,

metaphorically redefining a woman's status and highlighting the freedom of the natural world to do so.

Additionally, the poem describes the hybrid river flowers as "colder than a rose," separating them from the archetype of pure femininity and beauty, showing that classically-feminine women will not necessarily change themselves, but that a new type of women emerges. This very theme is reiterated as H. D moves from the the river flower to the wind flower, stating it not only "keeps the breath of the north-wind" but keeps "none other." Rather than "freezing" a feminine, "delicate" flower and, as such, merely adding tough, "cold" characteristics, the "wind-flower" is instead imbued with unwomanly characteristics, creating an entirely new type of woman. By mingling archetypes of the feminine with descriptions of toughness and harshness, all within the natural world, H. D contrasts and reinvents the meaning of femininity within modern society. Having confronted and reinvented the traditions and customs of the modern world, H. D pulls from both Whitman's natural-world deification and "Tradition and the Individual Talent's" call for poetry as a new religion, worshiping the figure of new-feminism she creates within "Wash of Cold River." After she describes and builds the image of the flowers as the example of hybrid femininity, the image begins to take human shape, developing "intimate hands and thoughts." But, rather than becoming a women, it becomes a "rare, beautiful, pure" but "inaccessible" statue, a copy of the actual idol — suggesting that this example of outlandish femininity cannot exist in the real world but must be imagined through "sheer rapture" or assent to heaven.

This idea that such a figure can only exist in the presence of God defies the hybrid women and makes poetry her gospel, asserting, in full modern style, poetry as the new religion. Despite the “inaccessible”-ity of the figure, however, the persona of the poem still worships its “shrine” and feels connected to the pseudo-deity’s “thoughts,” claiming she shares the “treasures of [her] mind” with the figure. This personal connection but physical inaccessibility reiterates the figure’s deification because it emulates Christian theology. However, it contrasts the Whitmanian idea of God as fully accessible within nature and within one’s self — highlighting women’s alienation from even the God’s they create. Women can imagine figures of femininity and strength but to emulate these figures, to suggest that they could find the same kind of power, remains impossible.

Along the lines of Whitman and T. S. Eliot, H. D.’s “Wash of Cold River” both deifies the figure within the poem and asserts poetry as a new religion, while subtly recognizing the limitations of her Goddess. Imagist poet H. D. uses Christian and Greek allusion to confront and contrast traditional women’s roles. H. D. recaptures the stories of former heroines and reinvents the lives of objectified and feminine figures, all within a Whitmanian-esque natural setting. Through this avant-garde feminism, her poetry remains thoroughly modern, as it confronts the traditional customs and religion. H. D.’s “Wash of Cold River” blends tough manlike natural imagery with archetypes of feminine fragility, ultimately deifying — and ironically alienating women from — a reinvented idea of femininity.