

Classic Poetry Series

**Hilda Doolittle**  
**- poems -**

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# Hilda Doolittle(10 September 1886 – 27 September 1961)

H.D. (born Hilda Doolittle) was an American poet, novelist and memoirist known for her association with the early 20th century avant-garde Imagist group of poets such as [Ezra Pound](http://www.poemhunter.com/ezra-pound/) and [Richard Aldington](http://www.poemhunter.com/richard-aldington/). The Imagist model was based on the idioms, rhythms and clarity of common speech, and freedom to choose subject matter as the writer saw fit. H.D.'s later writing developed on this aesthetic to incorporate a more female-centric version of modernism.

H.D. was born in Pennsylvania in 1886, and moved to London in 1911 where her publications earned her a central role within the then emerging Imagism movement. A charismatic figure, she was championed by the modernist poet Ezra Pound, who was instrumental in building and furthering her career. From 1916–17, she acted as the literary editor of the *Egoist* journal, while her poetry appeared in the *English Review* and the *Transatlantic Review*. During the First World War, H.D. suffered the death of her brother and the breakup of her marriage to the poet Richard Aldington, and these events weighed heavily on her later poetry. Glenn Hughes, the authority on Imagism, said of her 'her loneliness cries out from her poems. She had a deep interest in Ancient Greek literature, and her poetry often borrowed from Greek mythology and classical poets. Her work is noted for its incorporation of natural scenes and objects, which are often used to evoke a particular feeling or mood.

She befriended Sigmund Freud during the 1930s, and became his patient in order to understand and express her bisexuality.

H.D. married once, and undertook a number of heterosexual and lesbian relationships. She was unapologetic about her sexuality, and thus became an icon for both the gay rights and feminist movements when her poems, plays, letters and essays were rediscovered during the 1970s and 1980s. This period saw a wave of feminist literature on the gendering of Modernism and psychoanalytical misogyny, by a generation of writers who saw her as an early icon of the feminist movement.

**<b>Career</b>**

**<b>Early life</b>**

Hilda Doolittle was born into the Moravian community in Bethlehem in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley. Her father, Charles Doolittle, was professor of astronomy at Lehigh University and her mother, Helen (Wolle), was a Moravian with a strong interest in music. In 1896, Charles Doolittle was appointed Flower Professor of Astronomy at the University of Pennsylvania, and the family moved to a house in Upper Darby, an affluent Philadelphia suburb. She attended Philadelphia's Friends Central High School, at Fifteenth and Race streets, graduating in 1905. In 1901, she met and befriended Ezra Pound, who was to play a major role both in her private life and her emergence as a writer. In 1905, Pound presented her with a sheaf of love poems under the collective title *Hilda's Book*.

That year, Doolittle attended Bryn Mawr College to study Greek literature, but left after only three terms due to poor grades and the excuse of poor health. While at the college, she met the poets [Marianne Moore](http://www.poemhunter.com/marianne-moore/) and [William Carlos Williams](http://www.poemhunter.com/william-carlos-williams/). Her first published writings, some stories for children, were published in *The Comrade*, a Philadelphia Presbyterian Church paper, between 1909 and 1913, mostly under the name Edith Gray. In 1907, she became engaged to Pound. Her father disapproved of Pound, and by the time her father left for Europe in 1908, the engagement had been called off. Around this time, H.D. started a relationship with a young female art student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Frances Josepha Gregg. After spending part of 1910 living in Greenwich Village, she sailed to Europe with Gregg and Gregg's mother in 1911. In Europe, H.D. began a more serious career as a writer. Her relationship with Gregg cooled, and she met a writing enthusiast named Brigit Patmore with whom she became involved in an affair. Patmore introduced H.D. to another poet, Richard Aldington.

### **H.D. Imagiste**

Soon after arriving in England, H.D. showed Pound some poems she had written. Pound had already begun to meet with other poets at the Eiffel Tower restaurant in Soho. He was impressed by the closeness of H.D. poems to the ideas and principles he had been discussing with Aldington, with whom he had shared plans to reform contemporary poetry through free verse, the tanka and the tightness and conciseness of the haiku, and the removal of all unnecessary verbiage. In summer 1912, the three poets declared themselves the "three original Imagists", and set out their principles as:  
Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.

To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.  
As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.

During a meeting with H.D. in a tea room near the British Museum that year, Pound appended the signature H.D. Imagiste to her poetry, creating a label that was to stick to the poet for most of her writing life. However H.D. told different versions of this story at various times, and during her career published under a variety of pseudonyms. That same year, Harriet Monroe started her Poetry magazine and asked Pound to act as foreign editor. In October, he submitted three poems each by H.D. and Aldington under the rubric Imagiste. Aldington's poems were in the November issue of Poetry and her poems "Hermes of the Ways," "Orchard," and "Epigram", in the January 1913 issue. Imagism as a movement was launched with H.D. as its prime exponent.

The early models for the Imagist group were from Japan, and H.D. often visited the exclusive Print Room at the British Museum in the company of Richard Aldington and the curator and poet Laurence Binyon in order to examine Nishiki-e prints that incorporated traditional Japanese verse. However, she also derived her way of making poems from her reading of Classical Greek literature and especially of [Sappho](http://www.poemhunter.com/sappho/), an interest she shared with Aldington and Pound, each of whom produced versions of the Greek poet's work. In 1915, H.D. and Aldington launched the Poets' Translation Series, pamphlets of translations from Greek and Latin classics. H.D. worked on the plays by Euripides, publishing in 1916 a translation of choruses from Iphigeneia at Aulis, in 1919 a translation of choruses from Iphigeneia at Aulis and Hippolytus, an adaptation of Hippolytus called Hippolytus Temporizes (1927), a translation of choruses from The Bacchae and Hecuba (1931), and Euripides' Ion (1937) a loose translation of Ion.

She continued her association with the group until the final issue of the Some Imagist Poets anthology in 1917. She and Aldington did most of the editorial work on the 1915 anthology. Her work also appeared in Aldington's Imagist Anthology 1930. All of her poetry up to the end of the 1930s was written in an Imagist mode, utilising spare use of language, and a classical, austere purity. This style of writing was not without its critics. In a special Imagist issue of The Egoist magazine in May 1915, the poet and critic Harold Monroe called H.D.'s early work "petty poetry", denoting "either poverty of imagination or needlessly excessive restraint".

Oread, one of her earliest and best-known poems, which was first published in the 1915 anthology, illustrates this early style:

*Whirl up, sea—  
Whirl your pointed pines.  
Splash your great pines  
On our rocks.  
Hurl your green over us—  
Cover us with your pools of fir.*

## **World War I and after**

Before World War I, H.D. married Aldington in 1913; however, their first and only child, a daughter, was stillborn in 1915. Aldington enlisted in the army. The couple became estranged and Aldington reportedly took a mistress in 1917. H.D.

became involved in a close but platonic relationship with [D. H. Lawrence](http://www.poemhunter.com/david-herbert-lawrence/). In 1916, her first book, *Sea Garden*, was published and she was appointed assistant editor of *The Egoist*, replacing her husband. In 1918, her brother Gilbert was killed in action, and that March she moved into a cottage in Cornwall with the composer Cecil Gray, a friend of Lawrence's. She became pregnant with Gray's child, however, by the time she realised she was expecting, the relationship had cooled and Gray had returned to live in London. When Aldington returned from active service he was noticeably traumatised, and he and H.D. later separated.

Close to the end of the war, H.D. met the wealthy English novelist Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman). They lived together until 1946, and although both took numerous other partners, Bryher remained her lover for the rest of H.D.'s life. In 1919, H.D. came close to death when she gave birth to her daughter Frances Perdita Aldington—although the father was not Aldington, but Gray—while suffering from war influenza. During this time, her father, who had never recovered from Gilbert's death, died. In 1919, H.D. wrote one of her few known statements on poetics, *Notes on Thought and Vision*, which was unpublished until 1982. In this, she speaks of poets (herself included) as belonging to a kind of elite group of visionaries with the power to 'turn the whole tide of human thought'.

H.D. and Aldington attempted to salvage their relationship during this time, but he was suffering from the effects of his participation in the war, possibly post-traumatic stress disorder, and they became estranged, living completely separate lives, but not divorcing until 1938. They remained friends, however, for the rest of their lives. From 1920, her relationship with Bryher became closer and the pair

travelled in Egypt, Greece and the United States before eventually settling in Switzerland. Bryher entered a marriage of convenience in 1921 with Robert McAlmon, which allowed him to fund his publishing ventures in Paris by utilising some of her personal wealth for his Contact. Bryher and H.D. slept with McAlmon during this time. Bryher and McAlmon divorced in 1927.

### <b>Novels, films and psychoanalysis</b>

In the early 1920s, H.D. started to write three projected cycles of novels. The first of these, *Magna Graeca*, consists of *Palimpsest* (1921) and *Hedylus* (1928). The *Magna Graeca* novels use their classical settings to explore the poetic vocation, particularly as it applies to women in a patriarchal literary culture. The *Madrigal* cycle consists of *HERmione*, *Bid Me to Live*, *Paint It Today* and *Asphodel*, and is largely autobiographical, dealing with the development of the female artist and the conflict between heterosexual and lesbian desire. *Kora and Ka* and *The Usual Star*, two novellas from the *Borderline* cycle, were published in 1933. In this period, she also wrote *Pilate's Wife*, *Mira-Mare*, and *Nights*.

During this period her mother had died and Bryher had divorced her husband, only to marry H.D.'s new male lover, Kenneth Macpherson. H.D., Bryher, and Macpherson lived together and traveled through Europe as what the poet and critic Barbara Guest termed in her biography of H.D. as a 'menagerie of three'. Bryher and Macpherson adopted H.D.'s daughter, Perdita. In 1928, H.D. became pregnant but chose to abort the pregnancy in November. Bryher and Macpherson set up the magazine *Close Up* (to which H.D. regularly contributed) as a medium for intellectual discussion of cinema. In 1927, the small independent film cinema group POOL or Pool Group was established (largely funded with Bryher's inheritance) and was managed by all three. Only one POOL film survives in its entirety, *Borderline* (1930), which featured H.D. and Paul Robeson in the lead roles. In common with the *Borderline* novellas, the film explores extreme psychic states and their relationship to surface reality. As well as acting in this film, H.D. wrote an explanatory pamphlet to accompany it, a piece later published in *Close Up*.

In 1933, H.D. traveled to Vienna to undergo analysis with Sigmund Freud. She had an interest in Freud's theories as far back as 1909, when she read some of his works in the original German. H.D. was referred by Bryher's psychoanalyst due to her increasing paranoia about the rise of Adolf Hitler which indicated another world war, an idea that H.D. found intolerable. The Great War (World War I) had left her feeling shattered. She had lost her brother in action, while her husband suffered effects of combat experiences, and she believed that the onslaught of the war indirectly caused the death of her child with Aldington: she

believed it was her shock at hearing the news about the RMS Lusitania that directly caused her miscarriage. Writing on the Wall, her memoir about this psychoanalysis, was written concurrently with Trilogy and published in 1944; in 1956 it was republished with Advent, a journal of the analysis, under the title Tribute to Freud.

### <b>World War II and after</b>

H.D. and Bryher spent the duration of World War II in London. During this time, H.D. wrote *The Gift*, a memoir of her childhood and family life in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which reflects on people and events in her background that helped shape her as a writer. *The Gift* was eventually published in 1960 and 1982. She also wrote *Trilogy*, published as *The Walls do not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945) and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946). The opening lines of *The Walls do not Fall* clearly and immediately signal H.D.'s break with her earlier work:

*An incident here and there,  
and rails gone (for guns)  
from your (and my) old town square.</i>*

After the war, H.D. and Bryher no longer lived together, but remained in contact. H.D. moved to Switzerland where, in the spring of 1946, she suffered a severe mental breakdown which resulted in her staying in a clinic until the autumn of that year. Apart from a number of trips to the States, H.D. spent the rest of her life in Switzerland. In the late 1950s, she underwent more treatment, this time with the psychoanalyst Erich Heydt. At Heydt's prompting, she wrote *End to Torment*, a memoir of her relationship with Pound, who allowed the poems of *Hilda's Book* to be included when the book was published. Doolittle was one of the leading figures in the bohemian culture of London in the early decades of the century. Her later poetry explores traditional epic themes, such as violence and war, from a feminist perspective. H.D. was the first woman to be granted the American Academy of Arts and Letters medal.

### <b>Later life and death</b>

During the 1950s, H.D. wrote a considerable amount of poetry, most notably *Helen in Egypt* (written between 1952–54), an examination from a feminist point of view of a male-centred epic poetry. H.D. used Euripides's play *Helen* as a starting point for a reinterpretation of the basis of the Trojan War and, by extension, of war itself. This work has been seen by some critics, including Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, as H.D.'s response to Pound's *Cantos*, a work she greatly

admired. Other poems from this period include *Sagesse*, *Winter Love* and *Hermetic Definition*. These three were published posthumously with the collective title *Hermetic Definition* (1972). The poem *Hermetic Definition* takes as its starting points her love for a man 30 years her junior and the line 'so slow is the rose to open' from Pound's *Canto 106*. *Sagesse*, written in bed after H.D. had broken her hip in a fall, serves as a kind of coda to *Trilogy*, being partly written in the voice of a young female Blitz survivor who finds herself living in fear of the atom bomb. *Winter Love* was written together with *End to Torment* and uses as narrator the Homeric figure of Penelope to restate the material of the memoir in poetic form. At one time, H.D. considered appending this poem as a coda to *Helen in Egypt*.

H.D. visited the United States in 1960 to collect an American Academy of Arts and Letters medal. Returning to Switzerland, she suffered a stroke in July 1961 and died a couple of months later in the Klinik Hirslanden in Zürich. Her ashes were returned to Bethlehem, and were buried in the family plot in the Nisky Hill Cemetery on October 28, 1961. Her epitaph consists of the following lines from her early poem "Let Zeus Record":

*<i>So you may say,  
Greek flower; Greek ecstasy  
reclaims forever  
one who died  
following intricate song's  
lost measure.</i>*

### **<b>Legacy</b>**

The rediscovery of H.D. began in the 1970s, and coincided with the emergence of a feminist criticism that found much to admire in the questioning of gender roles typical of her writings. Specifically, those critics who were challenging the standard view of English-language literary modernism based on the work of such male writers as Pound, [Eliot](http://www.poemhunter.com/thomas-stearns-eliot/) and [James Joyce](http://www.poemhunter.com/james-joyce/), were able to restore H.D. to a more significant position in the history of that movement. Her writings have served as a model for a number of more recent women poets working in the modernist tradition; including the New York School poet Barbara Guest, the Anglo-American poet [Denise Levertov](http://www.poemhunter.com/denise-levertov/), the Black Mountain poet Hilda Morley and the Language poet [Susan Howe](http://www.poemhunter.com/susan-howe/). Her influence is not limited to female poets, and many male writers, including [William S. Vandermere](http://www.poemhunter.com/william-s-vandermere/)



[Robert Duncan](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-duncan/) and [Robert Creeley](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-creeley/), have acknowledged their debt.

# Acon

Bear me to Dictaeus,  
and to the steep slopes;  
to the river Erymanthus.

I choose spray of dittany,  
cyperum, frail of flower,  
buds of myrrh,  
all-healing herbs,  
close pressed in calathes.

For she lies panting,  
drawing sharp breath,  
broken with harsh sobs.  
she, Hyella,  
whom no god pities.

Hilda Doolittle

# Adonis

1.

Each of us like you  
has died once,  
has passed through drift of wood-leaves,  
cracked and bent  
and tortured and unbent  
in the winter-frost,  
the burnt into gold points,  
lighted afresh,  
crisp amber, scales of gold-leaf,  
gold turned and re-welded  
in the sun;

each of us like you  
has died once,  
each of us has crossed an old wood-path  
and found the winter-leaves  
so golden in the sun-fire  
that even the live wood-flowers  
were dark.

2.

Not the gold on the temple-front  
where you stand  
is as gold as this,  
not the gold that fastens your sandals,  
nor the gold left  
through your chiselled locks,  
is as gold as this last year's leaf,  
not all the gold hammered and wrought  
and beaten  
on your lover's face.  
brow and bare breast  
is as golden as this:

each of us like you  
has died once,

each of us like you  
stands apart, like you  
fit to be worshipped.

Hilda Doolittle

# Amaranth

I

Am I blind alas,  
am I blind,  
I too have followed  
her path.  
I too have bent at her feet.  
I too have wakened to pluck  
amaranth in the straight shaft,  
amaranth purple in the cup,  
scorched at the edge to white.

Am I blind?  
am I the less ready for her sacrifice?  
am I less eager to give  
what she asks,  
she the shameless and radiant?

Am I quite lost,  
I towering above you and her glance,  
walking with swifter pace,  
with clearer sight,  
with intensity  
beside which you two  
are as spent ash?

Nay I give back to my goddess the gift  
she tendered me in a moment  
of great bounty.  
I return it. I lay it again  
on the white slab of her house,  
the beauty she cast out  
one moment, careless.

Nor do I cry out:  
'why did I stoop?  
why did I turn aside  
one moment from the rocks  
marking the sea-path?

Andromeda, shameless and radiant,  
have pity, turn, answer us.'

Ah no - though I stumble toward  
her altar-step,  
though my flesh is scorched and rent,  
shattered, cut apart,  
and slashed open;  
though my heels press my own wet life  
black, dark to purple,  
on the smooth rose-streaked  
threshold of her pavement.

## II

Am I blind, alas, deaf too,  
that my ears lost all this?  
Nay, O my lover, Atthis:  
shameless and still radiant  
I tell you this:

I was not asleep.  
I did not lie asleep on those hot rocks  
while you waited.  
I was not unaware when I glanced  
out toward sea,  
watching the purple ships.

I was not blind when I turned.  
I was not indifferent when I strayed aside  
or loitered as we three went,  
or seemed to turn a moment from the path  
for the same amaranth.

I was not dull and dead when I fell  
back on our couch at night.  
I was not indifferent though I turned  
and lay quiet.  
I was not dead in my sleep.

## III

Lady of all beauty,  
I give you this:  
say I have offered but small sacrifice,  
say that I am unworthy your touch,  
but say not, I turned to some cold, calm god,  
that I fell back at your first glance.

Lady of all beauty,  
I give you this:  
say not, I have deserted your altar-steps,  
that the fire on your white hearth  
was too great,  
that I fell back your first glance.

Lady, radiant and shameless,  
I have brought small wreaths,  
they were a child's gift.  
I have offered you white myrrh-leaf  
and sweet lentisk.  
I have laid rose-petals  
and white rock-rose from the beach.

But I give now  
a greater,  
I give life and spirit with this,  
I render a grace  
no one has dared to speak  
at your carved altar-step,  
lest men point him out,  
slave, callous to your art,

I dare more than the singer  
offering her lute,  
the girl her stained veils,  
the woman her swarthes of birth,  
the older woman her pencils of chalk  
and mirror and unguent box.

I offer more than the lad,  
singing at your steps,  
praising himself mirrored in his friend's face,  
more than any girl,

I offer you this,  
(grant only strength  
that I withdraw not my gift)  
I give you my praise for this:  
the love of my lover for his mistress.

#### IV

Let him go forth radiant,  
let life rise in his young breast,  
life is radiant,  
life is made for beautiful love  
and strange ecstasy,  
strait, searing body and limbs,  
tearing limbs and body from life;  
life is his if he take it,  
then let him take beauty  
as his right.

Take beauty, wander apart  
in the tree-shadows,  
wander under wind-bowed sheaths  
of golden fir-boughs,  
go far, far from here  
in your happiness,  
take beauty for that is her wish:  
Her wish,  
the radiant and the shameless.

#### V

But I,  
how I hate you for this,  
how I despise and hate,  
was my beauty so slight a gift,  
so soon, so soon forgot?

I hate you for this,  
and now that your fault be less,  
I would cry, turn back,  
lest she the shameless and radiant  
slay you for neglect.



Neglect of the finest beauty upon earth  
my limbs, my body and feet,  
beauty that men gasp  
wondering that life  
could rest in so burnt a face,  
so scarred with her touch,  
so fire-eaten, so intense.

Turn, for I love you yet,  
though you are not worthy of my love,  
though you are not equal to it.

Turn back;  
true I have glanced out  
toward the purple ships  
with seeming indifference.  
I have fallen from the high grace  
of the goddess,  
for long days  
I have been dulled with this grief,  
but turn  
before the death strike,  
for the goddess speaks:

She too is of the deathless,  
she too will wander in my palaces  
where all beauty is peace.

She too is of my host  
that gather in groups or singly wait  
by some altar apart;  
she too is my poet.

Turn if you will  
from her path,  
turn if you must from her feet,  
turn away, silent,  
find rest if you wish:

find quiet  
where the fir-trees

press, as you  
swaying lightly above the earth.

Turn if you will from her path  
for one moment seek  
a lesser beauty  
and a lesser grace,  
but you will find  
no peace in the end  
save in her presence.

Hilda Doolittle

## At Baia

I should have thought  
in a dream you would have brought  
some lovely, perilous thing,  
orchids piled in a great sheath,  
as who would say (in a dream),  
"I send you this,  
who left the blue veins  
of your throat unkissed."

Why was it that your hands  
(that never took mine),  
your hands that I could see  
drift over the orchid-heads  
so carefully,  
your hands, so fragile, sure to lift  
so gently, the fragile flower-stuff--  
ah, ah, how was it

You never sent (in a dream)  
the very form, the very scent,  
not heavy, not sensuous,  
but perilous--perilous--  
of orchids, piled in a great sheath,  
and folded underneath on a bright scroll,  
some word:

"Flower sent to flower;  
for white hands, the lesser white,  
less lovely of flower-leaf,"

or

"Lover to lover, no kiss,  
no touch, but forever and ever this."

Hilda Doolittle

# At Ithaca

Over and back,  
the long waves crawl  
and track the sand with foam;  
night darkens, and the sea  
takes on that desperate tone  
of dark that wives put on  
when all their love is done.

Over and back,  
the tangled thread falls slack,  
over and up and on;  
over and all is sewn;  
now while I bind the end,  
I wish some fiery friend  
would sweep impetuously  
these fingers from the loom.

My weary thoughts  
play traitor to my soul,  
just as the toil is over;  
swift while the woof is whole,  
turn now, my spirit, swift,  
and tear the pattern there,  
the flowers so deftly wrought,  
the borders of sea blue,  
the sea-blue coast of home.

The web was over-fair,  
that web of pictures there,  
enchantments that I thought  
he had, that I had lost;  
weaving his happiness  
within the stitching frame,  
weaving his fire and frame,  
I thought my work was done,  
I prayed that only one  
of those that I had spurned  
might stoop and conquer this  
long waiting with a kiss.

But each time that I see  
my work so beautifully  
inwoven and would keep  
the picture and the whole,  
Athene steels my soul.  
Slanting across my brain,  
I see as shafts of rain  
his chariot and his shafts,  
I see the arrows fall,  
I see the lord who moves  
like Hector lord of love,  
I see him matched with fair  
bright rivals, and I see  
those lesser rivals flee.

Hilda Doolittle

# Cassandra

*O Hymen king.*

Hymen, O Hymen king,  
what bitter thing is this?  
what shaft, tearing my heart?  
what scar, what light, what fire  
searing my eye-balls and my eyes with flame?  
nameless, O spoken name,  
king, lord, speak blameless Hymen.

Why do you blind my eyes?  
why do you dart and pulse  
till all the dark is home,  
then find my soul  
and ruthless draw it back?  
scaling the scaleless,  
opening the dark?  
speak, nameless, power and might;  
when will you leave me quite?  
when will you break my wings  
or leave them utterly free  
to scale heaven endlessly?

A bitter, broken thing,  
my heart, O Hymen lord,  
yet neither drought nor sword  
baffles men quite,  
why must they feign to fear  
my virgin glance?  
feigned utterly or real  
why do they shrink?  
my trance frightens them,  
breaks the dance,  
empties the market-place;  
if I but pass they fall  
back, frantically;  
must always people mock?  
unless they shrink and reel  
as in the temple

at your uttered will.

O Hymen king,  
lord, greatest, power, might,  
look for my face is dark,  
burnt with your light,  
your fire, O Hymen lord;  
is there none left  
can equal me  
in ecstasy, desire?  
is there none left  
can bear with me  
the kiss of your white fire?  
is there not one,  
Phrygian or frenzied Greek,  
poet, song-swept, or bard,  
one meet to take from me  
this bitter power of song,  
one fit to speak, Hymen,  
your praises, lord?

May I not wed  
as you have wed?  
may it not break, beauty,  
from out my hands, my head, my feet?  
may Love not lie beside me  
till his heat  
burn me to ash?  
may he not comfort me, then,  
spent of all that fire and heat,  
still, ashen-white and cool  
as the wet laurels,  
white, before your feet  
step on the mountain-slope,  
before your fiery hand  
lift up the mantle  
covering flower and land,  
as a man lifts,  
O Hymen, from his bride,  
(cowering with woman eyes,) the veil?  
O Hymen lord, be kind.





# Cities

Can we believe -- by an effort  
comfort our hearts:  
it is not waste all this,  
not placed here in disgust,  
street after street,  
each patterned alike,  
no grace to lighten  
a single house of the hundred  
crowded into one garden-space.

Crowded -- can we believe,  
not in utter disgust,  
in ironical play --  
but the maker of cities grew faint  
with the beauty of temple  
and space before temple,  
arch upon perfect arch,  
of pillars and corridors that led out  
to strange court-yards and porches  
where sun-light stamped  
hyacinth-shadows  
black on the pavement.

That the maker of cities grew faint  
with the splendour of palaces,  
paused while the incense-flowers  
from the incense-trees  
dropped on the marble-walk,  
thought anew, fashioned this --  
street after street alike.

For alas,  
he had crowded the city so full  
that men could not grasp beauty,  
beauty was over them,  
through them, about them,  
no crevice unpacked with the honey,  
rare, measureless.

So he built a new city,  
ah can we believe, not ironically  
but for new splendour  
constructed new people  
to lift through slow growth  
to a beauty unrivalled yet --  
and created new cells,  
hideous first, hideous now --  
spread larve across them,  
not honey but seething life.

And in these dark cells,  
packed street after street,  
souls live, hideous yet --  
O disfigured, defaced,  
with no trace of the beauty  
men once held so light.

Can we think a few old cells  
were left -- we are left --  
grains of honey,  
old dust of stray pollen  
dull on our torn wings,  
we are left to recall the old streets?

Is our task the less sweet  
that the larve still sleep in their cells?  
Or crawl out to attack our frail strength:  
You are useless. We live.  
We await great events.  
We are spread through this earth.  
We protect our strong race.  
You are useless.  
Your cell takes the place  
of our young future strength.

Though they sleep or wake to torment  
and wish to displace our old cells --  
thin rare gold --  
that their larve grow fat --  
is our task the less sweet?

Though we wander about,  
find no honey of flowers in this waste,  
is our task the less sweet --  
who recall the old splendour,  
await the new beauty of cities?

*The city is peopled  
with spirits, not ghosts, O my love:*

Though they crowded between  
and usurped the kiss of my mouth  
their breath was your gift, *</i>*  
their beauty, your life.

Hilda Doolittle

# Eurydice

I

So you have swept me back,  
I who could have walked with the live souls  
above the earth,  
I who could have slept among the live flowers  
at last;

so for your arrogance  
and your ruthlessness  
I am swept back  
where dead lichens drip  
dead cinders upon moss of ash;

so for your arrogance  
I am broken at last,  
I who had lived unconscious,  
who was almost forgot;

if you had let me wait  
I had grown from listlessness  
into peace,  
if you had let me rest with the dead,  
I had forgot you  
and the past.

II

Here only flame upon flame  
and black among the red sparks,  
streaks of black and light  
grown colourless;

why did you turn back,  
that hell should be reinhabited  
of myself thus  
swept into nothingness?

why did you glance back?

why did you hesitate for that moment?  
why did you bend your face  
caught with the flame of the upper earth,  
above my face?

what was it that crossed my face  
with the light from yours  
and your glance?  
what was it you saw in my face?  
the light of your own face,  
the fire of your own presence?

What had my face to offer  
but reflex of the earth,  
hyacinth colour  
caught from the raw fissure in the rock  
where the light struck,  
and the colour of azure crocuses  
and the bright surface of gold crocuses  
and of the wind-flower,  
swift in its veins as lightning  
and as white.

### III

Saffron from the fringe of the earth,  
wild saffron that has bent  
over the sharp edge of earth,  
all the flowers that cut through the earth,  
all, all the flowers are lost;

everything is lost,  
everything is crossed with black,  
black upon black  
and worse than black,  
this colourless light.

### IV

Fringe upon fringe  
of blue crocuses,  
crocuses, walled against blue of themselves,

blue of that upper earth,  
blue of the depth upon depth of flowers,  
lost;

flowers,  
if I could have taken once my breath of them,  
enough of them,  
more than earth,  
even than of the upper earth,  
had passed with me  
beneath the earth;

if I could have caught up from the earth,  
the whole of the flowers of the earth,  
if once I could have breathed into myself  
the very golden crocuses  
and the red,  
and the very golden hearts of the first saffron,  
the whole of the golden mass,  
the whole of the great fragrance,  
I could have dared the loss.

V

So for your arrogance  
and your ruthlessness  
I have lost the earth  
and the flowers of the earth,  
and the live souls above the earth,  
and you who passed across the light  
and reached  
ruthless;

you who have your own light,  
who are to yourself a presence,  
who need no presence;

yet for all your arrogance  
and your glance,  
I tell you this:

such loss is no loss,

such terror, such coils and strands and pitfalls  
of blackness,  
such terror  
is no loss;

hell is no worse than your earth  
above the earth,  
hell is no worse,  
no, nor your flowers  
nor your veins of light  
nor your presence,  
a loss;

my hell is no worse than yours  
though you pass among the flowers and speak  
with the spirits above earth.

## VI

Against the black  
I have more fervour  
than you in all the splendour of that place,  
against the blackness  
and the stark grey  
I have more light;

and the flowers,  
if I should tell you,  
you would turn from your own fit paths  
toward hell,  
turn again and glance back  
and I would sink into a place  
even more terrible than this.

## VII

At least I have the flowers of myself,  
and my thoughts, no god  
can take that;  
I have the fervour of myself for a presence  
and my own spirit for light;

and my spirit with its loss  
knows this;  
though small against the black,  
small against the formless rocks,  
hell must break before I am lost;

before I am lost,  
hell must open like a red rose  
for the dead to pass.

Hilda Doolittle



# Evadne

I first tasted under Apollo's lips,  
love and love sweetness,  
I, Evadne;  
my hair is made of crisp violets  
or hyacinth which the wind combs back  
across some rock shelf;  
I, Evadne,  
was made of the god of light.

His hair was crisp to my mouth,  
as the flower of the crocus,  
across my cheek,  
cool as the silver-cress  
on Eros bank;  
between my chin and throat,  
his mouth slipped over and over.

Still between my arm and shoulder,  
I feel the brush of his hair,  
and my hands keep the gold they took,  
as they wandered over and over,  
that great arm-full of yellow flowers.

Hilda Doolittle

# Evening

The light passes  
from ridge to ridge,  
from flower to flower—  
the hepaticas, wide-spread  
under the light  
grow faint—  
the petals reach inward,  
the blue tips bend  
toward the bluer heart  
and the flowers are lost.

The cornel-buds are still white,  
but shadows dart  
from the cornel-roots—  
black creeps from root to root,  
each leaf  
cuts another leaf on the grass,  
shadow seeks shadow,  
then both leaf  
and leaf-shadow are lost.

Hilda Doolittle

## From Citron-Bower

From citron-bower be her bed,  
cut from branch of tree a-flower,  
fashioned for her maidenhead.

From Lydian apples, sweet of hue,  
cut the width of board and lathe,  
carve the feet from myrtle-wood.

Let the palings of her bed  
be quince and box-wood overlaid  
with the scented bark of yew.

That all the wood in blossoming,  
may calm her heart and cool her blood,  
for losing of her maidenhood.

Hilda Doolittle

# Garden

I

You are clear  
O rose, cut in rock,  
hard as the descent of hail.

I could scrape the colour  
from the petals  
like spilt dye from a rock.

If I could break you  
I could break a tree.

If I could stir  
I could break a tree—  
I could break you.

II

O wind, rend open the heat,  
cut apart the heat,  
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop  
through this thick air—  
fruit cannot fall into heat  
that presses up and blunts  
the points of pears  
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat—  
plough through it,  
turning it on either side  
of your path.

Hilda Doolittle

# Heat

O wind, rend open the heat,  
cut apart the heat,  
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop  
through this thick air--  
fruit cannot fall into heat  
that presses up and blunts  
the points of pears  
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat--  
plough through it,  
turning it on either side  
of your path.

Hilda Doolittle

# Helen

All Greece hates  
the still eyes in the white face,  
the lustre as of olives  
where she stands,  
and the white hands.

All Greece reviles  
the wan face when she smiles,  
hating it deeper still  
when it grows wan and white,  
remembering past enchantments  
and past ills.

Greece sees, unmoved,  
God's daughter, born of love,  
the beauty of cool feet  
and slenderest knees,  
could love indeed the maid,  
only if she were laid,  
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

Hilda Doolittle

## Helen In Egypt, Eidolon, Book Iii: 4□

&lt;i&gt;Helen herself seems almost ready for this sacrifice-at least, for the immolation of herself before this greatest love of Achilles, his dedication to 'his own ship' and the figurehead, 'an idol or eidolon . . . a mermaid, Thetis upon the prow.'&lt;/i&gt;

Did her eyes slant in the old way?  
was she Greek or Egyptian?  
had some Phoenician sailor wrought her?

was she oak-wood or cedar?  
had she been cut from an awkward block  
of ship-wood at the ship-builders,

and afterwards riveted there,  
or had the prow itself been shaped  
to her mermaid body,

curved to her mermaid hair?  
was there a dash of paint  
in the beginning, in the garment-fold,

did the blue afterwards wear away?  
did they re-touch her arms, her shoulders?  
did anyone touch her ever?

Had she other zealot and lover,  
or did he alone worship her?  
did she wear a girdle of sea-weed

or a painted crown? how often  
did her high breasts meet the spray,  
how often dive down?

Hilda Doolittle

# Leda

Where the slow river  
meets the tide,  
a red swan lifts red wings  
and darker beak,  
and underneath the purple down  
of his soft breast  
uncurls his coral feet.

Through the deep purple  
of the dying heat  
of sun and mist,  
the level ray of sun-beam  
has caressed  
the lily with dark breast,  
and flecked with richer gold  
its golden crest.

Where the slow lifting  
of the tide,  
floats into the river  
and slowly drifts  
among the reeds,  
and lifts the yellow flags,  
he floats  
where tide and river meet.

Ah kingly kiss --  
no more regret  
nor old deep memories  
to mar the bliss;  
where the low sedge is thick,  
the gold day-lily  
outspreads and rests  
beneath soft fluttering  
of red swan wings  
and the warm quivering  
of the red swan's breast.





# Lethe

NOR skin nor hide nor fleece  
Shall cover you,  
Nor curtain of crimson nor fine  
Shelter of cedar-wood be over you,  
Nor the fir-tree  
Nor the pine.

Nor sight of whin nor gorse  
Nor river-yew,  
Nor fragrance of flowering bush,  
Nor wailing of reed-bird to waken you,  
Nor of linnet,  
Nor of thrush.

Nor word nor touch nor sight  
Of lover, you  
Shall long through the night but for this:  
The roll of the full tide to cover you  
Without question,  
Without kiss.

Hilda Doolittle

# Moonrise

Will you glimmer on the sea?□  
Will you fling your spear-head□  
On the shore?□  
What note shall we pitch?□

We have a song,□  
On the bank we share our arrows—□  
The loosed string tells our note:□

O flight,□  
Bring her swiftly to our song.□  
She is great,□  
We measure her by the pine-trees.

Hilda Doolittle

# Never More Will The Wind

Never more will the wind  
cherish you again,  
never more will the rain.

Never more  
shall we find you bright  
in the snow and wind.

The snow is melted,  
the snow is gone,  
and you are flown:

Like a bird out of our hand,  
like a light out of our heart,  
you are gone.

Hilda Doolittle

# Orchard

I saw the first pear  
as it fell--  
the honey-seeking, golden-banded,  
the yellow swarm  
was not more fleet than I,  
(spare us from loveliness)  
and I fell prostrate  
crying:  
you have flayed us  
with your blossoms,  
spare us the beauty  
of fruit-trees.

The honey-seeking  
paused not,  
the air thundered their song,  
and I alone was prostrate.

O rough hewn  
god of the orchard,  
I bring you an offering--  
do you, alone unbeautiful,  
son of the god,  
spare us from loveliness:

these fallen hazel-nuts,  
stripped late of their green sheaths,  
grapes, red-purple,  
their berries  
dripping with wine,  
pomegranates already broken,  
and shrunken figs  
and quinces untouched,  
I bring you as offering.

Hilda Doolittle

# Oread

Whirl up, sea—  
Whirl your pointed pines.  
Splash your great pines  
On our rocks.  
Hurl your green over us—  
Cover us with your pools of fir.

Hilda Doolittle

# Pear Tree

Silver dust  
lifted from the earth,  
higher than my arms reach,  
you have mounted.  
O silver,  
higher than my arms reach  
you front us with great mass;

no flower ever opened  
so staunch a white leaf,  
no flower ever parted silver  
from such rare silver;

O white pear,  
your flower-tufts,  
thick on the branch,  
bring summer and ripe fruits  
in their purple hearts.

Hilda Doolittle

# Prayer

White, O white face—  
from disenchanted days  
wither alike dark rose  
and fiery bays:  
no gift within our hands,  
nor strength to praise,  
only defeat and silence;  
though we lift hands, disenchanted,  
of small strength, nor raise  
branch of the laurel  
or the light of torch,  
but fold the garment  
on the riven locks,  
yet hear, all-merciful, and touch  
the fore-head, dim, unlit of pride and thought,  
Mistress—be near!  
Give back the glamour to our will,  
the thought; give back the tool,  
the chisel; once we wrought  
things not unworthy,  
sandal and steel-clasp;  
silver and steel, the coat  
with white leaf-pattern  
at the arm and throat:  
silver and metal, hammered for the ridge  
of shield and helmet-rim;  
white silver with the darker hammered in,  
belt, staff and magic spear-shaft  
with the gilt spark at the point and hilt.

Hilda Doolittle



# Sea Iris

## I

Weed, moss-weed,  
root tangled in sand,  
sea-iris, brittle flower,  
one petal like a shell  
is broken,  
and you print a shadow  
like a thin twig.

Fortunate one,  
scented and stinging,  
rigid myrrh-bud,  
camphor-flower,  
sweet and salt—you are wind  
in our nostrils.

## II

Do the murex-fishers  
drench you as they pass?  
Do your roots drag up colour  
from the sand?  
Have they slipped gold under you—  
rivets of gold?

Band of iris-flowers  
above the waves,  
you are painted blue,  
painted like a fresh prow  
stained among the salt weeds.

Hilda Doolittle

# Sea Poppies

Amber husk  
fluted with gold,  
fruit on the sand  
marked with a rich grain,

treasure  
spilled near the shrub-pines  
to bleach on the boulders:

your stalk has caught root  
among wet pebbles  
and drift flung by the sea  
and grated shells  
and split conch-shells.

Beautiful, wide-spread,  
fire upon leaf,  
what meadow yields  
so fragrant a leaf  
as your bright leaf?

Hilda Doolittle

# Sea Rose

Rose, harsh rose,  
marred and with stint of petals,  
meagre flower, thin,  
sparse of leaf,

more precious  
than a wet rose  
single on a stem --  
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,  
you are flung on the sand,  
you are lifted  
in the crisp sand  
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose  
drip such acrid fragrance  
hardened in a leaf?

Hilda Doolittle

# Sheltered Garden

I have had enough.  
I gasp for breath.

Every way ends, every road,  
every foot-path leads at last  
to the hill-crest --  
then you retrace your steps,  
or find the same slope on the other side,  
precipitate.

I have had enough --  
border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies,  
herbs, sweet-cress.

O for some sharp swish of a branch --  
there is no scent of resin  
in this place,  
no taste of bark, of coarse weeds,  
aromatic, astringent --  
only border on border of scented pinks.

Have you seen fruit under cover  
that wanted light --  
pears wadded in cloth,  
protected from the frost,  
melons, almost ripe,  
smothered in straw?

Why not let the pears cling  
to the empty branch?  
All your coaxing will only make  
a bitter fruit --  
let them cling, ripen of themselves,  
test their own worth,  
nipped, shrivelled by the frost,  
to fall at last but fair  
with a russet coat.

Or the melon --

let it bleach yellow  
in the winter light,  
even tart to the taste --  
it is better to taste of frost --  
the exquisite frost --  
than of wadding and of dead grass.

For this beauty,  
beauty without strength,  
chokes out life.  
I want wind to break,  
scatter these pink-stalks,  
snap off their spiced heads,  
fling them about with dead leaves --  
spread the paths with twigs,  
limbs broken off,  
trail great pine branches,  
hurled from some far wood  
right across the melon-patch,  
break pear and quince --  
leave half-trees, torn, twisted  
but showing the fight was valiant.

O to blot out this garden  
to forget, to find a new beauty  
in some terrible  
wind-tortured place.

Hilda Doolittle

# Sitalkas

Thou art come at length  
More beautiful  
Than any cool god  
In a chamber under  
Lycia's far coast,  
Than any high god  
Who touches us not  
Here in the seeded grass.  
Aye, than Argestes  
Scattering the broken leaves.

Hilda Doolittle

# Song

YOU are as gold  
as the half-ripe grain  
that merges to gold again,  
as white as the white rain  
that beats through  
the half-opened flowers  
of the great flower tufts  
thick on the black limbs  
of an Illyrian apple bough.

Can honey distill such fragrance  
as your bright hair-  
for your face is as fair as rain,  
yet as rain that lies clear  
on white honey-comb,  
lends radiance to the white wax,  
so your hair on your brow  
casts light for a shadow.

Hilda Doolittle

# Stars Wheel In Purple

Stars wheel in purple, yours is not so rare  
as Hesperus, nor yet so great a star  
as bright Aldeboran or Sirius,  
nor yet the stained and brilliant one of War;

stars turn in purple, glorious to the sight;  
yours is not gracious as the Pleiads are  
nor as Orion's sapphires, luminous;

yet disenchanted, cold, imperious face,  
when all the others blighted, reel and fall,  
your star, steel-set, keeps lone and frigid tryst  
to freighted ships, baffled in wind and blast.

Hilda Doolittle



# The Helmsman

O be swift—  
we have always known you wanted us.

We fled inland with our flocks.  
we pastured them in hollows,  
cut off from the wind  
and the salt track of the marsh.

We worshipped inland—  
we stepped past wood-flowers,  
we forgot your tang,  
we brushed wood-grass.

We wandered from pine-hills  
through oak and scrub-oak tangles,  
we broke hyssop and bramble,  
we caught flower and new bramble-fruit  
in our hair: we laughed  
as each branch whipped back,  
we tore our feet in half-buried rocks  
and knotted roots and acorn-cups.

We forgot—we worshipped,  
we parted green from green,  
we sought further thickets,  
we dipped our ankles  
through leaf-mould and earth,  
and wood and wood-bank enchanted us—

and the feel of the clefts in the bark,  
and the slope between tree and tree—  
and a slender path strung field to field  
and wood to wood  
and hill to hill  
and the forest after it.

We forgot—for a moment  
tree-resin, tree-bark,  
sweat of a torn branch

were sweet to taste.

We were enchanted with the fields,  
the tufts of coarse grass—  
in the shorter grass—  
we loved all this.

But now, our boat climbs—hesitates—drops—  
climbs—hesitates—crawls back—  
climbs—hesitates—  
O, be swift—  
we have always known you wanted us.

Hilda Doolittle

# The Mysteries Remain

The mysteries remain,  
I keep the same  
cycle of seed-time  
and of sun and rain;  
Demeter in the grass,  
I multiply,  
renew and bless  
Bacchus in the vine;  
I hold the law,  
I keep the mysteries true,  
the first of these  
to name the living, dead;  
I am the wine and bread.  
I keep the law,  
I hold the mysteries true,  
I am the vine,  
the branches, you  
and you.

Hilda Doolittle

# The Pool

Are you alive?  
I touch you.  
You quiver like a sea-fish.  
I cover you with my net.  
What are you - banded one?

Hilda Doolittle

# Wash Of Cold River

Wash of cold river  
in a glacial land,  
Ionian water,  
chill, snow-ribbed sand,  
drift of rare flowers,  
clear, with delicate shell-  
like leaf enclosing  
frozen lily-leaf,  
camellia texture,  
colder than a rose;

wind-flower  
that keeps the breath  
of the north-wind --  
these and none other;

intimate thoughts and kind  
reach out to share  
the treasure of my mind,  
intimate hands and dear  
drawn garden-ward and sea-ward  
all the sheer rapture  
that I would take  
to mould a clear  
and frigid statue;

rare, of pure texture,  
beautiful space and line,  
marble to grace  
your inaccessible shrine.

Hilda Doolittle