

This paper examines the connection between childhood and the classical past that informs H.D.'s relationship to antiquity. The connection is typical of early twentieth century women writers, for whom childhood represents a time of formative encounters with classical mythology. In their works, these writers often take an approach to classical culture that is deliberately childlike in its selectivity, its emotional intensity, and its indifference to chronology; and they often write about antiquity for children..

H.D. first encountered antiquity in childhood, through Hawthorne's retellings of myth. In adulthood, her sense of the significance of childhood, and of mythology, was reinforced through involvement with psychoanalysis. Returning often to the interrelations of childhood and adulthood in her writing, H.D. associates both with antiquity. The childhood she recalls in The Gift is itself a version of antiquity, with its own incarnation of Helen (her mother). But Greece is also the land discovered in adulthood, and knowledge of antiquity is a tool with which to interpret and universalize personal history: in Tribute to Freud, for example, she reinterprets her brother's theft of their father's magnifying glass as Prometheus' theft of fire from Zeus.

In the classical fictions in which H.D. imagines forms of female transmission, such as Hedylus and "Hipparchia," mothers and daughters are alike portrayed as children created by one another. The role of classical myth in fostering this fusion is further illustrated by her novella The Hedgehog. H.D.'s daughter recalls her mother's description of the text as "a little book for children set in Switzerland, no not really for children, but about a child, about me, well sort of." The text itself displays uncertainty about both its audience and its subject. The narrative voice regularly suggests an adult speaking to a child, but sometimes uses language that implies an adult reader. We see events primarily from the little girl Madge's point of view, but at times she is a medium for her mother. Madge herself is confused about her relationship to her parents: she mixes up her dead father with "our Father which art in Heaven," and her mother has her daughter call her by her first name and dresses in clothes like her daughter's.

This confusion of childhood and adulthood is enacted through mythology. Learning the Greek myths from her mother, Madge becomes familiar, not only with Zeus, Pan, Artemis, Echo and Narcissus, but with an understanding of these stories as symbolic. In her tendency to see phenomena in the natural and the human world in light of Greek myth, Madge seems both childlike and curiously sophisticated. And in this regard she is made to seem like the Greeks themselves, who also hear Zeus in the thunder and see him in an eagle. Where her mother can tell and explain the stories, the child can actually live them, and she encounters both Pan and Artemis in the Swiss countryside. H.D. here suggests ambivalence about the relative value of the adult's power to control narrative and the child's ability to enact and believe it. Her appeal to classical myth, with its implication that this was a choice the Greeks themselves did not have to make, allows that ambivalence to stay unresolved.