

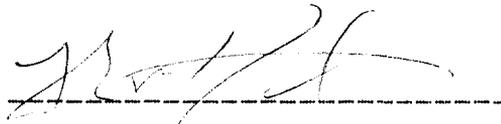
Persephone: The Renewal of William Carlos Williams

An Honors Thesis

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'T. Koontz', is written over a horizontal dashed line.

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In this paper I will explain why the myth of the rape of Persephone was chosen by William Carlos Williams as his personal myth and how its significance to him is exemplified in his poetry and his philosophy of life. I will explain archetype and its significance to poetry and explain "anima," a concept which Williams did not refer to by its psychoanalytical association, but rather exemplified in his living and writing.

In 1917, William Carlos Williams published Kora In Hell: Improvisations. In reference to this book, one of his favorites, he said that it "reveals myself to me and perhaps that is why I have kept it to myself" (I Wanted to Write...26). The title of the collection itself is a direct reference to the deity Persephone in her role as a maiden (or "kora" in older Greek). It quickly becomes evident, however, that represented in Kora is not the plight of the goddess, but that of Williams in his attempts to define himself in society and, in turn, reinforce his poetic philosophy. Through prosaic details and disjointed paragraphs, the collection serves to detail a period in his life when he indeed felt he was the very spirit of the brooding Persephone:

I thought of myself as Springtime and I felt
I was on my way to Hell (but I didn't get
very far). This is what the Improvisations
were trying to say" (I Wanted to Write 29).

As the title indicates, Kora is filled with both direct address and allusion to Persephone's abduction by Hades to the underworld. But before the significance of this myth can be shown, an explication of the myth is necessary.

In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Persephone, daughter of Demeter, is promised to Hades, god of the underworld, by Zeus. While the maiden is out in a field of flowers, she is abducted by Hades and taken down to his kingdom. When Demeter learns of

her daughter's abduction and of its sanctification by Zeus, she withholds her duty of sustaining the earth's plant life, thus threatening mortal existence and subsequent offerings to Zeus. To appease the goddess and return fruitfulness to the earth, Zeus has Persephone returned to the upperworld, but not before Hades forces her to eat a pomegranate, insuring that for one third of the year she must remain as his queen, while the rest of the year she can be with her mother (Morford 228).

Traditionally, this myth has been viewed as one explaining the cycles of the seasons and the death and rebirth of vegetable life. Demeter is seen as the goddess of the ripe grain and Persephone is associated with newly-sprouting plant life, the first signs of her yearly return from the depths of Hades, literally, the return of spring (Morford 241).

The prose poetry of Kora In Hell is a mixture of romanticism, philosophy, and things both beautiful and frightening. The book is simply the result of personal reflections Williams recorded every night for a year after returning home from his hospital calls. Because some entries seemed too obscure, he annotated them in italics directly beneath. Others are explained in the Prologue where they are identified by Roman numerals.

Williams wrote of his familiarity with the Persephone myth and his knowledge of its "significance to the pagan world" (Imaginations 29). And in a direct allusion to the myth, whether intended or not, he explains in the Prologue to the

City Lights Edition (1957) of Kora that the return of spring made March his favorite month:

I existed through the tough winter months
of my profession only for that" (Imag 29).

It is evident that Williams was acquainted with the Persephone myth. Whether he knew of the myth's applicability to the canons of New Poetry which he was espousing at this time is not evident as far as this writer can tell. But the complete association Williams was able to make between this myth and his life is astounding

This myth's connection to Williams is complete not only because of its attribute of rebirth, akin to the psychic rebirth Williams explains that he often searched for, but also because of the fact that in the myth it is a female who is abducted, namely Persephone. Williams mentions other hell-bound descents in his works, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice (Imag 32) for example, but other theories can explain that Williams' choice of Persephone for his descent association was the most accurate myth in connection with his own philosophies. For Persephone is significant not only in that she is the deity of rebirth, but that she is female, bringing with her the significance of that sex.

For a clearer understanding of the connotations of the feminine as far as the literature and poetic philosophy of Williams are concerned, it is necessary to look to the work of Carl Jung and the archetypal approach to psyche.

The archetypal approach to psychology developed near the turn of the century from two main sources. The first came from the Cambridge school of comparative anthropology, represented in the book by Sir J.G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (1890), and the second from C.G. Jung, s Psychology of the Unconscious: A Study of the Transformations and Symbolism of the Libido (1916).

As explained by Hillman, archetypal psychology finds its root in myth. It is the psychology of the cultural imagination in which myths serve as metaphors. The myths were originally created to satisfy the soul's need for self-knowledge (Brief Account 19, 20).

From the theories of archetypal psychology comes the archetypal approach to poetry. This states that since myths are primarily indirect methods for satisfying universal emotional needs, and a symbol is also an indirect way of saying one thing but intending another, it follows that myths are symbolic. If myths are symbolic methods for satisfying universal emotional needs, and if an archetype is created from what myths have in common, then an archetype is a universal symbol. If an archetype is a universal symbol and if a poem contains an archetypal pattern, then this pattern is a universal symbol as well (Friedman 48).

Also from the theories of archetypal psychology comes what is referred to as a literary archetype, which will help explain the significance of the feminine in regard to Williams.

In Jung's definition, "primordial image, or archetype, is a figure - be it a daemon, a human being, or a person - that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure" (Collected Works, vol. 15, 18).

Furthermore, Jung adds that eventually these figures are discovered to be "formulated resultants of countless typical experiences of our ancestors" (Friedman 48). When the use of archetypes occurs in poetry, the poet is then speaking of things eternal, not contemporary or transitory, in which the poet "transmutes personal destiny into the destiny of mankind" (Friedman 49).

"Anima" is the term given by Jung to represent the archetype of the "deposit of all the experiences of man with woman" (CW vol. 13, 58). It is the unconscious femininity which is a part of all of mankind. In Jung's words, it is the "glamorous, possessive, moody and sentimental seductress in man" (CW vol. 9, 422). "She intensifies, exaggerates, falsifies, and mythologizes all emotional relations..." (CW vol. 13, 57). This is why Persephone (female) is most important as a personal myth for Williams. She is the art in him, the imagination in himself and his poetic philosophy. Her femininity fills the role that other descenders (Orpheus) could not. Williams was aware of the creativity and emotional part of his being, what Jung would call his "anima."

Archetypal psychology can explain another part of the

Persephone myth which makes it appropriate for Williams. The fact that it is a descent myth is very significant.

Evans L. Smith in his dissertation The Descent to the Underworld: Towards and Archetypal Poetics of Modernism details the significance of the descent myth to the Modernist tradition of which Williams was a part. He lists four major symbols which have been used as references to the descent myth during the Modernist era. These are the crypt, the inferno, the initiatory temenos, and the granary of the seed forms of the Imaginal (237). Clearly, this last symbol is the symbol most reflective of the adaptation of descent myth which Williams chose.

Generally, all four symbols of the descent, which are part of the mythic phase of Modernism, use striking images and are suggestive of archetypal concern (Smith 240). Yeats termed this kind of poetic imagery Spiritus mundi. The images are the souls of the dead which enliven the poem with their unique, representative energies.

Also, the descent to the underworld, via any of the above symbols, brings about the activation of what Smith calls "the mythogenetic substratum of consciousness" and is followed by the uniting of the soul and the world that one is presented with after the downward journey (244).

Smith cites Hillman for explanations of the prevalency of death and creative illness in the lives and works of Modernist artists, as well as the theme of death in the development of

Modernism. Hillman believes that the archetype of the abduction of Persephone is reflective of the method through which the primary importance of the imaginal psyche is recovered and where the poetic basis of consciousness is secured. Also, Hillman's idea presents an explanation of why, in Modernist literature, the theme of crossing over into an understanding of soul often coincides with death in a story or poem, for example, the death of a character in a Modernist story (Smith 244). According to Hillman's theory, the death and apathy which permeate the works of the Modernist period can be understood as statements about the societal ills these artists felt were destroying their culture and threatening their art (Smith 245). He also explains that entrance to the storehouse of the Imaginal, Williams' choice of descent symbol, is possible only with a death of a previously established system. The death is symbolized by a destruction and disjunction, the type of breakdown of an establishment that Persephone's abduction from her mother's world represents (Myth of Analysis 210).

Looking to Williams as a source, the descent theme is found so prevalent in his writing that, as Feinberg suggests, one may consider even viewing it as the one theme from which all his work flows (74). The theme is represented not only in his explicit mentionings of the characters who play parts in this myth, Persephone, Demeter, and Hades, but in his extensive use of the themes of death and rebirth, references to the mother/daughter relationship, and the descriptions of the

pursuit of a young maiden by an older man. In fact, Williams' collection, Kora In Hell, has the title and contents to prove the ultra importance of this myth held for him.

In his autobiography Williams discusses the events in his life that were occurring as he began writing Kora In Hell:

The third book was Kora In Hell. Damn it, the freshness, the newness of springtime which I had sensed among the others [recently written books], a reawakening of letters, all that delight which in making a world to match the supremacies of the past could mean was being blotted out by the war [WWI]. The stupidity, the calculated viciousness of a money-grubbing society such as I knew and violently wrote against; everything I wanted to see live and thrive was being deliberately murdered in the name of church and state. It was Persephone gone into Hades, into hell. Kora was the springtime of the year; my year, my self was being slaughtered....For relief, to keep myself from planning and thinking at all, I began to write in earnest (158).

Here Williams states outright his identification with Persephone while unknowingly serving as proof of the theory of

the archetypal approach to both literature and psychology.

Smith explains:

The point here is that the governing principles of the archetypal imagination emerge during a period of personal and historical collapse, metaphorically akin to the descent to the underworld, and understood with reference to that myth by the writers themselves (201).

Williams recognized and exalted the feminine (what Jung called "anima") within himself. He was Persephone (imagination) being abducted by Hades (the rationalistic, war-ridden society). In Kora, he tries to reconcile his art with the society he was forced to deal with.

Kora In Hell consists of prosaic sections followed by their italicized explanations. And throughout this book in both the prose and straight qualifiers are found allusions to Persephone and the significance she held for Williams.

An example of a direct reference to the myth, not so much exemplary of its theme, appears in improvisation VI no. 2:

...Oh quarrel whether 'twas Pope Clement
raped Persephone or - did the devil wear
a mitre in that year (Imag 41).

The italicized explanation beneath this improvisation contains neither reflections upon Williams' poetic philosophy nor examples of how this fit him as a personal myth. The italicized section merely details an imagist-type observation

of a shapely woman becoming aware of her sexuality.

Next, in an example of the use of theme of death and rebirth, Williams refers to his marriage, mentioning neither poetry nor Persephone directly. It is the commentary Williams includes dealing with improvisation VIII no.1. He explains that the most joyous times of his marriage "have come after the most thorough destruction or harvesting of that which has gone before. Periods of barrenness have intervened..." And continuing he states the things their "imaginings have permitted, by a new growth of passionate attachment...It is in the continual and violent refreshing of the idea that love and good writing have their security" (Imag 22). In this last line, he presents the pervasiveness of the theme in his personal relationships as well as his writing.

Another aspect of the Persephone myth is directly alluded to, but only so far as the myth per se, not necessarily its literary or personal significance. In improvisation XIV no. 1 Williams alludes to the mother/daughter relationship of Demeter and Persephone. In fact, these lines can be seen as possibly coming from the lips of the mother herself:

The brutal Lord of All will rip us from
each other--leave the one to suffer here
alone. No need belief in god or hell to
postulate that much...(Imag 55).

This improvisation also serves to illustrate Williams' sensitivity to society's threatening of the artistic spirit.

The "brutal Lord of All" is the war-ridden society threatening to cause the unnatural separation of the "anima" from the rest of the psyche.

In the italics to the Improvisations, Williams explains, "Out of bitterness itself the clear wine of the imagination will be pressed and the dance prosper thereby" (Imag 55). This refers to the pathology Hillman suggests is necessary for entry into the storehouse of the Imaginal, in other words, the part of the psyche wherein lies imagination.

In Spring and All (1923), a book mixed with prose and poetry, Williams alights again upon the necessity of death before the descent. He explains that he "could not have written a word without the violence of expulsive emotion combined with the in-driving force or a crudely repressive environment..." (Imag 87).

Also in Spring and All there appears a poem which includes a number of direct allusions to the Persephone myth and, in turn, his relating of it to the state of contemporary society. This poem is numbered XXXVI in Imaginations, 147-148:

The crowd at the ball game
is moved uniformly

by a spirit of uselessness
which delights them-

Here he criticizes how society is dumb to that part of human psyche where Persephone can be found--imagination and individuality.

all the exciting detail
of the chase

This refers to Hades' pursuit of Persephone.

and the escape, the error
the flash of genius-

This alludes to Persephone's escape from hell, tainted by Hades' trick to keep her there, her eating of the pomegranate.

So in detail they, the crowd,
are beautiful

That is, the individual, not a faceless society, is beautiful.

The flashy female with her
mother, gets it-

Here, is an allusion to Demeter and Persephone. What they "get" is disregard for their importance, a disregard for the part of psyche they represent.

It is summer, it is the solstice

the crowd is

cheering, the crowd is laughing

in details

permanently, seriously

without thought.

It is Persephone, unrecognized.

In his book The Descent of Winter, 1928, (whose title is another allusion to the descent of Persephone), Williams is trying to explain his theory of contemporary poetry. His attempt is impeded by "the fragmentary stupidity of modern life, its lacunae of sense, loops, perversion of instinct...To be plain is to be subverted since every term must be forged new..." (Imag 232-233). He is referring to an ignoring of parts of our humanness, parts of human psyche, especially that place on our psyche where Persephone lives. This book is an amalgamation of poetry, prose and criticism and seems to serve as Williams' exercise for understanding not only his work, (medicine and writing), but also the world he was so keenly sensitive to.

In fact, his identification with Persephone and his definition of the myth's significance were products of his need of self-definition. It was a way for the poet/doctor to

understand the daily death and renewal he witnessed as part of his profession. And he also had to cope with the violence during the era of a world war, a time when the ideations of an artist seemed irrelevant to the society. Williams saw in Persephone that part of himself which reached for the heart of it all in order to understand the ancient answers to eternal, human questions. He was not disappointed, but renewed.

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