

2003

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David Webster

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Recommended Citation

Webster, David, "Bare Essentials" (2003). *Volume 11 - 2003*. Paper 18.
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-11/18>

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Bare Essentials

DAVID WEBSTER

A faceless hunter eyes the scopes of his plane, slowly raising his finger to the trigger which will send a horrendous bomb hurtling towards the earth. As the explosions devastate another factory or another school, a rippling cloud of death engulfs the surrounding buildings and people. This situation was very real and very tangible to many people during World War I and II, including Hilda Doolittle, an author, actress, and poet that survived two world wars, wars that eventually led to her emotional breakdown. In the first poem of one of her most powerful works, *The Walls Do Not Fall* (from *Trilogy*), H.D. exhibits the regression of people to the core of their existence, and champions this notion by expressing a loss of emotional stability and an eventual rise in clarity and hope. In *The Walls Do Not Fall*, wandering and mental exhaustion lead to the diminishing of a war victim's security and emotional stability. The poem's speakers have no refuge and are offered no respite, because there is no comforting, familiar place left; this is communicated as the sufferers stand "trembling at a known street corner" (HD, 134). There is no home to run to and no comfort, only small patches of never-ending destruction to flock towards. The speakers cannot gather their thoughts as they "walk continually" and "powerless...to another cellar, to another sliced wall" (HD, 134). There is no permanence and even the places the speakers used to know, like the street corner, are gone and their significance dissipated into the "thin air / that thickens to a blind fog" (HD, 147). The nagging burr that has attached to the speakers' thoughts is a realization that the situation is simply "unalterable" (HD, 133). All of these stressful factors compound to emotionally sink the speakers, forcing them to cope in a most peculiar fashion.

A paramount indication of the speakers' emotionally stabilizing layers being shredded shines through in their dehumanization and emotional coldness towards war. The opening line of the poem punches the reader by referring to the bombing raids on England as "An incident here and there" (HD, 133). H.D. uses the word "incident," a nondescript, ambiguous word that completely deflates the meaning of war until it appears insignificant. The word takes on the air of one thrown out in casual conversation, not one used to describe mass murder. This assumed numbness is further

supported in the words "here and there" (HD, 133). Again, H.D.'s writing is devoid of description or even labels; there are not cities being bombed, just vague locations. In this manner, the speakers become able to rationalize and cope with war, as well as convey a true sense of a diminishing outer layering of ignorance.

In stanza 15 H.D. alludes to the speakers' shedding of stratum not by focusing on the emotional factors, but by means of rough, physical description. Furthermore, H.D. speaks graphically of people with "melted away" flesh, "burnt out" hearts, and "muscles shattered" (HD, 135). The horrific termination of the heart, brain, and physical covering is an allusion to the removal of the speakers' shrouds and layers that shield their cores of existence. This is reinforced when H.D. writes of "the brain / about to burst its brittle case/ (what the skull can endure!)" (HD, 134). This passage does not correlate to the physical skull, but rather to thoughts, emotions, and the fragile human psyche; war has racked all of these almost past endurance. H.D. proclaims that what is left after facing such "terror" is the "frame," the most basic structure upon which everything hangs and expands. "The frame held," and after all the horrors of war, the speakers have been reduced to their emotional core.

The hallmark of the speakers' loss and reduction comes in the form of divine understanding and a relinquishing of the trivial things. H.D. writes:

"There, as here, ruin poems
 The tomb, the temple...
 There as here, there are no doors:
 The shrine lies open to the sky...
 Ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof
 Leaves the sealed room
 Open to air,
 So, through our desolation,
 Thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us
 Through gloom." (HD, p.134)

This entire passage is a metaphorical allusion to the speakers' emotions and spiritual situation. Like the temples, the speakers are reduced, broken, and shattered, but still endure. The idea of the shrine, the most sacred and divine part of the temple, being exposed directly parallels the speakers' mind and thoughts as they are stripped of its outer layers and now lay open to new ideas and edification. The speakers are also humbled in similar fashion to the temples, whose grandeur has been reduced to rubble and fragments. Through this humility, the victims acquire an enhanced appreciation, as expressed when they say that the sight of "utensils" in the rubble is like gazing at "rare objects in a museum" (HD, 134). This appreciation comes only after the speakers are forced to "fight for life, /...fight...for breath" (HD, 142). When the outer protection is finally gone, both in the victims and the temples, they lie "open to the sky," but amenable to spirituality and humble appreciation (HD, 134). This

argument is further stilted through the "desolation" that causes the speakers to become more receptive to the "Spirit" and "the Presence" (HD, 134). The speakers' complete regression to the essentials brings them to the final stage: searching for hope.

Similar to Jesus in the Bible, the speakers are seemingly lost as they "fight," and become angry in their search for answers and hope (HD, 142). The speakers' anger is directed at history, as they probe, "...what good are your scribblings?" and further condemn it by claiming "Pompeii has nothing to teach us" because there is still "no rule / of procedure" (HD, 142, 134, 147). There is no precursor to the speakers' struggle and thus, history cannot dictate or offer advice. Therefore, the speakers are forced to formulate history and hope themselves. With each step, the victims feel much like "voyagers, discoverers / of the not known" as they trek forth with "no map" (HD, 147). In this we see that the speakers are cognizant of their situation and through this the beginning of hope arises in the proclamation, "O Sword, / you are the younger brother of the latter-born, / your Triumph, however exultant, must one day be over" (HD, 142). The latter-born refers to writing and scripture, which stand as a more permanent force than the "Sword," a metaphor for war (HD, 142). The speakers know that the war will die out no matter how powerful it or the machinations that support it may seem, because "in the beginning / was the word" and the word has proven not to be ephemeral. Words such as "papyrus," the paper of antiquity, further cement the notion that words and ideas are enduring. More hope crops up when the speakers ponder, "What saved us? What for?" concluding that perhaps they were spared to pass "the flame" and spread the truth of this dismay. Thus, H.D. provides the reader with a clear example of manifested hope after a removal of all the speakers' protective coatings (HD, 135).

The first canto in *The Walls Do Not Fall* tracks the regression of war-struck individuals as they spiral downward. The emotional stability is removed, the security blankets of previous days literally go up in flames, and the vulnerable core of existence is brought into view. In this fragile state, H.D.'s speakers acquire an appreciation of the things they were blind to before, and they also experience a time of self-reliant hope. The struggle and war may continue to devastate the subjects of H.D.'s poem. However, the flame of hope will prove to shine through and H.D. makes certain that for the speakers, "...the walls do not fall" (HD, 146).