To What Extent does H.D. follow Imagist poetic principles in *Sea Poppies*?

SEL2207: Modernisms
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Word Count: 1,310

I confirm that this piece of work contains no plagiarised material and that I have read and understood the section on Plagiarism in the School Style Guide.
In 1912 Ezra Pound pronounced H.D. ‘the first Imagist’, yet ‘H.D. was often embarrassed by Pound’s use of the term to fight his own battles with the poetry establishments’.¹ This raises questions as to the extent that H.D.’s poetry follows Imagist poetic principles, whether or not she attempted to follow them. These principles are expressed by Pound: treat the image directly, ‘[u]se no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something’, and ‘behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of your art which has exact parallels in music’ as rhythm and metre do in poetry.² In *Sea Poppies*, H.D. draws on Imagism yet does not allow it to constrain her, she pushes its boundaries to contrast Imagist poetry with the poetry that has come before it, therefore following Imagist principles only to a certain extent.

H.D. uses the principles of Imagism to construct various parts of *Sea Poppies*. The first two stanzas are constructed using a musical phrase like structure, there is no regular metre or rhyme or rhythm but only the occasional repetition of phrases: ‘fluted with gold/fruit on the sand’.³ These lines allow a repeated rhythm, a musical phrase, yet preceding these two lines is a line one iambic foot shorter and proceeding it is a line one iambic foot longer ending the stanza. This build-up of metre length echoes the rise in volume of a musical crescendo. Pound urges the Imagist poet to ‘[l]et the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause’, to be more free with metre and to use it to pull the reader in the direction they want to take them.⁴ H.D. demonstrates this technique in *Sea Poppies* not only in the crescendo of her opening stanza but in the first line of the next; the second stanza begins only with the word ‘treasure’, which, after the rise of the previous stanza, stops the reader in their tracks, just like a stop in a piece of music, before continuing into the much longer ensuing lines.⁵ *Sea Poppies* also incorporates a use of sensuality, using colour and texture in phrases such as ‘[a]mber husk’ and ‘marked with a rich grain’ to present the image to the reader.⁶ However, the use of adjetival phrases such as these are often sparse and obscure, revealing the image to us slowly, not using any other word which Pound would have deemed to be unnecessary. Pound, in his prescription of Imagism,

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⁴ Pound
⁵ Doolittle, I. 5
⁶ Doolittle, ll. 1-4
condemned the use of figurative language and ‘mix[ing] an abstraction with the concrete’; H.D.’s use of language, in invoking the purely sensual, keeps Sea Poppies grounded in reality, away from this figurative language and therefore grounded in Imagism.

However, this grounds Sea Poppies in Imagism only to a certain extent. The poem also presents to us features that are a direct contrast to those attributed to Imagism. There actually is an occasional use of figurative language in Sea Poppies, for example. In using verbs such as ‘caught’ to animate nature, personify it as a force that is moving, chasing and catching, H.D. uses figurative language to breathe life into her imagism. Until this point the image is still, yet after it things come to life; drifts are ‘flung by the sea’ and ‘fire’, presenting an image of a moving, flickering flame, is ‘upon leaf’. The sea is also personified here and the use of fire to colour the leaf of the flower at the end of the poem is metaphorical, ‘an abstraction’, something which goes against Pound’s Imagist principles. Not only is the figurative language a diversion away from Imagism but the movement it creates is also. Hay notes that, while Imagist theory suggested a ‘static quality’ to the artform, in Sea Poppies ‘the fecund imagery in the opening stanza certainly seems static, but movement is suggested at the conclusion of the short poem as the reader is presented with a flower’, and this does suggest to us movement, yet there is still more evidence for this movement throughout the poem in the verbs used: ‘spilled’, ‘caught’, ‘flung’, ‘grated’, and ‘split’ are all also strongly suggestive of movement. This shows Sea Poppies presenting its readers with a poem that appears at first entirely Imagist before it gradually injects movement into the form through figurative language and movement, refuting Imagist principles.

Another way Sea Poppies defies Imagist principles is in the more regular poetic structure it adopts as the poem reaches its third stanza. After the musicality of the first two stanzas, the third stanza adopts a metre close to perfect iambic dimeter. This corresponds with the more frequent figurative language and verbs suggesting movement: ‘your stalk has caught root/among wet pebbles/and drift flung by the sea/and grated shells’. Sea Poppies seems to strive towards a regular poetic form in connection more with the poetry of the past than that of Imagism. As the poem progresses in more complex language and in more structured form,

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7 Doolittle, ll. 8-14
8 Pound
10 Doolittle, ll. 6-12
11 Doolittle, ll. 8-11
like that of the romantics before, the flower, the image that the poem produces, blossoms; Howarth notes that [H.D.] privately disliked [Pound’s] brand identity for [Imagism], and the violent aesthetics of [Vorticism] and her ability to throwaway the principles of Imagism in *Sea Poppies* certainly correlates with this. Sea Poppies demonstrates two different types of chaos through refuting the principles of Imagism here, while demonstrating the chaos of Imagist structure and the efficiency of Imagist language in the first two stanzas, it contrasts this with the chaos of language in the poetry before Imagism and the efficiency of the structure of this poetry. In a fitting final statement, *Sea Poppies* ends with a question: ‘what meadow yields/so fragrant a leaf/as your bright leaf?’. This final questioning statement, if we look behind its flowery exterior, sarcastically questions why Imagism should be held as the ‘bright leaf’ out of all the other leaves in the ‘meadow’, and leaves the poem open ended to emphasise that poetry has changed, but will change again.

Ultimately, *Sea Poppies* only follows Imagist principles to a certain extent before it begins to dismiss them and adopt principles in direct contrast to them. *Sea Poppies* does this to demonstrate the arbitrariness of poetic rules, to show that there are differing levels of chaos and order in all different forms of poetry and that one is not better than another but, instead, forms can be used together in variation to great effect. *Sea Poppies* shows that, while efficient, precise and non-abstract language can be powerful, figurative and abstract language can encourage movement in poetry, and a different form of power and imagery; and while structure can be powerful when free, it can also be powerful when regular. It shows that poetry can, has and will change, and begs the question as to why Imagism should be held in high esteem above other forms. H.D. did not want to be entrapped in any one poetic movement – in this case Imagism - and *Sea Poppies* does not prescribe to any one poetic form or style, it demonstrates and then dismisses the principles of Imagism in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of freedom to use any poetic form.

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12 Howarth, p. 146
13 Doolittle, II. 15-17
14 Doolittle, II. 15-17
Bibliography


