# Beyond the Epiphany: H.D. and Religious Modernism

**Learning Objectives:**
- To understand the relationship between the modernist epiphany and religious culture.
- To identify alternative forms of engagement with religious culture.
- To assess the relationship between shifts in religious attitudes and developments in modernist style and form.

## Class Readings:


## Part 1: To understand the relationship between the modernist epiphany and religious culture

Share the following passage: ‘This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. Cranly questioned the inscrutable dial of the Ballast Office with his no less inscrutable countenance.’ *Stephen Hero: Part of the first draft of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, edited with an introduction by Theodore Spencer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), p. 188. The passage should stimulate discussion in response to the questions in the second column.

Where or in what context have you heard about epiphanies in modernism or literature more broadly? What happens during epiphanies? What kinds of vocabulary / register are used to describe them? What are the key elements of epiphany as you understand it? Where does this word *epiphany* come from? Is there any vocabulary that is connected to this original context? What is it being used to describe in this context? Does the quotation from Clement Greenberg help you understand the shift from religion to aesthetics: Modernist poetry is ‘the imitation of imitating’. It is ‘centered on the effort to create poetry and on the “moments” themselves of poetic conversion, rather than on experience to be converted into poetry’? *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 3–21 (p. 8, p. 7).

Share T. S. Eliot, ‘Journey of the Magi’ (1927) and note that this poem is a dramatic monologue that recounts the event celebrated during the feast of the epiphany.

In what ways does the poem resist or complicate the idea of epiphany as outlined by Joyce? How does the poem relate to the quotation from Greenberg? What drew Eliot to the epiphany story and how was that different from Stephen/Joyce’s motivations?

## Part 2: To identify alternative forms of engagement with religious culture

Ask students to share their notes on Callison, *Modernism and Religion*, pp. 1-12. The

In what way does ‘epiphany’ slot into a history of writing about literature and
discussion is shaped by the questions in the second column, which the teacher might wish to pre-circulate to students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What historical factors drove and shaped this approach to literature and religion and / or religious experience? What does this approach prioritize? How is the epiphany of <em>Stephen Hero</em> more in keeping with secular concerns than ‘Journey of the Magi’? What kinds of knowledge/commitments/interests does ‘Journey of the Magi’ require that <em>Stephen Hero</em> doesn’t? Would it be fair to describe Joyce’s epiphany as ‘materialist’?</td>
<td>Read John Gould Fletcher, ‘H.D.’s Vision’, <em>Poetry</em> 9, no. 5 (February 1917), 266–69, which is a review of H.D.’s first volume of poetry <em>Sea-garden</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What crossovers can you detect between H.D./Fletcher’s imagist commitments and the epiphany? Where does Fletcher use religious terminology in the article? To what end does he use it? What connections does Fletcher identify between religious experience and the aesthetic experience of reading H.D.’s verse? How does that differ from the way in which Eliot writes about religion in ‘Journey of the Magi’? Another way of asking this final question is: what forms of cultural knowledge does the reader need in order to recognize H.D.’s poems as religious and what forms of cultural knowledge does Eliot’s poem require/draw on? Why is this development important for religious history? What does it reveal about the claims made by and about modernism?</td>
<td>Part 3: To assess the relationship between shifts in religious attitudes and developments in modernist style and form.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where does the speaker come into the poem? What happens to her? What actions are connected to the natural world? Is there a contrast between the natural world described in the two parts of the poem? How is Hermes a contrast with nature? If the natural world is characterized by violent movement/change, how would you categorize Hermes’s existence? Is there a difference between how Hermes and the speaker are treated by nature? Why do you think the speaker addressed a poem to Hermes? What does he give her? How is this different to Eliot’s dramatization of the magi? How does ‘Hermes of the Ways’ reflect Fletcher’s account of H.D.’s poetry.</td>
<td>Read ‘Hermes of the Ways’, in <em>Collected Poems</em>, pp. 37-39. Students are asked to go through the poem and pick out words that appear twice or more (avoiding prepositions). This leads into a discussion about the natural world/its relationship with the I/the contrast with Hermes. This should be structured by the questions in the second column, which the teacher might wish to pre-circulate to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do H.D.’s religious concerns broaden or shift in later life? What role does initiation play in her religious thinking? How did this</td>
<td>|</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
manifest in her encounter with Freud? How does this revise Fletcher’s account of H.D.’s vision (or at least as related to the later work)? To what degree does H.D. move closer to Eliot’s approach to religion? To what extent does a difference between Eliot and H.D. remain?

Read H.D., ‘The Flowering of the Rod’ (1944), in *Trilogy*, pp. 111-72. The teacher will note that the two major figures in the text are Mary (a composite of all the New Testament Marys, but particularly Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary) and Kaspar (a magus, but more merchant than king). Over the course of the poem, Kaspar meets Mary and is unsettled by her and goes on to have a vision inspired by her. The teacher may wish to share this summary with the students in advance of the class to help situate the reading.

*Trilogy, pp. 155-57:* What do you notice about the register / vocabulary used to describe the vision? What are the key features of this vision in terms of location and time? What is the significance of the vision to Kaspar’s relationship with Mary as a woman? To what extent does the vision challenge Kaspar’s understanding of femininity? Where might you be likely to find this kind of vocabulary? Is this language closer to the epiphany of Joyce or Eliot? How? Why is this significant? *Trilogy, pp. 165-67:* How does this passage challenge the status of the vision? What verbal patterns do you notice? Where would you place these patterns on a scale from very poetic to very prosaic? How does this reconfigure Joyce’s combination of the spiritual and the everyday in the epiphany?

Teacher moves discussion away from specific passages and develops the following plenary reflections.

What does the religious language of the literary epiphany suggest about the commitments and claims made by and about modernism? How does H.D.’s early work reflect these claims? How does her later work shift away from them? What does this suggest about H.D.’s and/ or Eliot’s developing attitudes towards modernism’s aesthetic characteristic and utopian aspirations? Why is religion brought into this critique? Conversely, what do the claims made for and about modernism as a conduit of or to the spiritual reveal to us about religious history? To what extent has the epiphany etc provide a support for religious ideas in an otherwise secular world? To what extent has the epiphany helped shape, strengthen and sustain the secular?

**Development:**
H.D.’s concerns / the limitations of the epiphany can also be addressed in a theoretical register via postsecular theory. Read:

Kearney’s interpretations of specific modernist texts uncover embedded quasi-metaphysical religious attitudes, which represent the persistence of a traditional religious outlook, and then go on to unpick the ways modernist texts undermine that view, ultimately embracing the spiritual potential of the everyday. See also:
