A member of the original Imagiste group, formed in London under the auspices of Ezra Pound, and therefore a key participant in the first modernist movement in Anglo-American poetry, the American-born H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) is as famous for leaving home as Emily Dickinson is for staying there. H.D. is also notorious for the visionary style that dominates her later writing, and her mysticism is usually understood as another, more metaphorical form of travel, in this case beyond the limits of the body itself rather than the domestic sphere. For both these reasons, it is therefore typical to find H.D.’s work, especially her later long poems, characterized in terms of a desire for transcendence: H.D.’s goal is to ‘open the boundaries of the self to another reality, not in order to deny its operations but in order to claim and be claimed by them’, in an act of ‘transcendence, a breakthrough into a new dimension’ (Morris, ‘Concept’ 429). As this reference to a ‘new dimension’ suggests, H.D.’s literary project involves the development of new spatial metaphors, but these metaphors are usually understood as a clear alternative to the home she left behind, not a transformation of the domestic sphere, as I will argue. Where in the previous chapter I had to show how Dickinson’s poetry contained a critical perspective on the domestic life she led, in this chapter I will have to show how H.D.’s metaphors of travel can be contextualized in terms of domesticity, despite H.D.’s having left the feminine sphere behind. In the memoir she wrote about her sessions in therapy with Freud in the 1930s, H.D. reflects that ‘leaving home was not always an unhappy matter’ (Tribute 166). As the rather convoluted use of the double negative suggests, H.D. is more ambivalent toward the process of ‘leaving’ and more attached to forms of ‘home’ than her personal history and literary reputation would suggest.
It is no coincidence that this suggestion that leaving home is sometimes an unhappy process comes in the aftermath of H.D.’s encounter with Freudian psychoanalysis. These sessions led H.D. to write an unpublished autobiographical narrative entitled The Gift during the years 1941-43, and this narrative provides an indispensable resource for understanding the significance of domesticity for H.D. and the work her poems do to transform the spatial metaphor of ‘home’. The Gift records H.D.’s memories of her childhood in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania toward the end of the nineteenth century, and shows H.D. applying the psychoanalytic model of recollection, repetition, and working through to the constructions of domesticity and gender that were still dominant at that early and impressionable stage of her life. At the same time, this narrative shows considerable self-consciousness about the spatial metaphors for the psyche that structure Freud’s thinking, and H.D.’s critical stance toward the privatization of women’s lives in the domestic sphere is paralleled by her critical stance toward the privatization of the individual mind or self. As Susan Stanford Friedman points out, H.D. deliberately frames the narrative of her childhood in relation to the present moment of its composition in London during the Blitz, so that the domestic sphere of her childhood is juxtaposed not to ‘the semidark cave of Freud’s safe room’ but instead ‘a flat under constant bombardment from Nazi bombs’ (Penelope’s Web 330). This frame then enacts an oscillation not between one ‘safe’ and securely bounded maternal or domestic space (childhood) and another, metaphorical one (Freud’s office), but instead an oscillation between this ideal of home and an actual place under continual threat of having its walls blasted open and being exposed to history. The result is to undermine any nostalgia for domestic security. Within H.D.’s text, in fact, threats to domestic stability seem indistinguishable from the promise of a cure, in a parallel to the therapeutic effects of psychoanalysis and its exposure of the workings of the unconscious. Like Dickinson, H.D. works to imagine destruction as transformation and specifically as a figure for a different experience of space.

The nineteenth-century culture of domesticity is most directly invoked in The Gift through a scene in which H.D. remembers attending a stage performance of Uncle Tom’s Cabin as a child and as a result learning to reinterpret domestic space as theatrical space. The implications of this redefinition of home are elaborated in the metaphor that serves as the title of the first section of The Gift, the ‘Dark Room’. This metaphor links domesticity and the unconscious, both figured in terms of obscurity and inaccessibility. Freud uses a similar photographic