

## POETIC COMPLEXITY IN ‘IN A STATION OF THE METRO’ BY EZRA POUND

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### ABSTRACT

This research study is meant to investigate into the signs of complexity in, ‘In a station of the metro’ by Ezra Pound – the most haunted work in modern poetry. It is a representative poem of imagism and reflects all the trends of the age in their truest form with a unique blend of visual, intellectual and emotional implications. It is predicted that this poem bears intricacies of design, in form, structure and subject matter, in the backdrop of the remarkable industrial, economic, social, cultural and technological changes at the outset of the 20th century, which greatly influenced art during this tumultuous period and in turn shaped literary modes of thought, expressions and styles. It is conjectured that all these elements have contributed towards its opacity so as to lend it a peculiar intellectual charm, enabling it to portray a variety of multifaceted themes with an approach of minimalist to use fewest possible words as well as of epic to work on a massive scale.

**Keywords:** Complexity, intricacy, imagism, trends, tumultuous period, opacity, multifaceted minimalist, epic.

### INTRODUCTION

It invites an arsenal of critical responses and interpretations to read ‘In a station of the Metro’ by Ezra Pound. Should the style and subject matter be credited for its complexity, or the transitional period of history or the poet himself with his scholarly tastes- is a perplexing question that needs careful handling. This poem bears intricacies of design, form, structure and subject matter, in the wake of the significant social, industrial, economic, cultural and technological changes in the beginning of the 20th century, which greatly influenced art during this transitional period and revolutionized literary modes of thought, expression and style to a great extent.

### Research Questions

- Why is the aforementioned poem a complex piece of writing?
- Which elements have contributed towards its intricate pattern?
- How do different socio-economic developments and literary trends of the age get reflected in literature and what effects they cause?
- How far do the personality and particular tastes of the poet form a background of such a piece of writing?

## **Background to the Problem**

- The literature mirrors the contemporary advances in addition to the renewed form of visual images and sensory responses that keep on passing through their evolutionary stages, leaving their mark on it, in their own way. The image of 'Metro' in addition to the startling metaphorical comparison of the 'faces' of human in form of 'apparition' with its connotations, to the 'petals' on 'black bough' seem to be an apt artistic achievement for a poet about whom T.S Eliot has rightly remarked to be 'more responsible for the twentieth century poetry than any other individual'.
- It is imperative to find out the social, economic and literary atmosphere, in order to comprehend any piece of writing in depth and highlight its true merits.
- The modern age, with all of its complications and wide ranging psychological effects on the senses, perceptions, sensibilities, emotions and attitudes of the people, has been viewed by the researchers from different angles, the 'modernist movement' along with its repercussions, being one among them.
- All these perspectives need to be interlinked and then evaluated for the sake of a comprehensive and logically coherent understanding of the problem in the new light for which the intended research is expected to play a significant role.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this poem, Pound is trying to infuse life into a line of literary and aesthetic Modernist movement that comprises the most dynamic period in the history of English literature. The modern art movement revolutionized art and culture and set the stage for Modernism and its counterpart postmodern art as well as other contemporary art practices. This period has been an object of interest for the critics who have viewed it from different angles in their particular way. The literary scene of the early twentieth century portrays the transitions of the recognized literary norms. This poem is the best example of the exposition of the spirit of modernist movement and holds a monumental status as the shining example of imagism. The imagist movement was modern poetry's point de repère, the landmark venture, whose followers contributed vitally to the transformation of American and British cultural life in those crucial years. (Helen Carr: 2009). Imagism was a brief, complex yet influential poetic movement of the early 1900s, a time of reaction against the recognized literary norms of the Victorian period of the late nineteenth-century poetry which Ezra Pound, as a member of the literary avant-garde and one of the key imagist poets, described as 'a doughy mess of third-hand Keats, Wordsworth, half-melted, lumpy'. (Peter Jones: 2001)

On the contrary, the imagist poetry was broadly characterized by brevity, clarity, precision, exactness, concentration of meaning, purity of texture and focus on the true reality of a thing that was more important for Pound than to use a number of adjectives to describe only its physical appearance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Limitations**

It has been tried to focus mainly on the study of the required areas to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in which the poem was written (1913).

### **Areas to Study**

An in depth analysis of the economic, social, technological, architectural, psychological and literary scenario of the period has helped me to achieve the objective.

### **Resources and Methods**

The qualitative research methodology has been put into practice while using the following resources, in order to collect the target information. After that, the set of information has been examined critically, tracing the correlative impact on the poem under discussion.

- Library catalogues: It has been taken advantage of all the library catalogues to find out the material related to the research.
- Literary Histories, Encyclopedias: I have probed into more general reference works through these resources to get new impulses to the research and a general starting point. They have also helped in the correct use of critical terminology.
- Bibliographies: Both current and retrospective bibliographies have been used for most systematic and reliable information through these sources.
- Literary Journals: Literary journals have been sorted out to get up-to-date information of the required topics.
- Internet: A careful use of internet while double checking all sources has been ensured.
- Snowballing: All the valuable sources have been manipulated that are very close to the topic and come into knowledge through the works cited, as the secondary material of the first draft.

## **RESULTS**

In 1912, Pound coined the term "imagism" to describe the clean, visual, minimalist poetry he championed. Pound defined image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". Thus motivated by the idea of 'making it new' and following the principles of imagism in their truest form, this poem got shaped in the hands of the poet against the traditional formalism and ornate diction, to exhibit his skill in experimenting with the new form of verse – the free verse. It appeared before public in 1913. The whole poem consists of only fourteen words which may be taken as the compressed form of a sonnet, a poem of fourteen lines, with a combination of eight words in the first line and six in the second to follow the octet sestet pattern of an Italian sonnet.

In "Pound's 'Metro' Hokku: The Evolution of an Image," Chilton Randolph and Carol Gilbertson argue for the importance of subtle replacement of colon with the semi-colon at the

end of the first line, in the final revision of Pound's choice of punctuation in "In a Station of the Metro" and hold the opinion that this altered format indicates both Pound's debt to and distinction from the Japanese haiku. It traces "not only a struggle with "rhythmic" units or visual appeal, but the difficult evolution of Pound's genuinely modernist poetic." (Chilton: 232). These technical innovations and the use of unconventional poetic language material often baffled even the sympathetic readers.

In Pound's words, the poem isn't a description but an 'equation', because it is free from the traditional grammar to push us in one side or the other; the words that formulate this equation (the 'apparition' and the 'petals') are given equal value. In this way, this is the most direct treatment ever possible.

The complicated form of the poem takes its share from the advances in the field of psychology too. William McDougall's *Body and Mind: A History and Defence of Animism*, claiming that there is an animating principle in Nature and that the mind guides evolution, Carl Jung's "Analytical Psychology" and Jacob L. Moreno's psychotherapy methods, which emphasized spontaneity and interaction, and John B. Watson's "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" seem to get reflected in the themes of the poem to signify the complexity of human mind and ability to think in many different ways and directions and feel a variety of emotions at a time—something that only human are able to do.

Pound has very deftly referred to the latest technological developments of the age through a cluster of implied associations triggered by the image of "Metro". It symbolizes the rapid pace of scientific progress of the time. The Metro station is also supposed to suggest a journey to the underworld of the kind that occurs in the classical epics like Homer's "Odyssey" (Greek epic poem: 850 BC, describing Odysseus' descent into Hades), Virgil's "Aeneid" (Latin epic poem: 19 BC, relating the adventures of Aeneas after the fall of Troy), 14<sup>th</sup> century epic poem *Inferno*, first part of *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (1350) and a reference towards Persephone and Demeter to allude towards —are visible only for those who can see. It is also a depiction of the downward progress of the modern man on account of his moral degeneration. His negative traits such as selfishness, jealousy, hypocrisy, callousness and insensitivity towards his fellow beings make him to be ranked lower than his actual status of human being. This means that in order to understand Pound, one needs to have read the same writers, studied the same languages, and learned the same history that Pound read. This swift perception of relation can only be possible for a genius and every reader is not a genius, so this may result in a number of conundrums.

Moreover, the connotations of the image 'apparition' encompass a wide range of thoughts. It implies that the people who are appearing suddenly and getting out of sight just as fast at the station, are like spirits of dead persons, symbolizing that the modern man is spiritually dead. His endless materialistic pursuits have deprived him of spirituality and aesthetic sense and disconnected him from nature and ultimately from his creator. It shows that he has become an automaton, owing to his over busy routine and fast mode of life. The modern man is a "hollow man" in all.

There is neither any single way to understand the complex phenomenon of culture nor is there any to trace its marks on the contemporary literature. (David Daiches: 1940). The 20th century

may have observed more technological and scientific progress than all the other centuries since the dawn of civilization. The social, economic and cultural evolution in the wake of the revolutionary inventions of Edison and Marconi has also captured the mind of the poet in the skilful use of the startling metaphorical comparison of human "faces" with the "petals" on a wet black tree branch. The branch stands for social structure and petals symbolize people. Here the "bough" is black, pointing towards its unhealthy structure and showing that it lacks inner strength, vigour and vitality. It means that the social set up is decaying in the modern age. The branch is wet because the sun does not shine much over it; therefore, the petals on it are dull and lifeless and so are the people of the modern society, who prefer to live in the polluted cities instead of the natural fresh environment of villages. They have replaced the natural sunlight and moonlight with the artificial electric light. They use mechanical means of ventilation in place of unforced circulation of air in the open. "Metro" is a symbol of the modern man's downward movement his desire to stay underground, thus getting further away from the grand, wide, vast and colourful universe. It is a sharp criticism on the modern life style that has lead towards the loss of feelings and sentiments and made the people appear as ghosts. It also shows that the people of the modern age are carrying worries, problems and tensions on their faces which are the hallmarks of the modern society. Their unhappy and hopeless state has dehumanized them and made them look like ghosts. So, modernization with all its underlying themes as urbanization, commercialization, industrialization and mechanization, has been briefly, yet deftly, hinted at.

The poets want to bring a sense and a perception of life, widening peoples' contacts with existence. Pound has dealt with the universal themes of human existence, its reality, objectives and perspectives in multi-dimensional terms. He links the human faces (a synecdoche for people themselves) with petals on a damp bough to draw attention to the charm, beauty and elegance of human life as well as its transience. The black wet bough signifies that it has just rained and the petals stuck to the branch were shortly attached to flowers of the plant, may still be alive but they will wither soon, thus emphasizing the human mortality. So, this poem is a symbolic reminder of "Memento Mori" (Latin phrase that means "remember, you have to die")-the inevitability of death. Everyone has to succumb to death sooner or later. In addition to it, the word apparition has twofold reference as something present and absent at the same time, thus implying the transient nature of human life.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

It is quite evident that the complicated amalgam of revived poetic form of free verse along with its subject matter bears an ample proof of the new discoveries and inventions of the modern age in all spheres of life, which defies every restriction regarding thought, action and expression. The rushed mode of modern life, accompanied by a wish to carry as much as possible, rather beyond the defined limit, within its domain seems to overwhelm the scholar-poet in such a way that he attempts this poetic venture with an outstanding intellectual command and ease to stimulate the imagination of the readers to the full. The poem marks the successful culmination of imagism to manipulate the poetic devices and practices to serve the required purpose of creating the exact picture with the words.

## CONCLUSIONS

So, it is very easy for an average underprepared reader to get Pound wrong, as opacity and ambiguity are the probable effects in modernist writing. Pound ever affected obscurity and liked the abstruse. Following the technique and skill of a sculptor, “the elusive master of allusion” in the words of Louis Menand, designed this poem ingeniously, chipping away every superfluous in order to reveal the form of words within, while cutting it down from thirty lines. It is equally interesting to note as how masterfully he has followed the Shakespearean notion that declares brevity as the soul of wit to depict a variety of philosophical, psychological and existential ideas of the age within the brief structure of only fourteen words with their innumerable visual, social, emotional, cultural and intellectual implications. The poem still leaves much to our imagination with its inexplicably interwoven themes and complicated oblique form.

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