



## Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

### Video transcript

#### What are the literary-historical contexts of 'In a Station of the Metro'?

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Ezra Pound published 'In a Station of the Metro' in the April 1913 issue of Poetry magazine. Edited by Harriet Monroe, Poetry magazine was one of those little magazines where US modernism happened. It was at Ezra Pound's urging that his friend T. S. Eliot's wonderful and famous poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' was published there. Pound was a tireless promoter of his fellow modernist writers.

And there was something else that Pound was very good at: he was very good at inventing literary movements. And the most influential literary movement that he invented was Imagism. In the March 1913 issue of Poetry magazine, that issue which immediately preceded the one where he published 'In a Station of the Metro', two imagist manifestos were published, one by Pound one by F. S. Flint. And it's in F. S. Flint's manifesto, simply entitled 'Imagisme', where we find the most useful definition of some of the main tenets of Imagism. The first of these tenets is 'Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective'. What does this mean?

The first tenet - direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective - means that modernists should deal with the real world, the material, physical world that we can see, hear, feel, touch and taste. And that is in direct contrast to earlier romantic writers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, who sought to pierce through the world of appearances to get at a more real world of spirit and ideas beyond the world we can see.

Not so the modernists: they sought to deal with the world we're actually in, with the urban crowd in a metro station.

The second tenet of Imagism is equally important: 'To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.' Modernist writers such as Pound, Eliot, Hemingway, H. D. and Gertrude Stein considered themselves craftsmen or craftswomen whose main job was to work on and with language, to cut it down to the bone, to use language with as much precision and concision as possible. Ernest Hemingway put it most memorably perhaps when he said that he sought to write 'the one true sentence.'

And that's precisely what Pound aimed for in 'In a Station of the Metro'. According to his own account, this poem was originally 30 lines long.

And he pared it down to those famous two lines: 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough.' Why call the movement Imagism? In his essay 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', which was published right after Flint's imagist manifesto,

Pound defined the image thus: 'An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.' And again, this is precisely what Pound does in 'In a Station of the Metro'. He creates an instant image of faces emerging from an anonymous crowd in a station of the metro. 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough.' And this relation of images corresponds to a more general feature of modernist writing.

Modernist writing was faced with a great difficulty, namely how to render the new chaotic, disjointed, fragmented, urban, industrialised world of modernity, a world that no longer seemed to be kept together by shared norms and values, all of which would soon be swept away by the First World War, which broke out one year after Pound published 'In a Station of the Metro'. And one of the responses that modernists gave to this crisis of representation was to create instant images, instant flashes, rather than creating organic, all-encompassing wholes.

And this is precisely what Ezra Pound did in 'In a Station of the Metro': creating a fragment for a fragmented world.