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## In A Station Of The Metro



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### **In a Station of the Metro**

*Ezra Pound 1916*

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Based on Japanese haiku, “In a Station of the Metro” (1916) reflects Pound’s interest in Japanese cultures, as well as his belief that the purpose of art was to “make it new.” The poem is an embodiment of Pound’s theory of Imagism, which prescribed:

- 1. Direct treatment of the thing itself.*
- 2. Use no word that is not relevant to the presentation.*
- 3. To use rhythm in the sequence of the musical phrase, not the meter.*

Pound was not interested in faceting a perfect jewel of an image, but rather in capturing the center of human experience a concentrated image, as if sculpting it out of the world. Pound learned more from the Russian painter Kandinsky’s theory of form and color than from French sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska’s work, than from conventional study of poetry. The “metro emotion” he termed only began to make sense to him wordlessly. He described it as “little splotches of color,” and “a pattern.” It was not the multitudinous details of the experience that concerned him, but the emotional structure of the experience. He has written of this poem that

*I got out of a metro train ... and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another ... and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant, but I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden*

after attending the Cheltenham Township High School. Just before his sixteenth birthday, Pound entered the [University of Pennsylvania \(/social-sciences-and-law/encyclopedia/us/university-pennsylvania\)](#), and in 1903 he transferred to Hamilton College, where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1905. He taught [Romance languages \(/literature-and-linguistics-and-literary-terms/language-and-linguistics/romance\)](#) at Wabash College for a short time in 1907, but was dismissed after a scandal involving a student who was allowed to stay overnight with him in his room. After this and a failed courtship with Moore, Pound decided to leave for Europe, where he privately published his first poetry, *A lume spento*, in Venice in 1908. He then moved to London and became immersed in the literary and intellectual milieu and was a respected critic. At this time Pound founded a poetic movement called Imagism, which linked modernism to the Symbolist movement and Oriental poetry, such as haiku.

Pound spent much of his time concerned with promoting the careers of many other writers of the time and was a key figure in the publication of many influential

## Poem Text

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

## Poem Summary

### Lines 1-2

In such a compressed poem as this haiku it may be useful to refer to the title line in the poem. On a very literal level, then, it is clear that Pound is placing the poem presents within the context of the Paris Metro or train system. Figure 1 “a Station of the Metro” may call up an association with “stations of the cross” series of 14 representations of successive incidents of the Passion of Christ in a sequence for prayer or meditation.” This association establishes the state of concentration on the compressed image presented by the poet in this

In line 1 “apparition” is the first word that directs the reading of the poem, an abstract word in these two lines. Not only does it have more syllables than the poem, but it functions in all three of its definitions. “Apparition” is initially “a ghostly appearance of a person or thing,” and as such sets the tone for a meditative experience. The second meaning of the word is “something manifest or incongruous appearance”—and it certainly is incongruous to find a natural station. It is equally incongruous to find there the kind of aesthetic or spiritual the poem explores. Finally, “apparition” is defined as “an act of becoming appearance.” In fact, the poem itself renders the poet’s image centered

The 12 syllables of this line illustrate Pound's concept of the sound and rhythm, "melopoeia." He sets a mood of focused anticipation here by using the sound of the syllables to break the line into three balanced phrases of 5, 4, and 3 syllables. They are "balanced" because it is not the syllables themselves which determine the phrase, but the sounds of the syllables: "The apparition [PAUSE] of the crowd in the crowd;"

There is more poetic appeal in the second line of the haiku. It presents an image of blossoms that have blown loose and stuck by the rain to the black bark of the boat.

In such a short poem, any use the poet makes of sound can serve as a tool for structuring the poem. The first obvious sound connection between line 1 and line 2 is the assonance of the internal vowel sounds between "crowd" and "bough" at the end of the two lines. The prepositional phrase "in the crowd" becomes balanced in the second line: "a ... bough."

Further connection between the two lines occurs by the use of alliteration between "apparition" and "[p]etals." In addition, the second line's musical quality is enhanced by the assonance of the "e" sound in "[p]etals" and "wet," as well as by the alliteration of the "b" sounds in "black" and "bough."

Pound's sense of "melopoeia" (sound and rhythm in poetry) comprises the poetic concepts of assonance and alliteration, but extends further to the use of the number and lengths of syllables and punctuation to create rhythm in the line. This line of 7 syllables has a more complex rhythm than that of the balanced 3-phrase line of 12 syllables. The first phrase of this second line is made up of the 2 syllables

Metaphor is a more intense rendering of the relationship of “likeness” than omitting the use of the words “like” or “as,” metaphor creates an identification of things. It is helped to do this in these two lines by means of the semicolon, which leads the reader to expect a balanced grammatical construction. However, the relationship in the poem is between more than “these faces in the crowd” and the “[p]etals on the bough.” In fact, it is not “faces” that *are like* “[p]etals,” but it is “[t]he apparition of” something.

A semicolon generally signals an equation, or balance, between two grammatical structures. And, in much the same way that a sentence can have an understood subject that begins with a verb (EXAMPLE: [You] Leave your dog outside.), these two lines, separated by the semicolon suggest an understood equation of “[t]he apparition of” in the first line, perhaps, “[the appearance of]” in the second line.

While it is necessary to use the first line of the haiku to discover the implied structure of the second line, it is also critical to further explore the image of the first line to inform that of the second line. Perhaps it is best to begin with the literal scene presented in the first line: a busy train station, a crowd of people moving on and off the train, a rush of movement and energy—only to discover that a crowd of people moving off the train, a rush of movement and energy—only to become visible (the third meaning of “apparition”) in the crowd.

This literal analysis of the first line leads to a similar examination of the second line. Our expectation of balanced grammatical structures implied by the semicolon is fulfilled as the content of the images is achieved. This means that it is necessary to discover how the blossoms on the bough came to be there. First they were in flowerets, then they were in a shower, and then the wind blew them free until they landed, stuck by the crevices of the dark tree bark. Thus, one might say,

In fact Pound's meditation on his aesthetic or spiritual response to the perception of faces in a subway station, such an unexpected place engendered the poetic struggle toward the knowledge that the faces are the same as the petals; the apparition of these faces in the crowd is of the same force of nature as the appearance of the petals on the tree bough."

## Themes

### **Appearance vs. Reality**

The use of the word "apparition" in the first line is what opens this poem up to a meaning that reach beyond that of a simple comparison of faces to petals, blurring the line between the real and the ghost. We use this word often to describe something that cannot be confirmed to be real, like a ghost. Although it

### **Topics for Further Study**

- Write the story of how this poem came to Pound. Was he standing on a subway platform? Was he at his desk? On a ferris wheel? Did he shout it out? Did he revise it many times until he got it right?
- Compare this poem with Matsuo Bashō's haiku "Falling Upon Earth," and *Poetry for Students*. What common attitude do these authors share? Do the circumstances of their lives help or hinder Bashō in getting his point across?
- How do you think the speaker of "In a Station of the Metro" feels about the world? How does he feel about the people who ride it? Explain.

the meaning that is derived from putting them together. If the word “apparition” is uncertain about his idea of how the faces and the petals fit together, that is, things create a new reality when they are united.

## **Nature**

Pointing out the fact that a completely urban experience such as the rush off a train is like a natural occurrence is a way of telling the reader that the city is not entirely separated from the natural world. We can feel comforted by the association of faces with flower petals, which are usually used to represent beautiful creations. That comfort, however, is short lived when we realize that we are connected to something as heavy and ugly as “a wet, black bough.” What Pound unstated is exactly which part of man’s world is like the bough. It can only be the metro station. We are led to see the experience of riding the train as some natural experience. Commuting on crowded subway trains can certainly soak one with an oppressive need to follow particular social behaviors and weigh on the soul like a heavy wood. Being an anonymous part of a dense crowd is a very natural experience. The blackness of the wood is appropriate. Pound touches upon feelings that seem to be unique to the harshness of modern life, and he tells us that even these activities are part of nature taking its course.

## **Consciousness**



strangeness does not come entirely from the poem's brief length (although it does not look like the poems that we are accustomed to), rather it is the lack of explanation that seem as if the poet has not fulfilled his duty. Pound purposely frustrates readers by not looking to the poem for something to think about (as students are often taught). Pound succeeds in getting readers to feel something that goes beyond thought.

## **Style**

"In a Station of the Metro" is a type of poem called a haiku (sometimes spelled haikai), a traditional Japanese nature-image poem of precisely 17 syllables. Pound's poem has 17 syllables, 12 in the first line and 7 in the last. The haiku as Pound uses the form is a typically Modernist image of the city in relationship to an image from nature.

Image is central to this form, and Pound's concept of "phanopoeia," or the power of words on the imagination, is certainly at the center of this poem. However, his best poetry language charged to the highest degree also includes the concepts of "logopoeia," or the play of ideas among words, and "melopoeia," emotional correlations induced by the rhythm of words.

The compression of meaning in this poem into such highly concentrated images is a play of ideas necessary for "logopoeia," but the emphasis in haiku on syllable count and "melopoeia" will be used to the fullest possible extent. Pound maintained the form as a medium with which the poet "cuts a design in time." The sharpness and

## Compare & Contrast

- **1916:** Although the war in Europe (now called [World War I \(/history/mo-and-battles/world-war-i\)](#)) had been going on since 1914 and Germany use submarines to sink U.S. merchant ships, President [Woodrow Wilson \(/people/history/us-history-biographies/woodrow-wilson\)](#) was reelected kept us out of war.”

**1917:** America’s entry into the war helped bring it to an end the follow

**1941:** America stayed out of the war in Europe until the Japanese attack [\(/places/united-states-and-canada/miscellaneous-us-geography/pearl-harbor\)](#) on December 7. The U. S. declaration of war against Japan brought down Japan’s allies, Italy and Germany.

**1946:** With the disabling of Germany during the war, the [United States \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/united-states\)](#) turned its military focus on the threat of Communism from the [Soviet Union \(/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/soviet\)](#).

**1991:** The [Soviet Union \(/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/soviet\)](#) disbanded when member states rushed to declare independence.

**Today:** Approximately 20 percent of the energy consumed in the U.S. is generated by nuclear power.

- **1916:** The first commercial refrigerator became available in the United States for \$900, about the price of a new car.

**Today:** Only one home in five thousand does not have refrigeration.

Pound was a founding member. In the early years of his career, after graduating from Harvard in 1906, Pound was interested in the works of symbolist and decadent poets such as Swinburne, Rossetti, Johnson, Symons, and Yeats because they took a more subjective approach to poetry than the writers who came before them. He admired their work but thought that it was too self-absorbed to communicate with people the way that poetry should. On the other hand, the symbolists were rebelling against the traditionalists whose ideas, he felt, were too broad and too moralistic, diluting their impact with a message for everybody. Pound was dissatisfied with both extremes. In 1907, he met Hulme in London and was introduced to Hulme's friends, former members of the Imagist Club in Oxford who had quit the club but still gathered regularly at a London pub. The group was centered on what was good poetry and what was bad, and Pound, naturally, was a member. After poetry from different cultures was compared, it was decided that poetry should be simple and direct, focused on a single image, and more concerned with the musicality of a poem than with fitting it into a conventional rhyme scheme. Within the next few years, members of the group had poems published that followed the style that had been developed.

Pound himself coined the name "Imagist" several years later, in 1912. In his introduction to the book titled *Riposte*, he included a section of poems called "The Complete Poet's Introduction to Hulme," naming the group for the first time in his introduction: "As for the future of the descendants of that forgotten school of 1909, have that in the keeping of the Imagists." In an essay in *Poetry* magazine titled "A Few Don'ts by an Imagist," Pound described the concept of an image: "An 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."

For all of the influence that Imagist writing had on its own generation and for all that it became, it was short-lived, so that by 1917 hardly anyone called themselves Imagist. The problem was that it had grown too popular, too quickly: the idea was to be original and honest, but it only took a few years before everyone in the world was referring to every sort of poem as Imagist. It did not help that Pound felt that the movement had been stolen away from him. In 1915, a newcomer to the movement, [Amy Lowell](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/amy-lowell](#)), signed a contract with a commercial publishing house to put out an annual anthology of imagist poems. The advertisements for the book listed Lowell as “the foremost member of the movement,” and merely mentioned Ezra Pound’s name along with the other members. After the book was published, Lowell referred to the movement as “Amyism” and refused to be associated with it. Pound simply cut himself off from the way of thinking that the group represented, and his writing continued to be guided by the artistic principle of focusing on the image in the poem’s form. Much of modern poetry holds this as one of the most important principles that the poet has, although it is not the only consideration. Imagism has become a part of the mainstream.

## **Critical Overview**

American poet [Allen Ginsberg](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/allen-ginsberg](#)) has said that Pound was the most important poet since [Walt Whitman](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/whitman](#)) to develop the possibility for a new practice of writing and reading poetry. As Donald E. Stanford indicates, Pound’s search for poetic structures through which to understand his emotional experience led him to discard the structures of literature from the [Middle Ages](#) ([/history/modern-europe/ancient-history-middle-ages-and-modern-history/middle-ages](#)). In place of this he formulated a structure based on juxtaposition of images, which grounded his theory of Imagism.

Pound felt that Chinese poetry corroborated his “Imagist” principles, although

exactly designates the thing,” whereas the use of meter promotes the inclusion of words and the use of rhyme ensures only that the selected word will always be different from another. Tucker points out that Pound’s refusal to express emotional experience through the form and meter of set forms would seem to indicate that he would then be writing in a more direct way. However, his further rejection of what Tucker refers to as “words of second-hand meaning” necessary for the logical construction of sentences focused him on the immediate emotional potential of words and lines similar to that of haiku. In fact, Tucker employs the same technique in Pound’s work in this direction. It is Tucker’s belief that when we insert, for example, the “is like” between the two images of a haiku—to make their relationship explicit—we lose the power to communicate in a direct emotional way. In fact, the power of Pound’s haiku is so evident as in Pound’s haiku-poem.

Pound’s “[haiku]-like sentence” established the artistic ideal of Imagism. Within the time it extended over a mere ten years, it was responsible for a transformation in the English language, noted by English novelist and critic Virginia Woolf as the change in style that was the beginning of Modernism. In Pound’s work, as William Pratt has recognized, this is manifested itself in his ability to construct images with words and in his unique use of poetic rhythm of conversational speech. Both are characteristic of this radical new style. In “a Station of the Metro,” the poem that confirmed a new understanding of poetry in the twentieth century.

## **Criticism**

### **Marisa Pagnattaro**

*Marisa Pagnattaro is a freelance writer and is the Book Review Editor and a regular contributor to the Member of the Georgia Bar Journal. She is a teaching assistant at the [University of Georgia](http://social-sciences-and-law/education/colleges-us/university-georgia) ([/social-sciences-and-law/education/colleges-us/university-georgia](http://social-sciences-and-law/education/colleges-us/university-georgia)), Athens, Georgia. In her recent essay, Pagnattaro discusses how Pound employed the philosophy of Imagism in “a Station of the Metro.”*

that was to publish Doolittle's poem), Pound promoted this new style of verse. "Objective—no slither—direct—no excess of adjectives, etc.... It's straight passing comments, Imagism came into being.

The main idea of Imagism is to use clearly presented, concise images in [\[https://literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general-terms/imagism/\]](#) the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, Pound set forth the basic tenets of Imagist treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective; II. to use absolute words that does not contribute to the presentation; and III. in regard to rhythm, to conform to the natural flow of musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome. Pound sought to capture the essence of an image or what he described as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional instant of time."

Using this philosophy of poetry composition, Pound set out to write "In a Station of the Metro." In *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*, Pound explains the biographical basis of the poem:

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and suddenly saw a beautiful face, then another, and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found in words, but there came an equation ... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just mat—a "pattern" you mean something with a "repeat" in it. But it was a word, the beginning for me of a language in colour

article entitled “How I Began,” Pound describes a sudden realization that led him to write the poem for several weeks: “Then only the other night, wondering about the adventure, it struck me that in Japan, a work of art is not estimated by its length, where sixteen syllables are counted enough for a poem if you arrange the words properly, one might make a very little poem.” A year after his previous draft, Pound’s final haiku-like combination of words, drawing on this traditional form of Japanese poetry consisting of exactly seventeen syllables. In his September 1914 article in *Review*, Pound quoted a well-known, haiku-like verse as emblematic of the kind of clear and precise images he sought to capture his experience in the metro: “The butterfly flies back to its branch: / A butterfly.”

There are two versions of “In a Station of the Metro.” The first version was published in *Poetry* with extra spacing for emphasis:

**The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.**

Pound was fascinated by the possibility of using the typesetting of a poem to control the way it was read. The large gaps of space between single words, phrases, and lines control the reader’s pace, giving the poem a heightened sense of drama. In the original version, the spacing was conventionalized and the widely anthologized version was published in *Poetry* with extra spacing for emphasis:

**The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.**

In crafting this poem, Pound drew directly from the three essential principles articulated about Imagism. First, he directly treats the image of the people in the metro. Second, there is absolutely no excess of language; every one of the words that constitute the poem—including the six words of the title—are essential to the image produced. Lastly, Pound breaks from the monotonous rhythms of haiku and other traditional forms of poetry, using a more direct and concise style.

commuter traffic into a moment of great beauty. The faces become velvet connected to one limb of being. The addition of “wet” and “black” intensifies the moment with the deep richness of colour after a rain shower.

Pound concretely and directly presents the “luminous detail” of this memo. Like the Chinese ideographs Pound studied, “In a Station of the Metro” succinctly encapsulates the idea of a thing in a single image.

## What Do I Read Next?

- Pound was an amazing person in life who knew almost everybody involved in the literary world. This meant, since his friends were writers, that many wrote about him. Some of the best books about him are *End of Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound* by H.D. and *Directions* in 1979 and [Charles Olson](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/charles-olson](#)) & *Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeth* in 1975.
- Pound’s correspondences with one of the greatest names in twentieth-century literature can be found in *Pound/Joyce: The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce* ([/people/literature-and-arts/english-literature-20th-cent-present-biographies/pound-joyce](#)), published in 1967 with commentary and an introduction by Forrest Reiher.
- In 1960, noted literary critic M. L. Rosenthal published *A Primer of Ezra Pound* (56-page) book that prepares readers for all aspects of the poet’s work.
- *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*, published in 1972, compiles essays by dozens of well-known authors, including [William Carlos Williams](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/william-carlos-williams](#)), D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, [Rupert Brooke](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/english-literature-biographies/rupert-brooke](#)) and [Joseph Conrad](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/english-literature-20th-cent-present-biographies/joseph-conrad](#)), to name just a few. This book is organized in chronological order and edited by Eric Homberger.
- Burton Raffel’s 1984 biography *Ezra Pound: Prime Minister of Poetry* ([/people/literature-and-arts/english-literature-biographies/burton-raffel](#)) is a more recent work that provides a comprehensive look at the poet’s life and work.



Pound abandoned Imagism after poet [Amy Lowell](#) ([/people/literature-and-literature-biographies/amy-lowell](#)), decided to write and promote Imagist poetry. Pound sarcastically renamed the movement “Amygism” and moved on to begin with Vorticism, which focused on the effect of systems of energies. In any event, Pound’s images continue to be present in Pound’s later poetry, especially in his great *Cantos*. Moreover, even though the Imagist movement was relatively short-lived, its influence is evident in the works of other great twentieth-century American poets such as [William S. Williams](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/william-s-eliot](#)), [Wallace Stevens](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/wallace-stevens](#)), and [Marianne Moore](#) ([/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/marianne-moore](#)).

**Source:** Marisa Pagnattaro, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1999.

## Jyan-Lung Lin

*Ezra Pound’s use of the Japanese haiku technique in his works is detailed in the following excerpt.*

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**Source:** Jyan-Lung Lin, “Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’ as a Yugen Haiku,” *Yugen*, Vol. 21, Nos. 1 & 2, Spring & Fall, 1992, pp.175-183.

## Steve Ellis

*The use of punctuation in Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” is examined in the following excerpt.*

“... ‘In a Station’ seems to prescribe no clear role for the ‘critical’ reader; its condensation give it a sense of being analysis-resistant ...”

Kenner, Hugh, *The Pound Era*, University California Press, 1971.

O'Connor, William Van, *Ezra Pound*, ("University of Minnesota Pamphlets of the University of Minnesota Press series, No. 26), University of Minnesota Press, 1963.

Pound, Ezra, *Gaudier-Brzeska* New Directions, 1970.

Pound, Ezra, "How I Began," in *T.P.'s Weekly*, June 6, 1913, reprinted in *Ezra Pound: The London Years*, edited by Noel Stock, 1965.

Pound, Ezra, "How to Read," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, New Directions, 1972.

Pound, Ezra, "Vorticism," in *Fortnightly Review*, September 1, 1914.

Pratt, William, "Ezra Pound and the Image," in *Ezra Pound: The London Years*, edited by Philip Grover, AMS Press, 1978, pp. 15-30.

Stanford, Donald E., "Ezra Pound, 1885-1972," in *Revolution and Convention in American Poetry*, University of Delaware ([/social-sciences-and-law/education/college-of-arts-and-letters/university-of-delaware](https://social-sciences-and-law/education/college-of-arts-and-letters/university-of-delaware)) Press, 1983, pp. 13-38.

Tucker, John, "Poetry or Doubletalk: Pound and Modernist Poetics," in *Criticism*, 27, No. 2, Summer, 1985, pp. 39-48.

## **For Further Study**

Bevilaqua, Ralph, "Pound's 'In A Station of the Metro': A Textual Note," in *Notes*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, September 1970, pp. 293-96.

*This essay does a thorough job of analyzing how the idea of Imagism influenced Pound's poem, with special attention given to the open meaning of the poem.*

Pratt, William, *The Imagist Poem*, New York (/places/united-states-and-canada/geography/new-york): E.P. Dutton Co., 1963.

*This book is a very useful source for understanding Imagist poetry and provides hundreds of examples of Imagist poems and poems that were part of the Imagist movement.*

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