**THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY LITERARY CONTEXT**

**FOCUS: LITTLE MAGAZINES. MODERNISM IN POETRY. IMAGISM. EZRA POUND; T. S. ELIOT; ROBERT FROST; WALLACE STEVENS; E. E. CUMMINGS.**

The inter-war period in American literary history was characterized by experimentation and creative inventiveness as writers – especially in the field of poetry – attempted to come to terms with new philosophical and psychological interpretations of reality. The discovery of the subconscious and new concepts regarding time meant that the scope of literary reference was broadened and orthodox beliefs of the past were laid open to question.

Aesthetic consideration were formalized anew as American literary criticism matured: Ezra Pound, leading literary critic of the time, was joined by T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens in his analysis of the writer’s craft, and further important contributions were made by Earnest Hemingway and the influential Gertrude Stein.

*LITTLE MAGAZINES*

Writers measured themselves according to new literary canons as ‘literary criticism’ developed into a serious and systematic genre. Conventional standards and established authors were questioned and attacked by a new body of writers whose works were frequently published by the so called ‘little magazines’ – independent-minded periodicals more concerned with publishing new authors and establishing new critical standards than the material rewards of commercial success. The most influential of these little magazines were two edited by the essayist and critic, Henry L. Mencken. From the pages of ‘The Smart Set’ and ‘American Mercury’, Mencken and his protégés launched their ferocious crusade against established literary conventions and authors. Their attacks on the narrow-minded, provincial aspects of much of rural American life was heralded as ‘a revolt against the village’.

MODERNISM

* Experimentation and creative inventiveness;
* New ideas;
* Breaking with tradition;
* Fragmentation;
* Experimentation with point of view;
* American literary criticism matured.

AMERICAN MODERNIST POETS

**Ezra Pound** (1885–1972)

* A controversial figure;
* Technical innovations and use of unconventional poetic materials which often baffled readers;
* No determinant identity or poetic voice;
* A multiplicity of identities and voices;
* A fierce individualist.

IMAGISM

* An anti-Romantic movement in poetry;
* Simple and few words;
* The image is let to speak of itself;
* Derived its technique from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry—stressing clarity, precision, and economy of language;
* Everyday speech, new rhythms, and clear, sharp images;
* Key representatives of Imagism: **Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)** and **Amy Lowell**.

**Pound's rules for writing Imagist poems as reported by F. S. Flint in *Poetry* 1913:**

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

[**In a Station of the Metro**](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/station-metro)

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.* ([Ezra Pound](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/ezra-pound))

SOME HELPFUL HINTS TO ANALYZE THE POEM:

1. Think about the function of the title of the poem.
2. Pay attention to the images and the way they are introduced in the poem in terms of syntax.
3. Is he comparing? Is he seeing both things?
4. Does this approach remind you of any poetic tradition?

**T. S. Eliot** (1888-1965)

- Came under the influence of [Ezra Pound](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/ezra-pound);

- ***Prufrock and Other Observations***(1917) - first book of poems;

- ***The Waste Land*** (1922) - considered to be the most influential poetic work of the 20th century;

- His poems articulated the disillusionment of a younger post–World War I generation with the values and conventions of the Victorian era.

**Robert Frost** (1874-1963)

* At the crossroads of 19th-century American poetry and modernism;
* His poetry is resolutely American;
* An original, modern idiom and a sense of directness and economy that reflect the imagism of [Ezra Pound](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=80585) and [Amy Lowell](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/amy-lowell);
* On the other hand - no marked departure from the poetic practices of the 19th century;
* Avoids traditional verse forms, but his technique is never experimental and he is not an innovator.

**The Rose Family**([Robert Frost](https://www.poemhunter.com/robert-frost/poems/))

*The rose is a rose,  
And was always a rose.  
But the theory now goes  
That the apple's a rose,  
And the pear is, and so's  
The plum, I suppose.  
The dear only knows  
What will next prove a rose.  
You, of course, are a rose -  
But were always a rose*.

SOME HELPFUL HINTS TO ANALYZE THE POEM:

1. Think about the symbolism behind the rose.
2. What might be the aim of this cliché?
3. What feeling does the constant repetition evoke in you?

**Wallace Stevens** (1879-1955)

* Focused his attention on man and the things in his world;
* A master stylist, employing an extraordinary vocabulary and a rigorous precision in crafting his poems.
* A philosopher of aesthetics, vigorously exploring the notion of poetry as the supreme fusion of the creative imagination and objective reality.

**E. E. Cummings** (1894–1962)

- One of the most innovative poets of his time;

- Experimented with poetic form and language to create a distinct personal style;

- Disregarded grammar and punctuation;

- Always used “i” instead of “I” as a protest against self-importance;