



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 21, 2021

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



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Ezra Pound's Poetry between Victorianism and Modernism: A Historical-Biographical Analysis

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Abstract. This paper examines the short poems of Ezra Pound, a group of works that have long been the subject of academic discussion in the field of literary analysis. Although Ezra Pound is typically considered a Modernist poet, some clear elements of Victorianism can be discerned within his revolutionary forms of poetry. The paper will offer a historical and biographical background to Pound's work before moving on to an analysis and discussion of the poet's short poems. While previous studies of Ezra Pound's poetry have adopted various critical approaches, we believe that this is the first study that compares the influence of Modernism and Victorianism on the work of this important figure in English verse of the early twentieth century.

Keywords. ezra pound, poetry, victorianism, modernism

1. Introduction

Ezra Weston Loomis Pound (1885 – 1972) is widely seen as one of the most important poets in the Modernist school of poetry, which emerged in the years following the First World War. Ezra Pound was born in Idaho, the United States. Still, he spent much of his life in Europe, most notoriously in Italy during the Second World War, where he was an enthusiastic supporter and active collaborator in the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. Imprisoned by the allied forces after the War, he spent the rest of his life in Italy, dying in Venice in 1972.

Ezra Pound was a prolific poet, with his most important works including *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), *Ripostes* (1912), and his 800-page epic poem, *The Cantos* (ca. 1917-1962). He is also known for his concise poems, many of which are influenced by his readings of Japanese Haikus. T.S. Eliot stated that Pound's work had an enormous influence on his poetry. Pound had lived a turbulent life full of political activity and questionable affiliations, and controversy over his views has considerably damaged his literary reputation. His poetry is marked by a highly idiosyncratic style and has focused on considerable literary analysis, particularly his shorter works. Academic discussion continues over the precise categorization of Pound's work, but there is general agreement that he was primarily a poet of the Modernist school. This study takes an alternative view and examines Pound's shorter poems in an effort to identify any lingering Victorian elements in this apparently Modernist corpus. The findings of this research may cast doubt on the straightforward categorization of Pound as a Modernist poet, identifying considerable evidence to suggest that Ezra Pound's short poems could be categorized as both Victorian and Modernist poetry.

2. Ezra Pound as a Modernist Poet

This chapter of the paper highlights Ezra Pound's poems as examples of Modernist poetry. A definition of Modernism is provided with an account of its characteristics in poetry before moving on to an evaluation of Pound's poems in terms of these characteristics. Finally, the chapter offers historical and biographical evidence to support the hypothesis.

2.1 Definition and Elements of Modernism

Modernism is a broad term that covers many different branches of life, including, but not limited to, society, culture, art, architecture and literature. It was a movement that transformed all aspects of life and emerged as a response to the rapid and widespread changes in Western society, culture, and industry in the early twentieth century. The sheer breadth of the content and features of Modernism meant that it exerted a remarkably diverse influence on the modern world (Keyser and Jay 14). Modernism has broken all of the traditional rules theatrically, which was also the case with its impact on literature. Modernist literature marked a clear shift from the literature of earlier eras both in form and content, and this change affected both poetry and prose.

In terms of form, Modernist poetry is marked by a more straightforward and more straightforward approach to both structure and use of language. Styles such as formalism, imagism, symbolism, and absurdism saw increasing use, while the broader range of subject matter found in Modernist poetry, including such issues as industrialism, War, individualism, pessimism and freedom, reflected the increasing level of sophistication in society, itself a result of modernity. Moreover, modernist poetry is more fragmented in structure and eschews the organic unity of earlier poetry. Modernist poetry is also often termed "poetry from mind to mind"; Modernist poets communicate with their readers through intellectual stimulation. Poets of the movement also addressed universal human problems which were not tied to specific periods and places, and examinations of political themes were also common. The Modernist movement not only introduced new forms and subjects to the genre of poetry, but it brought about a revolution across all aspects of poetry (Finch, John, and Untermeyer 189).

2.2 Ezra Pound's Short Poems as Modernist Poetry

Ezra Pound's poems are marked by a form, themes, language and a willingness to break the conventions of previous literary schools, which are typical of early works of Modernist poetry. It led his work to be identified as such when they first appeared. Three of his most famous short poems are *In a Station of the Metro*, *And Days are Not Full Enough*, and *Alba*.

The first of these, "*In a Station of the Metro*", is only fourteen words long:

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.* (Pound)

In many ways, this poem is an encapsulation of the age of Modernism in poetic form. The shortness of the poem itself is a revolutionary feature of Modernist poetry, and it can indicate that the readers are running out of time. Also, the poem's irregular rhyme and rhythm is another typically Modernist feature that suggests the themes of industrialization and the increasing pace of life. The word "apparition" emphasizes this increasing pace and reminds us that time is also running rapidly, adding to the sense of the poem's shortness, itself a sign or a symbol of the rapid and sudden development, urbanization, and industrialism of the modern age. The term

"crowd" indicates the increasing mobility of people in the period, with populations increasingly moving into cities from the homes and villages where they once lived more peaceful lives. The phrase "petals on a wet black bough" is an evocative image of an overlooked and neglected tree which receives little attention from the people who pass it by. The poem's title also indicates that the poet has been inspired to write the poem while in the vicinity of a metro station, a location that is symbolic of industrialism and the increasing speed of life in the modern age. The poem is also marked by the simplicity of its language and the freedom of its form. Reading the poem and diving into the words give the reader a comprehensive image of the modern age. The verse shows that small and simple objects in the modernist movement were increasingly ignored in the modern era, either in the form of "the petals on the wet black bough" or the anonymous faces in the crowd. One significant point to consider is that it is unclear whether Ezra Pound was outside the metro looking at the crowd or if he was inside, a member of the crowd himself. In both cases, however, the sense of the apparition would still hold true.

According to Pratt and William (133), the poem both describes the changes that have occurred as a result of the increased pace of life and also criticizes these developments. This is achieved in a direct and straightforward manner. Other critics have read this poem as purely a work of description, while others perceive Pound's critical approach. Ezra is describing the era in clear terms; he only speaks about how it appears, depicting the era as an image. This description is particularly sophisticated because it shows the downsides of the period. It is a frank image of the era in which he lived.

The second poem is "*and The Days Are Not Full Enough.*"

*And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass (Pound)*

The title immediately tells us that the poem is a criticism of reality and how short time has become. It is only a single stanza, but the poem can be interpreted in many different ways. The shortness of the poem could be indicative of the symbolism or the imagistic depiction of the briefness of time, a problem from which society suffered in the modernist era. Furthermore, it offers a simile that compares human life to a quickly running mouse. Revolutionary items and features such as these mark the poem as a work of the Modernist school of poetry (Sergeant 64).

The third poem is "Alba"

*As cool as the pale wet leaves
of lily-of-the-valley
She lay beside me in the dawn (Pound)*

This poem is also a concise work offering a romantic aspect and a feminine theme. The poem depicts a sleeping or lying woman in the natural setting of a sunrise. This could be interpreted in two ways. The first approach is that the poem may be indicating the need for the individual to look back upon love and re-evaluate their lives which have been emptied of love by the encroachment of industrialism. Another meaning is conveyed through the use of the word "lay" rather than "slept", indicating the possibility of insomnia due to exhaustion caused by living in an industrialized world. (Pound 318)

All of the features identified in these poems suggest that Ezra Pound can be categorized as a Modernist poet.

2.3 Historical-Biographical Reasons to Classify Pound's Poems as Modernist Poetry

Both through the features of his work and the events of his life, it seems reasonable to describe Ezra Pound as a Modernist poet. The biographical and historical details of Pound's life have been discussed at length by many critics. Firstly, Pound lived in an era in which industrialization was taking over the globe, and he was also witnessing the horrors of two world wars. The drastic changes that occurred over the course of Pound's life were also noteworthy for the speed at which they took place, and this greatly affected his writing style and the subject matter he addressed in his work.

He was also well known for his relationships with other leading Modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot. In examining Ezra Pound's life, we can relate his poetry to the events he witnessed. *In a Station of a Metro* was written in Paris in 1913, a time at which the French capital was undergoing a rapid process of industrialization. Pound wrote the poem as he was watching the passing faces of the masses of people going and coming through the Metro station. The faces of the passers-by are obscured by their movement, giving an effect similar to that of a film being sped up by the editor. During the period in which the poem was written, Pound was reading Japanese folktales in the form of Haikus, short-form poems. It is known that Pound first composed a more extended version of the poem, gradually reducing the length to the essence of his message (Pound 318). This reduction in length also reflects his observations of the briefness of time and how people also suffer from the same issue in the modern era. The poem *And the Days Are Not Full Enough* can perhaps be seen as an extension of the earlier work. Both poems address a real-life problem that has appeared due to the developments of the modern age; Ezra himself suffered from these same issues. In short, details from Pound's biography supports his categorization as a Modernist poet.

3. Ezra Pound as a Poet in the School of Victorianism

This chapter of the paper highlights Ezra Pound's poems as Victorian poetry. It first offers a definition of Victorianism before moving on to examine its characteristics. Pound's poem will then be examined in an effort to identify and evaluate any Victorian features. Historical and biographical evidence will then be offered in support of the hypothesis.

3.1 Definition and Elements of Victorianism

The literary school of Victorianism is generally considered to fall between the years of 1837 and 1901, primarily the early period of industrialism preceding the modernist era of the early 20th century. Victorian literature is typically associated with the period of Queen Victoria's reign in England. Victorian poetry has many features ("Victorian Poetry Volume 47, 2009 Index" 2). Ballads were the most popular form of poetry in terms of structure in this school, and the thematic emphasis was placed on the provision of poetry for the masses.

Victorian poetry is also marked by harmony between language and the chosen content, with rustic language commonly employed to address rural themes and subject matter. Pessimism is another typical feature of Victorian poetry: a strict sense of morality and social and individual responsibility. Science and technology and resulting religious doubts also commonly feature in works of the period, but the era also increased interest in folktales and folk myths. Finally, realistic depictions of nature are typical subjects in Victorian poetry, often used to contrast city life and urbanization. In general, it is possible to state that Victorian poetry was more nature-oriented and popular in approach, with a greater focus on society than on the individual.

3.2 Ezra Pound's Short Poems as Victorian Poetry: The Role of Nostalgia

Although Pound is widely and correctly considered a leading figure in Modernist poetry, a deeper examination of his work can reveal elements of Victorian literature. For example, his poetry does not lack a certain nostalgia for bygone days. His short poems also include themes and features of Victorian literature, which either intentionally or unintentionally criticizes modern life. Pound's poems also feature language indicative of nature, science and technology, and rural themes. On such a basis, it is possible to suggest that his poetry can also be read as Victorian works.

Several elements of Victorian poetry also appear in the poem "*In a Station of the Metro*". First of all, the poem addresses the issues of the majority and offers a realistic account of contemporary nature. The idea is to connect mountains, rivers and trees of human reality with the inventions and discoveries of science. The poem also includes a scientific theme in its setting of a metro station, indicating the advanced technology that was used to create this system. Finally, there is nostalgia for the Victorian era itself. The use of the word "Petals" or "Lillies" shows that the Victorian interest in flowers and their symbolism continued into the Modernist period. In the references in "Alba" to natural features such as the dawn and the feminine atmosphere, we can also discern the same nostalgia for the Victorian era's romantic and naturalist elements. Finally, the poem "*and The Days are Not Full Enough*" also has a hint of nature by using the word "grass" in the simile. All three poems share a pessimistic mode, a typical feature of Victorian literature. However, it should be borne in mind that Ezra himself was not in England, nor were the poems written during the reign of Queen Victoria's (Nichols 171).

3.3 Historical-Biographical Reasons to Categorize Pound's Poems as Victorian Poetry

The analysis has shown that although Ezra Pound is rightly considered to be one the outstanding figures in Modernist poetry, his work features many elements which are typical of Victorian poetry. The events of Pound's life and the influences upon his thinking can offer further evidence to support this hypothesis. Ezra Pound was born in the late 1880s, which would mean that he was born during the Victorian era. Moreover, he was in love with folktales, an interest that later drew him to read Japanese Haikus, a source of inspiration for his shorter work. Kuduk (514) has argued that despite the iconoclastic approach of many Modernist poets, Victorian literature remained a strong influence both on Modernism itself and on subsequent schools of poetry; Dick and Homberger have noted Pound was highly influenced by the Victorian poets, enjoying a positive relationship with the genre during his early years (Dick and Homberger 772).

Ezra Pound was married to an English writer, Dorothy Shakespear, and spent many years in London, a further factor indicating the influence of Victorianism on his work.

The existence of these historical-biographical facts, references and analyses make Pound's classification as a Victorian poet very likely and possible.

"American Victorian Poetry" sounds like a contradiction in terms. Actually, the phrase "Victorian Poetry" was coined by an American in New York, when E. C. Stedman published Victorian Poets in the United States in 1875." (Jackson)

4. Clarifying The Confusion

This chapter explains the confusion involved in considering Ezra Pound as both a Modernist and Victorian poet, offering suggestions of how the two classifications can be mutually compatible. The chapter then outlines a detailed background reading which demonstrates

Pound's uniqueness and the ways in which his work differs from the standard characteristics of the two schools.

4.1 Traditional VS Modern Classifications

Traditionally, poets were often ascribed to a single school in a specific era with little possibility of escaping this designation. It may be hard for those who ascribe to these traditional rules to understand that a poet can be classified as a poet for two or more schools. However, developments in science and technology mean that all fields can be intertwined with another in complicated ways, and this allows interdisciplinary approaches to poetry to be understood in more detail. As Jackson argues, there is no logic in classifying Victorian poetry as only works written by English authors in England. According to ("OUP Accepted Manuscript"), relationships exist between every literary school. Therefore, a poet can be both American and Victorian at the same time. On such a basis, Pound can be considered both a Victorian and a Modernist poet at the same time.

4.2 Backgrounding Pound's Life: Historical and Biographical facts

As was discussed in previous chapters, Ezra Pound lived an extraordinarily rich life. He was born in America, spent many years in England, marrying an Englishwoman there, and died in Italy. He was deeply involved in politics, and he faced many troubles and obstacles in his life, not least of which were his imprisonment after World War Two and his subsequent internment in a psychiatry hospital. His actions during the War led to him being exiled and severely damaged his literary reputation. He witnessed the events and the chaos of industrialization and both world wars. But he was also a lover and proponent of world literature, spanning the eras of Victorianism and Modernism (Keyser 54). Altogether, these events affected him internally; they also caused him to be a different poet and even a different individual. It is for this reason that Pound's poetry is so different from those of his contemporaries and why he still deserves a place among the greats of the world of poetry.

4.3 Contrasts between Pound and Both Modern and Victorian Poets

Ezra Pound is often described as a unique poet, and he was a very perceptive man who was always acutely aware of what was happening around him. There are many other reasons why he was unique. First and foremost, Ezra Pound was widely experienced due to his nature and his travels. There is a real sense of genuineness in his descriptions. He was an educated reader and a valued literary critic. Furthermore, the historical events witnessed by him made him this different man. His poetry includes elements of both Modernism and Victorianism too.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ezra Pound's poetry is highly innovative yet remains accessible in form. He eschews rhyme and rhythm in his work, features which lead him to be considered chiefly as a Modernist poet, a sense that is further strengthened by the themes and subjects addressed in his poetry and by the events of his life. In the past, any non-British poet who wrote poetry in the Victorian era would not have been considered a Victorian poet. However, new researchers reject that idea. Ezra Pound's poetry has been influenced by both Victorianism and Modernism poetry, and his own work includes elements of both schools. These features interplay and complement each other, with no single influence becoming predominant. This quality of Pound's work makes it abundantly clear that he is a poet of both schools and movements.

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