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إعداد: الأستاذة الدكتورة أروى حسن الدوري

البريد الإلكتروني الجامعي dr.arwa.hussein@tu.edu.iq

Imagism and Cubism in the Poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot

In the early 20th century, the literary movement of Imagism and the artistic movement of Cubism transformed poetry and visual arts, respectively. Both groups aimed to diverge from convention and provide new viewpoints on the perception and representation of reality. Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot epitomized modernist experimentation in poetry, deriving influence from these movements. This article examines the effect of Imagism and Cubism on the poetry of Pound and Eliot, illustrating how their works encapsulate the fractured and complex nature of contemporary existence.

Imagism: Clarity and Precision in the Poetry of Ezra Pound

Imagism, a literary movement led by Ezra Pound, arose as a response against the ornate, extravagant vocabulary characteristic of Victorian poetry. Pound, like with contemporaneous poets such as H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Richard Aldington, championed a kind of poetry characterized by directness, conciseness, and vividness. Imagism aimed to produce a vivid picture or moment of sensory clarity that exists alone, free from superfluous adjectives, metaphors, or conventional meter. In his 1913 article “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” Pound articulated the principles of Imagism, highlighting the significance of “direct treatment of the ‘thing,’” conciseness, and free verse rhythm.

Pound’s poem "In a Station of the Metro" (1913) is a quintessential example of Imagism. Composed of only two lines, the poem reads:

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals
on a wet, black bough." (Pound, 1913)

Pound skillfully depicts a short scene of contemporary metropolitan life. The term "apparition" implies a ghostly or transitory character, yet the juxtaposition of human features and flower petals emphasizes the scene's transience and beauty. The poem's

minimalism and acute emphasis on imagery follow the fundamental principles of Imagism. It captures a single, crystalline moment, devoid of embellishment or abstraction. In this regard, Imagism resembles Cubism, notably in its attention to detail and fragmentation of reality. Pound's Imagism tried to condense moments intotheir purest form, much to how Cubist painters chopped down things into geometricforms to offer numerous viewpoints at the same time. By reducing language to its essentials, Pound's poetry presents fragmented yet vivid snapshots of reality. As hefamously stated, "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something" (Pound, 1913).

Cubism, pioneered by painters like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, transformed how visual reality was depicted. Rather of showing things from a single perspective, Cubist artists divided their subjects into various geometric forms and angles, enabling viewers to see the item from several viewpoints at once. This notion of fragmentation breaking down a whole into different but interconnected parts found parallels in the work of modernist poets like T.S. Eliot.



Like Picasso's painting "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907), where the female figure is deconstructed and presented from multiple angles, Prufrock's consciousness is dissected, revealing various facets of his psyche. Through this fragmentation, Eliot captures the complexity of human thought and emotion, much as Cubism captures the complexity of perception. While Eliot was not an Cubist in the strictest sense, his poetry was heavily affected by Cubist techniques, notably the fragmentation of narrative, voice, and imagery. Eliot uses a

Cubist-style fragmentation of mind in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), showing Prufrock's inner struggle and shattered awareness. The poem, as a case in point, alternates between locations, recollections, and views, portraying the disconnected condition of contemporary existence. The poem's form reflects Prufrock's existential paralysis, as Eliot employs stream of consciousness to express his disorganized, self-doubting thoughts: "*Time to turn back and descend the stair, / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair... / Do I dare / Disturb the universe*?" (Eliot, 1915) Eliot's use of fragmented imagery and disconnected thoughts mirrors the Cubist approach of breaking down a subject into its component parts.

The Waste Land and Cubist Montage

Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) illustrates Cubist techniques in poetry. The poem is a disjointed, multi-voiced collage of cultural references, personal musings, and mythical allusions. It displays a disconnected collage of images and sounds, similar to a Cubist artwork, yet these parts work together to make a unified depiction of post-World War I disillusionment. For example, in the poem's opening part, "The Burial of the Dead," Eliot contrasts imagery of old myth with current, metropolitan scenes:

Unreal City,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many." (Eliot, 1922)

The fragmentation of time and space, as well as the layering of various voices and cultural allusions, are reminiscent of the Cubist notion of presenting many views inside a single artwork. Eliot's “The Waste Land”, like a Cubist artwork, portrays a fragmented yet full view of a world in cultural and spiritual collapse.

Imagism and Cubism vary in their approaches. Imagism seeks clarity in single moments, while Cubism stresses diversity and fragmentation. However; both movements share a desire to break free from old forms and provide new ways of experiencing and interpreting reality. In Pound's poetry, Imagism lowers language to its fundamental elements, much as a Cubist painting reduces things to geometric outlines. Eliot uses Cubist methods like as fragmentation and different angles to show the shattered state of contemporary awareness. Pound and Eliot employ both trends to investigate contemporary life in different ways, with Imagism resulting in a sharper perception and Cubism enabling them to explore fractured, multiple perceptions. As Eliot said in his article “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot, 1919). This exemplifies the Cubist theory of splitting down a single topic into several views.

In short, Imagism and Cubism, although differing in their methodologies, both fundamentally address the representation of the intricacies of contemporary experience in art and literature. For Ezra Pound, Imagism provided a method to distill poetry to its fundamentals, showcasing vivid, precise imagery that encapsulates the core of a moment or emotion. T.S. Eliot saw Cubism as a framework for examining the fractured, multi-dimensional aspects of consciousness and society in the contemporary world. Both poets, via their involvement with these groups, produced works that not only mirrored the tumult and disarray of the early 20th century but also expanded the limits of literary form and expression. Their inventions established the foundation for what is now acknowledged as Modernist poetry, and their impact persists in current literature and art. Pound and Eliot's poetry, via Imagism and Cubism, serves as a potent witness to art and literature's persistent capacity to encapsulate and elucidate the fragmented, varied essence of human experience.