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Oct 26th, 1:30 PM - 3:00 PM

### Imagist Poetry of Twentieth Century American Poets Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell and Hilda Doolittle

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#### Recommended Citation

Bashota, Halil and Ejupi, Vlera, "Imagist Poetry of Twentieth Century American Poets Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell and Hilda Doolittle" (2019). *UBT International Conference*. 46.

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# **Imagist poetry of the twentieth century American poets: Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell and Hilda Doolittle**

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**Abstract.** This article elaborates key aspects of imagist poetry of the twentieth century American poets E. Pound, A. Lowell and H. Doolittle. Twentieth century imagism belongs to a literary movement in American modern era that is characterized by a tendency to break from the past of traditional literary styles, to a movement that reflects the simplicity, clarity and precision of reflective images. It covers a period from imagism to symbolism, a period of free expression, direct topics as well as images as an exact description. The study remains with highest relevance, despite that there is a wide range of articles, papers, analysis and books about American studies, yet it is a gap in specific topics and authors.

**Key words:** literary styles, imagism, symbolism, free expressions, reflective images

## **Introduction**

Twentieth century marks the beginning of a new movement raised among modern American literature, first among imagist poets, and later on, in all arts which was spread and succeeded, especially with greatest advancement in poetry. This movement was called “imagism”, and its first roots were found in England and America, as early as in 1908, where the initial ideas came from the English philosopher and poet T.E. Hulme, who spoke about poetry that is different from the traditional one, a poetry which is not conditioned by the topic, or word expressions. This movement began as a manifestation of a group of authors, influenced by English Metaphysical poets, and French Symbolists, with Ezra Pound and his contemporaries in forefront, who wanted to go beyond the literary styles of that time, what they think they were “bad habits” and belong to nineteenth century. (Daiu, 2010, p.57). In both Pound’s essays: “Imagisme” (1913), and “A few don’ts by an imagiste” (1913), we find a kind of appreciation for such a new literary styles that was coming very fast, and served as a manifesto for most of the authors of this period, where it clearly specifies what an imagist should do and don’ts. Ezra Pound was considered as one of the forerunners of imagism, who plays the most significant role in forming the new style to Eliot, Joyce, Frost, Moore, Hemingway, Tagore and many other authors. (Daiu, 2010, p.70). Both Eliot and Tate, recognized his irreplaceable role, by considering him as “the most important English poet living”, however there were others who didn’t appreciate most of his works and his contribution, such as Fitzgerald. Pound thinks that the nineteenth century poetry has too many problems, starting from word expressions, literary style as well as poetic diction. Poetry consists in itself of an overuse of words, such words that most of the time don’t play any role, or are not anymore in the actual speech, with subjects` repetition, and traditional diction in their stanzas or meters. This tendency to change the general artistic and literary styles made him one of the most central figures of the whole movement, along with the first artists to accept and further support the imagist attitudes, Amy Lowell, and Hilda Doolittle.

These multifaceted efforts of this movement became very important not only for the authors but for its contribution to the whole American literature, by enriching it and making more attractive for readers and also for new scholars of this period. In her preface to her anthology, (1915), Amy Lowell printed the more precise rules. According to her, poetry should contain six principles: it should be the use of the common speech, a speech of everyday life, but it should employ the exact words; (2), it should create a new rhythm; (3) allow absolute freedom of choosing the subject; (4) present an image - poetry should present the image of the topic it contains; (5) it should produce the poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite; (6) last but not least, the concentration is in the very essence of poetry. (Daiu, 2010, p.58).

Moreover, according to Ms. Lowell, the imagist movement splits up into three phases: the first one with poets Edwin A. Robinson and Robert Frost, with their works "The night before", "Birches", and "Mending walls", whose works are considered to be more realistic, direct and simple; the second phase with the representation of Edgar L. Masters, his revolutionary poetry and Carl Sandburg, a winner of the Pulitzer prizes, as well as widely regarded as a major figure in contemporary literature, with his famous works, "Chicago Poems" (1916), "Cornhuskers" (1918), and "Smoke and Steel" (1920); while the third phase is represented by Hilda Doolittle, with her most well-known poem "Oread" (1915), and John G. Fletcher, the ones that become the key pioneers of the last generation to modernize the whole concept of poetry. (Tupper, vol. 33, no. 5, 1918).

Another literary contribution which will be noted as part of this study is the author Hilda Doolittle, mostly known in literature as H.D. Imagiste, after returning to London, she came to Ezra Pound's influence that helped her become more exclusive to the period. Her concept and ideas about poetry, were almost the same to other imagist poets, with some minor exceptions. H.D. participated in both projects, first publication of "Des Imagiste" (1914), and the second edition "Some Imagist Poets" (1916), with her most brilliant works published among the most famous "Oread", "Garden", and "Sea Roses" as well as "Sea Gods".

## **Aspects of imagist poetry in Ezra Pound, Ami Lowell and Hilda Dolittle**

Among all the modernist poets Ezra Pound remains the most controversial one. He was called from an indifferent person to a nutty one, sometimes critics were harsher with him to call a fascist. Hugh Kenner, a literary critic, in his study "The poetry of Ezra Pound", could claim that Pound didn't have any wide public, while his readers were very frequently surprised by his controversial poetic materials, and esthetic concept. However, Eliot recognized his contribution in the twentieth century modern poetry. He considers Pound as a cornerstone of the literary studies. (Cid, vol. 28, no.3, 1954). While Donald Hall, reaffirmed Pound's impact not only to his personal poetry but his support was evidenced in James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Robert Frost, recalling that "Ezra Pound is the poet who, a thousand times more than any other man, has made modern poetry possible in English."

Ezra Pound is one of the most important poets of the movement that helped the shape of imagist ideals. It was him that required the standard of writing poetry should be liberated from sentimental and abstract words which are completely unnecessary for a poet. In "A few don'ts by an Imagiste" (1913), he insisted that instead of having been told by the poet of our feelings and emotions with too many unnecessary words, it is better for an imagiste to use such a clear and precise images that enables the reader to better penetrate to the very core of message.

The most distinguished aspect of Pound's poetry was the use of poetic criteria among the twentieth century poetry, that in modernist concept they were considered as new principles that will contribute by creating new rules for modern era, and it was Pound who were the first to formulate it as "imagism". Critics see Ezra Pound as one of the most influential authors in his

generation that helped the creation of a new perspective for modernist poetry. As someone who keeps the working principles, he stayed very close to the newly principles, and promoted it much further. He made it clear in both works "Retrospect" and also in "A few don'ts".

So, according to him, this is more applicable, economic from words, through using precise words, as well as more attractive. To better elaborate it, in his poem "In a station of a metro", we can see, a short poem, modelled under the Japanese style of haiku, which tells about the clear image of people seen in the darkness of a Paris subway. Here through these short two lines poem, he wanted to prove metaphorically the supernatural and unexpected experience through image and using the exact words that creates specific emotion and real perception. The word "apparition" has been long debated among literary critics' reviews. Critics call it just a single word that makes the couplet from a bad statement into poetry. It has been stated that the word suggests "the supernatural or the immaterial and a sudden unexpected experience"; that it "first establishes the sensation of unreality and the lack of precision which is then reinforced by the metaphor, and which, therefore permeates the mood of the poem," and that through its use, the poet seems to suggest that life "can be made to seem bearable only by the metaphor of an 'apparition,' a ghost of the bright beauty of things that grow freely in the sunlight." As regarding the structure, it is a short free verse couplet, resembling a Japanese haiku.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough.

(Poem: In a station of a Metro)

Another poem that Pound is seen to write according to his standards, the imagist standards is the poem "The sea of glass", a short, simple and very colourful poem. The metaphor he uses in this poem goes beyond what is seen, and felt, through a picturesque and, what he would himself call "apparition", among the lines expressed so beautifully to convey the message. The endless sea that is roofed over with the rainbows, where two lovers meet and depart, that makes such a beautiful view very glorious. The lines are unrhymed and

I looked and saw a sea  
roofed over with rainbows,  
In the midst of each  
two lovers met and departed;  
Then the sky was full of faces  
with gold glories behind them.

It is worth mentioning that the perspective of sea images remain essential to Pound, through which he manages to visualize the relationship between his inspiration and reality.

## **Amy Lowell introspective modern poetry**

Amy Lowell belongs to the most unique poets that exemplifies an excellent escape from the rules and structure of the poetry of the nineteenth-century, facing a kind of regular expressions and a tendency to be more straight-forward and direct in her poems, complying with modernist concept. She was an early adherent to poetry, as noted in her edition with lyrical poems "A Dome of Many Coloured Glass", her preface to "Sword Blades and Poppy Seed", in the North American Review, in 1917, and more polyphonic in "Men, Women and Ghost" in 1916.

A Dome of Many Coloured Glass was her first edition in poetry, which appeared in 1912, however many of her works, especially uncollected poems, were published in both editions of the "Some imagists poets: An Anthology" dated in 1915 and second edition in 1916. In some specific poems of this edition, Lowell, uses the figure of alliteration and a specific poetic symbolism through figurative words that makes the

reader feel the emotional weight in the third person. In the poem called “Song” , the symbolic phrase, which repeats the rhythm in the first line of every four stanzas, “to be a flower”, “ to be a butterfly”, “to be a cloud” and “to be a wave”, represent the need for reincarnation of her poetic perception in readers’ desire in meeting new and perspective visualization.

Oh! To be a flower  
Nodding in the sun  
Bending, then upspringing  
As the breezes run

Holding up

A scent-brimmed cup  
Full of summer's fragrance to the summer sun.

(A Dome of Many Coloured Glass,1912)

In the preface of “Sword Blades and Poppy Seed” (1914), Lowell insisted that poetry should not try to teach or contain moral lessons, it should simply exist because it’s a “created beauty”, and such beauty, it is not quite simple to perceive unless you fully understand it. Art and universe are very much interrelated, the sooner we admit the universe, it is easier for us to perceive art. “Art is as much a function of the Universe as an Equinoctial gale, or the Law of Gravitation; and we insist upon considering it merely a little scroll-work, of no great importance unless it be studded with nails from which pretty and uplifting sentiments may be hung!” (Lowell, 1921). As regarding the technicalities used in poetry construction, she mentioned that the most influential to her, were the French poets of “Parnassian School”, such names as Leconte de Lisle, and José-Maria de Heredia (Lowell, 1921). According to her, real poets should produce poetry full of beauty and feeling, and with the ability to give that same feeling to readers. But to do this, they should find new images and use unexpected forms. Her desire was to write about free things, not to worry about the rhyme or meter. In her poem “Temple”, she uses a free-verse scheme with very figurative words that help the reader experience the same feeling, just like the author himself. However, despite the fact that it was enormously influenced by French symbolism, it doesn't fully abandon the English meter. As we can see into the lines that first and fourth lines rhyme, the subject matter complies and the emotional state remains: “

Between us leapt a gold and scarlet flame.  
Into the hollow of the cupped, arched blue  
Of Heaven it rose. Its flickering tongues up-drew

And vanished in the sunshine. How it came.”  
(Poem: The Temple) .

In her work “The Garden by Moonlight”, a fourteen line poem split into six to seven words per line, she tries the simplicity of life, nature and beauty, through a very careful expressions and exact words, she uses to the best description of the topic: A black cat among roses  
Phlox, lilac-misted under a first-quarter moon

The sweet smells of heliotrope and night-scented stock The garden is very still  
It is dazed with moonlight.

(Poem: The Garden by Moonlight).

It brings the freshness of garden on moonlight, the tranquility and colorful images described perfectly that one will feel the sight and smell of such a mysterious and magical quality. Here, in the poem we can see how the images are fully enforced by specific words that describes the idea, making more reasonable and acceptable for anyone that reads the poem. The scheme is completely regular and avoids the metaphor, making it easier for a more concrete reading. The lines are not rhymed and the poem contains the free verse, without restriction to words or topics.

Moon-shimmer on leaves and trellises

Moon-spikes shafting through the snow ball bush

Only the little faces of the ladies' delight are alert and staring  
Only the cat, padding between the roses  
Shakes a branch and breaks the chequered pattern.

(Poem: The Garden by Moonlight).

Even though, Lowell wrote mostly in free verse, without respecting rhyme, diction or restrictions to the structure of the 19th century, a rhyme scheme was found time to time among her poems, in the second and fourth lines of each stanza in "Azure and Gold", we see the rhyme ABCB: "reds/beds - trees/bees - stun /sun - hue/woo". The poem is a seven - four -line stanza, with seven syllables in each line. Despite it, was simple, clear and precise, as he tries to visualize everything in it, through words and images. In "Azure and Gold", Lowell introduces the reader with the great nature, beautiful nature with figurative words full of images that enriches the vocabulary of poetry. In the third line of the first stanza, it expresses in words like: "sparkle and coolness of snow", or in the second line of the second stanza: "pink of blossoming trees".

## **H.D. aesthetic poems, a transformation from speech into image**

Pound influence on H.D. was as early as in 1913, upon his suggestions for publishing the three poems of her in "Poetry" over the signature "H.D., Imagiste", by the expatriate Pennsylvanian Hilda Doolittle, who came to Europe in 1911. Burnett estimates that in the two poems of H.D. named with a simple title "Garden", she demonstrated her devotion and commitment to the movement facing the central themes of literary modernism, by entering in the era of great development in literary modes. Within this modernist tradition, H.D's particular emphasis grew out of her perspective as a woman regarding the intersections of public events and private lives in the aftermath of World War I and in the increasingly ominous period culminating in the Atomic Age. Love and war, birth and death are the central concerns of her work, in which she reconstituted gender, language, and myth to serve her search for the underlying patterns ordering and uniting consciousness and culture. ("H. D.")

Her poem was distinguished mainly for the ability to use a concentrated language and create a musical line that made the poetry become more resonant in speech, not to fit to the theory but to indulge her perspective as a poet, and what in fact later on, will by itself create an artistic approach to meet the requirements. According to the reviewers and scholars who wrote about her work in the 1910s and 1920s (such as Flint, Lowell, Sinclair, Eliot, Pound, Monroe, Williams, H. P. Collins, Alfred Kreyborg, and Marianne Moore), her work was very influential in the legitimization of the "modern" style of poetry. ("Hilda Doolittle, American Poet"). Alongside most of the imagist poems that has in itself the content of nature, and natural beauty, her poem "Oread" sticks to more realistic descriptions of pines, rocks and fir by whirling and splashing by

the wind and sea. The poem remains simple, clear and short, addressing the message, a recall to get the generation

Whirl up, sea—  
Whirl your pointed pines.  
Splash your great pines  
On our rocks.  
Hurl your green over us—  
Cover us with your pools of fir  
(*Oread*, 1915)

In the edition of “*Sea Garden*” (1916), the poet’s language is simple and realistic. She comes down to the earth, writing about gardens, poppies, trees as well as the days and nights. Poems like “*sea rose*”, “*sea lilies*” and “*sea poppies*”, represent her commitment to the realism of the twentieth century, where the natural beauty is praised and appreciated as it’s grown naturally. Other poems such as “*Mid-day*”, “*Evening*” and “*Night*”, portray the process of life, how it passes from one petal to another, by celebrating the beauty and purity of natural things.

The light passes  
from ridge to ridge,  
from flower to flower—  
the hypaticas, wide-spread  
under the light  
grow faint—  
the petals reach inward,  
the blue tips bend  
toward the bluer heart  
and the flowers are lost.  
(“*Evening*” - *Sea Garden*, 1916)

Critics have found some ground on her mystic approach, as she makes a journey into herself to delve over the mysticism and paradoxical forces that sees the women's role in society. When we say mysticism over imagism, as far as, it is not quite clear for an imagist poet, construct the image so widely, we surely can state that in both of her editions she wrote about mythical figures and heroines. In her edition “*Hymen*” (1921), most of the poems like: *Hymen*, *Thetis* and *See heroes* represent her appreciation for the greek heroes and heroines: *Hymen*, a poem associated with a temple music, deep and simple chanting notes, represents her deep despair and respect to women.

From the closed garden  
Where our feet pace  
Back and forth each day,  
This gladiolus white,  
This red, this purple spray—  
Gladiolus tall with dignity  
As yours, lady—we lay  
Before your feet and pray:

(*Hymen*, 1921)

In “*Thetis*”, she brings so perfectly all that mysticism into a brighter and vivid picture through the lines of the second stanza, by describing the natural look as pictoresc and marvellous as

possible, when we know that according to the greek myth, Thetis has been one of the untouched and mesmerizing goddess of beauty.

When the sun slips  
Through the far edge,  
There is rare amber

Through the sea,  
And flecks of it  
Glitter on the dolphin's back  
And jewelled halter  
And harness and bit  
As he sways under it.  
(Hymen, 1921)

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that imagist poetry seizes a very unique place in the twentieth century modern poetry. First, by its topics that come from real life, simple topics that are part of daily routines. The perspective of sea images remain essential to Pound, through which he manages to keep the relationship between his inspiration and reality. The same happens with Lowell, and her passionate poems of garden, and other natural beauties. Second, visualization through using images and visuals to make it a brighter and understandable for the reader. Third, the avoidance of unnecessary words, using a very precise word-image- prescription.

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