



Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

What are the historical contexts of 'In a Station of the Metro'?

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In my experience as a professor of American literature, the method of reading literary texts that we'll have a look at this week is the one that meets both students' and lay readers' expectations most closely. Most readers want to know more about how a novel, a play, or a poem fits into its time. Most readers are keenly interested in how the literary text draws on contemporary events, how it comments on societal debates of its time, how it gives expression to a specific zeitgeist. Now, I'm a native speaker of German, so I have to add, I think, that the word is actually pronounced 'tsaɪt, gaɪst' sharper, harsher, more German. So this is what we'll do this week.

We'll have a look at the historical context of 'In a Station of the Metro'. We'll have a look at its literary-historical context. And we'll have a look at New Historicism, a specific historical approach to literary texts that is currently dominant in literary studies. Let's start with the historical context. As the title of 'In a Station of the Metro' already tells us, we find ourselves in this poem in a space of technology and a space of mobility, a quintessentially modern space. And the metro itself is part of a larger modern space, that of the city. And for many a modernist, the city came to epitomise everything about modernity.

In this photograph of New York from the 1910s, we see many features of modernity expressed: urbanization, technological progress, mobility, urban crowds, and the explosion of widely available knowledge. Theatres and universities are always found in cities. Because the city is such a quintessentially modern place, many important modernist city novels were written. Think of James Joyce's Dublin in 'Ulysses'. Think of John Dos Passos' New York in 'Manhattan Transfer'. Think of German writer Alfred Döblin's 'Berlin Alexanderplatz'. For these writers, the city was the space of modernity. Perhaps Pound himself put it most succinctly when he said, 'I detest the country'. And by this, he meant the countryside. And 'In the Station of the Metro' indeed originated in an experience Pound had in a city.

'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough.' These lines originated when descending into a metro station in Paris in 1912, the year before he published 'In a Station of the Metro', Pound was struck by the stark contrast between the ugliness of the metro station and the beauty of the human faces he saw there. The beautiful human faces are, Pound suggests, like petals. He probably had



the petals of Japanese cherry trees in mind. And those faces are like petals against a dark and ugly background. But as we already saw in our close reading week, Pound in his poem 'In a Station of the Metro' does not only establish a contrast between beauty and ugliness.

Remember: 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough.' Pound here also establishes a contrast between the singular human faces and the mass plural of the crowd. And by doing that, he touches upon one of the central issues of the modern world, alienation - the fact that people in urban settings tend to feel a sort of disconnectedness from themselves and a disconnectedness from one another. Of course, it was Karl Marx who most famously theorised alienation. But if we take a final historical context into consideration, we begin to wonder to what extent Pound was really appalled and repelled by urban crowds and masses. And this brings us to the darkest side of Pound.

Pound turned out to be a fascist, a fascist who made anti-Semitic radio broadcasts in Mussolini's Italy, who was interned for treason during the Second World War. And whose poem 'With Usura' perpetuates the idea of Jews as greedy moneylenders. Search the world wide web for an image of Pound and fascism, and you'll find a pretty ugly photograph. Now, with knowledge of Pound's turn to fascism, we may begin to wonder what the poem's attitude toward its crowd is. After all, for fascists, the anonymity and alienation, the massed nature of city life, stands for everything that they rebelled and fought against.

At the same time, the fascists crucially relied on the masses for their physical, material, violent force, as well as their theatrical appeal. Think of any Nazi propaganda film by Leni Riefenstahl.