

THE IMAGIST MOVEMENT IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

SUKHMEET KAUR

Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature,
RR Bawa DAV College for Girls, Batala, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with the Imagist movement in English poetry which completely changed the style of writing poetry not just during that particular time span but for the future generation of poets also. The romantic elements in poetry were replaced by crisp and precise language. This paper basically deals with how things changed with the emergence of the Imagist movement.

KEYWORDS: English Literature, Emergence of the Imagist Movement

INTRODUCTION

The imagist movement in English poetry marked the beginning of a simple and precise poetic style which focused on describing images with crisp language and great focus. It started in the early 1900s when the old ways of writing poetry were abandoned and the modernist movement in poetry was started. The imagist movement is basically a subset of modernism which keeps its focus on deftly described images and does not waste time on talking about the themes behind the images- instead; they allowed the image to speak for itself. Among the notable imagist poets can be named William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell among others.

During the second decade of the 20th century, this movement was started as a reaction to Georgian poetry which they criticized as facile and loose. The term 'Imagism' was coined by Ezra Pound to denote the principles agreed on by himself and the other members of the literary group which was formed in London in 1912.

As a broad movement, Imagism signals the beginning of English and American modernism, and a definite break with the Romantic-Victorian tradition. As a stylistic programme, it manifests the desire of the post-symbolist, pre-war generation for a harder, more precise and objective medium.

Characteristics

Imagism emphasized form over everything else. It required the poet to remove herself or himself from the poem and to deliver it as objectively as possible. It also believed that the poem should be sparse, with no extra flourishes or ornamentation. Adjectives and descriptive were to be avoided. No abstraction were to be used. Words had to be precise and accurate in their meanings. They defined poetry as the presentation of a visual situation in the fewest possible concrete words. The lead given by T.E. Hulme was followed by Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle, popularly known as H.D. Ezra Pound wrote "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." There were four published Imagist anthologies- *Des Imagistes* (1914); *Some Imagists* (1915, 1916, 1917).

The typical Imagist poem is written in free verse, and undertakes to render as exactly and tersely as possible, without comment or generalization, the writer's response to a visual object or scene; often the impression is rendered by

means of metaphor, or by juxtaposing a description of object with that of a second and diverse object. This famed example by Ezra Pound exceeds all Imagist poems in the degree of its concentration:

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Revolting against the Romantic Extravagance in thought and expression, the Imagist movement had the following objects:

- To employ the language of common speech, preferring the exact word to the merely decorative.
- To create new rhythms, including free verse, as the expression of new moods.
- To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject.
- To replace vague descriptions by an exact image.
- To effect the utmost economy in the use of words.

Fundamentally, Imagism was a recall to economy and discipline, but it was too restrictive to endure long as a concerted movement. However, it proved to be the beginning of modern poetry. Almost every major poet upto this day, including W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, has felt strongly the influence of the Imagist experiments with precise, clear images, juxtaposed without expressed connection. Aldington said, "Poetry should be burned to the bone by austere fires and washed white with rains of affliction"

The most striking fact In 20th century English literary history is the revolution in poetic taste and practice which resulted in the rejection of the view of poetry represented by Palgrave in his 'Golden Treasury' in favour of one which saw poetry as at the same time more symbolist and more cerebral. This revolution was an Anglo-American achievement. T.S. Eliot, who settled in England before World War I and Ezra Pound, the literary gadfly whose stay in England in 1912 stung so many poets and critics into new activity, were in large measure its leaders, but much of the theoretical ammunition was supplied by T.E. Hulme who, before his death in the war of 1917, had contributed to the New Age and other periodicals a number of essays in which he declared war on what he considered to be the Romantic view of life and of art. Hulme wanted discipline, precision in the art of poetry writing. "I object even to the best of the Romantics", he wrote in his essay "Romanticism and Classicism". Hulme produced a collocation of classicism, the 'religious' attitude, abstract or geometrical art, belief in original sin, hard, clear and precise images, the medieval viewpoint, discipline and authoritarianism in politics on the good side of the ledger against romanticism, humanism, naturalistic art, belief in man's unlimited potentialities, the emotional and soft, the Renaissance attitude, self-expression and democracy on the bad side. The Imagist movement deriving from Hulme and Pound and others, demanded clear and precise images, elimination of every word "that did not contribute to the presentation" and a rhythm freed from the artificial demands of metrical regularity.

Ezra Pound, who was born in the USA but moved to Britain and Europe later in his life, has the reputation of being one of the most difficult poets of the 20th century, a reputation one understands and accepts if one were to dip into, say "The Cantos". Pound's significance to 20th century criticism and poetry is unimaginable. He nurtured several poets-one

of them was T.S. Eliot, whose “The Wasteland” was edited by Pound- and was at the forefront of major literary movements and developments like Vorticism and Imagism. He edited the first imagist anthology in 1914 and was instrumental in promoting James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis. He was also associated with Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway and Hilda Doolittle first in London and then in Paris. Pound’s first collection of poems “A Lume Spento” appeared in 1908. His obsession with accurate language, minimalism and sharp imagery is already visible in his early works like “Personae”. Here is a sample from Personae:

See. They return; ah, see the tentative
 Movements, and the slow feet,
 The trouble In the pace and the uncertain
 Wavering!

In 1920, he published the famous “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”, a collection that dealt with the theme of art itself. It opened with the following well-known lines:

For three years, out of key with his time,
 He strove to resuscitate the dead art
 Of poetry
 He had been born
 In a half-savage country, out of date;

The French Symbolists had taken a similar view of metrical regularity and invented *vers libre* that was adopted by the Imagists. The Symbolists wanted to be precise in order to be properly suggestive; precision, individuality, the “exact curve of the thing” and maximum symbolic projection of meaning was seen as going together. The imagists had a specific set of rules which they were supposed to follow when writing poetry. Firstly, they aimed at using the language of common speech- to employ the exact word, not the nearly-exact, not the merely decorative word. Secondly, they aimed at creating new rhythms as the expressions of new moods- and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. Thirdly, they aimed at absolute freedom in the choice of subject without any limitation. Fourthly, they tried to present an image and opposed the cosmic poet who seemed to shirk the real difficulties of his art. Fifthly, they aimed at creating verses which were hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.

The imagists expressed their ideas through the new rhythmic effect of the 'free' poetry and concentrated upon the creation of sharp and precisely delineated images in a language of the common people. The imagists brought out a magazine 'The Egoist' and later on published three volumes of Imagist poetry between 1905-1917. Imagism could not cut much ice for it concentrated exclusively on a new technique, holding that the subject was relatively unimportant. The pursuit of the sequence of very concise images and the use of *vers libre* often led to obscurity and license, and the movement was strongly criticized and quickly died out. Yet Hulme's conception of the clearly visualized concrete image is one of the most distinctive underlying ideas of later poetry and its effect is seen clearly in the poetry of T.S. Eliot.

CONCLUSIONS

As a critical movement, Imagism's main significance resides in its revaluation of Romanticism and the nineteenth century which, with few exceptions, is dismissed as a sentimental, blurry, manneristic period. No less significant was its insistence on the functional rather than the merely ornamental, potentiality of the poetic image, and the latter's capacity for conveying the concrete and definite. In this, it 'isolated the basic unit of the modern poem,' as Stephen Spender suggested. But in overstating its case, it was ignoring other, no less effective, poetic energies, as well as dangerously limiting its own scope.

REFERENCES

1. Mundra, J.N. A History of English Literature, Prakash Book Depot.
2. Mundra, S.C. A History of English Literature, Prakash Book Depot.
3. Daiches, David. A Brief History of English literature.
4. Rickett, Compton. History of English Literature.
5. Long, William J. A History of English Literature.
6. Poets.org
7. Wikipedia.org
8. Poetryfoundation.org