1. **American Modernist Poetry**

**E. Pound: ‘make it new,’ ‘break the pentameter.’**

**Introduction**

Read the following excerpts of poems and recall the features of Romantic poetry.

**\**The Daffodils*** by W. Wordsworth, 1815

I wandered lonely as a Cloud

That floats on high o'er vales and Hills,

When all at once I saw a crowd,

A host, of golden Daffodils;

Beside the Lake, beneath the trees,

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

**\*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by S. T. Coleridge, 1797**

The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,

Merrily did we drop

Below the kirk, below the hill,

Below the lighthouse top.

The Sun came up upon the left,

Out of the sea came he!

And he shone bright, and on the right

Went down into the sea.

**Compare to the following poem of Ezra Pound:**

***In a Station of the Metro***, 1913

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound’s poem is typical of ***Imagist*** poetry:

-Imagists try to avoid the sentimentalism of past styles,

- Free verse with emphasis on innovation:

In form: disrupt traditional fixed forms and break old patterns; two- line poem, no stanzas, no rhyme scheme, no regular meter

In syntax: two fragments joined by a semi-colon, no verb, no linking word, no complete sentence

- Language economy: only 14 words, 2 lines, 2 phrases,

-Images and symbols replace direct statements and leave space for interpretations.

- impersonal voice/ perspective/ point of view

- juxtaposition: vivid segments/ fragments and images juxtaposed: people’s faces in station and petals on a bough

-Meditative/ Philosophical tone: reflecting modern man’s state of mind, condition, and existential crisis

-Emphasis on presenting life as experienced: capturing the impression of a moment: faces like petals

- Modernist poetry is more predominantly intellectual/cerebral in its appeal, rather than emotive; opposed to the Romanticist poetics of spontaneity and imagination

- semantically and grammatically challenging for the uninitiated readers

The short poem and its title symbolise the rapid pace of modern progress, the shortness of life, and the modern man’s meaningless existence, according to Pound.

-The metro station also suggests a journey in the underworld; a world of darkness, despair, decay, and lifelessness

***The Snow Man*** (1923)

by Wallace Stevens 1879 –1955

One must have a mind of winter

To regard the frost and the boughs

Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time

To behold the junipers shagged with ice,

The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think

Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land

Full of the same wind

That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,

And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

**Questions:**

1. What do you think are the most striking features of Modernism that characterise the poem in terms of form?
2. “Poets in our civilization must be difficult,” writes T.S. Eliot in a 1921 essay. Does this characteristic apply to the poem? If yes, clarify how.

**Answers:**

1. Although the poem is made up of a title and five tercets (three-line stanzas), it is actually a one-complex-compound-sentence poem, which is very innovative, with no regular rhyme scheme, and no regular meter (free verse.)
2. The poem is indeed difficult to understand due to:

* its complex experimental **form**,
* its surreal winter **setting**; utterly lifeless and unearthly winter scenery,
* its combination of visual and auditory **images**: (frost, snow-crusted trees, rough ice-shagged boughs, glittering sun) Vs. (sound of land, sound of leaves and wind)
* its shift from concrete to abstract **diction**: trees, ice, frost, boughs… to ‘nothing’, ‘the nothing that is’
* its **symbolism**: winter, ice, cold, snow man symbolize modern nihilism…etc
* its detached /impersonal **point of view:** “One” perspective, indefinite, impersonal
* its philosophical/ meditative tone, and nihilistic **mood**.

**Themes**:

**Perspectivism:** everything is subjective – there can be no objective experience of the world.

**Reality:** the conflict, according to Stevens, between the rational consciousness of the existential meaninglessness/ purposelessness, between the will to see things as they are, and the innate human tendency to project emotions on reality and colour it through imagination.

**Also:** the misery of human condition**,** and the “emptiness within” of the twentieth-century man.

**Title:** the poem isn’t about a ‘snowman’, but about the Snow Man (separate words), which symbolises modern man’s existential crisis and nihilism.