In a Station of the Metro

POEM TEXT

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

SUMMARY

Seeing all these people’s faces pass by in a crowded subway station brings to mind the image of petals on a wet, black tree branch.

THEMES

PERCEPTION, IMAGINATION, AND REALITY

“In a Station of the Metro” is concerned above all with imagery: the speaker sees a bunch of people in a subway station and this prompts the speaker to envision petals on a tree branch. This shift is remarkably sudden: in just two lines—a fleeting instant—the speaker sees both petals and a crowd of faces, and manages to vividly convey both images to the reader.

The poem’s brief form allows it to combine both forms of perception (one happening before the speaker’s eyes, and one happening in their mind), creating a new, blended reality from the speaker’s point of view. Overall, then, the poem might be thought of as an attempt to capture the connection between sight and imagination—revealing how these two processes together shape people’s perception of the world around them.

Pound strips the poem of all superfluous language. Including the title, the poem uses just 20 words—meaning there is nothing to focus on besides the pair of images and how they relate to each other. The poem’s structure thus allows for a clear association between the what the speaker sees (“faces in the crowd”) and what the speaker imagines in response (“petals on a wet, black bough”).

The poem also notably doesn’t use any verbs. Instead, it is isolated to the rawest, most basic descriptions of images, which contribute to the spontaneity of the speaker’s visual association. In other words, the poem seems to catch the speaker in the act of visually processing a connection between “faces” and “petals” before the speaker even has time to form a complete thought! This verbless quickening creates a mingling between the two images as though the speaker sees “faces” and “petals” at the same time, or perhaps in oscillation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:
- Lines 1-2

URBAN LIFE AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Pound was a champion of a technique called “imagism,” which is more concerned with conveying images in clear, vivid prose than with following any particular poetic form. As such, part of the “point,” as it were, of a poem like "In a Station of the Metro" is simply to paint a picture for the reader. Much of the wonder of this particular poem is the way in which the two images presented contrast with and complement each other, helping the reader “see” these very different objects—a subway station and a wet tree branch—in a new or different way.

Taken on a symbolic level, the poem seems to be juxtaposing two normally opposing realms: that of urban life and that of the natural world. This might be highlighting just how different the human-made world is from the natural world by putting them in
such close proximity, or it might be highlighting each's (somewhat unintuitive) similarity. Of course, the poem could also be doing both!

The word “apparition” is especially important in assessing the similarity or difference between the images in the first and second lines. On one hand, this word could suggest a distraction. The “apparition,” or the ghostly, blurred appearance of many people in a crowd, might be so dull and homogenous an image that the speaker’s brain turns instead to petals. In other words, all the people rush by so quickly that their faces become indistinguishable from one another, and the speaker becomes distracted, thinking instead of the loveliness of nature.

Indeed, this depiction of a relatively peaceful and elegant part of the natural world would seem a welcoming change from a noisy, crowded metro station. The speaker could also be suggesting that nature is worth prioritizing, or at least thinking about, in a world increasingly consumed by technology. Perhaps the speaker is thinking about how the metro station has displaced what might have once been a forest, swapping out trees for a hurried mass of people and the loud, dirty trains.

Of course, the poem is just as likely doing the opposite: implying that the world of human beings isn’t all that distant from nature, and is in fact an extension of the natural world. Note that “apparition” also implies a kind of visual dissolving of one image into another. Under this interpretation, the ghostly faces in a metro station, lining up on either side of a track, dissolve in the speaker’s mind into the image of petals hanging on either side of a branch.

In this reading, the city itself could be thought of as a tree, with each metro station representing different “boughs” of that tree and people representing the tree’s leaves. The metro nourishes various parts of the city—allowing transportation of people and goods—just as a tree’s branches carry water to its many leaves.

What’s more, both images convey a sense of temporality, since neither is static. In the first, people are traveling from one destination to the next; whatever “faces” appear in the crowd will be replaced by new commuters soon enough. In the second, the tree is wet—likely from rain—and will ostensibly dry, while its petals will eventually fall and be replaced by new ones. In a way, then, this pair of images could suggest everything from the fleeting quality of the moment to the cyclical nature of life itself.

The word “faces” stands also stands out. Pound could have used “people,” or otherwise drawn attention to entire bodies rather than just faces. The word “faces,” however, accentuates the degree of monotony and blurriness in the image of the crowd.

Think about it this way: people’s faces are usually their most distinguishing characteristic, or the primary way that people tell one human being from another. If, in this metro station, everyone’s face shares the quality of an “apparition,” then the speaker has detached themselves from the scene by describing other people as such. The speaker seems to view the crowd as one ghostly body, not caring to pay attention to its many details. This distancing also paves the way for the seemingly abrupt transition in the next line, as though the speaker has already begun thinking about something else.

Read in a different way, the use of “apparition” suggests something deeply spiritual and moving about this crowd. The speaker is having a sort of vision or spiritual experience while looking out on all these people who pass before the speaker’s field of vision for just a moment. Perhaps this reflects the ultimate unknowability of other people, or the speaker’s sensation of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of different lives rushing past in an instant.

LINE 1

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

The title helps readers understand what’s happening here: the speaker is in a crowded subway station, where people appear like “apparitions”—or ghostly, fleeting images—as they pass by. On the one hand, this line seems pretty simple: with so many people walking by, one face after another pops up in the speaker’s field of vision. Yet the word “apparition” gives these faces a supernatural, ethereal quality, as if the speaker isn’t quite sure if these people even exist. Thanks to the poem’s title, readers can assume that the speaker’s crowded surroundings are indeed real, even though something else will take those surroundings’ place in the following line. “Apparition” also suggests something momentary—that the faces pop up in the speaker’s field of vision and just as quickly disappear.

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LINE 2

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Contrasting with the suggestion made by the “apparition” in the previous line, the images in this second line are very concrete. In other words, there is no debate as to what the speaker is looking at or imagining: “Petals on a wet, black bough.”

One word that stands out, and may even seem out of place, is the word “black.” Boughs are not normally black (although there certainly are trees with black bark). The word might exist
as a comparative feature between the metro station and the tree branch, as the former is a dark, dimly lit place, and the poem is inviting of a comparison between the two. In combination with "wet," the word "black" suggests that this tree branch has been soaked with rain, momentarily darkening its bark.

In a subtle way, this echoes the use of the word "apparition" in the previous line: "apparition" suggests not just ghostliness, but that something is fleeting or temporary. Likewise, if the trees in the second image are dark for being soaked with rain, this is also a temporary state; they won't always be wet. Nor will the petals always be there; flowers lose their petals and trees lose their leaves. So too will the metro be empty (or emptier) once peak travel times are over or the station has closed for the evening. Together, these two lines thus paint a picture of a brief, fleeting moment. Nothing is permanent, they seem to suggest.

This line also contains several notable sonic features, one of which resonates with the previous line. "Petals" and "wet" share assonance with the short /e/ sound, while "black" and "bough" have alliteration by each starting with the letter "b." Although this poem does not rhyme, the final words in each line, "crowd" and "bough," share assonance with the long /ow/ sound. This simple feature of sonic resonance connects each line, even though they portray different images. Perhaps they are more alike than they initially seem.

Note also how there are no verbs here, nor conjunctions between the two lines. Instead, the speaker relies on the shared sounds and thematic echoes to draw a link between these two images, trusting the reader or listener to fill in the blanks. In other words, there is an implied equivalence between the poem's first line and second.

POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

This poem contains both alliteration and consonance, two related literary devices that allow its short form to link disparate images with sound. There are only a few instances of each, and they all occur in the poem's second line. Alliteration exists in the /b/ sound shared by "black" and "bough," while consonance exists in the /t/ sound shared by "Petals" and "wet" as well as in the /l/ sound shared by "Petals" and "black." In a poem this sort, the use of so many repeated sounds is no coincidence, but rather a deliberate choice on the part of the speaker.

For one thing, the insistence on the /l/ sound slows down the second line. Whereas in the first line the people's faces rush by so quickly that they seem like mere apparitions, in the second line it feels as though the speaker is really savoring this image of "petals on a wet black bough." The luxuriousness of the /l/ sound causes time to pause, in a way, as if the speaker has pressed a slow-motion button on the image before them.

These sonic resonances stand out not just for their appealing sound, but also for the fact that one line contains them while another does not. The lack of similarly resonant sonic devices in the first line might make the image of the crowded train station seem less beautiful or coordinated than the second line, which, by contrast, consists almost entirely of words that all sonically resonate with one another.

This disparity matches each line's content, the first portraying an image that is, after all, less beautiful and more hectic by representing a crowded metro station, while the second line shows a relatively orderly and peaceful glimpse into the natural world.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:
- Line 2: "t," "l," "t," "bl," "b"

ASSONANCE

Unlike the examples of alliteration and consonance, which seem to help distinguish the images in the first and second lines, assonance links each line together. There are several instances of assonance in this poem. "Apparition" and "black" share assonance with the short /a/ sound, "Petals" and "wet" with the short /e/ sound, and finally "crowd" and "bough" with the long /ow/ sound.

On the most basic level, this assonance simply makes the poem sound lovely—and, indeed, "poetic." It also suggests a sense of cohesion, reminding the reader that every word in this very short poem has been carefully selected by the speaker, rather than jotted down haphazardly.

Part of this poem's conflict, of course, is whether its two main images (the "faces" and the "petals") are more similar or more different from one another. A crowded metro station does indeed seem quite different from a collection of petals hanging from a tree branch. However, the fact that assonance exists between words in each line, especially in the final word of each (making the poem almost rhyme), invites a connection between these two images. In other words, because the lines sound so very similar so often, this suggests a thematic link between them.

The poem, of course, could be interpreted both ways, supporting or rejecting the idea that a crowded metro station bears similarity to the natural world. In interpreting this poem, it is important to note that the sounds it makes, in addition to its actual content, support how readers understand the relationship between the two images.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:
- Line 1: "a," "ow"
**Juxtaposition**

"In a Station of the Metro" juxtaposes two images: that of many people situated in a crowded metro station, and that of petals on a wet tree branch. This juxtaposition is formally designed to highlight the pairing of these two images, as evidenced by the poem's two-line structure and accompanying grammar (specifically, a colon joining each line).

The poem thus prompts several questions, namely that of why these two images are being paired together. Although it isn't possible to answer this question outright, it is nevertheless worth noting the significance of what, exactly, is being juxtaposed, and how those things might relate to one another.

For example, beyond the specifics of each image, the poem juxtaposes two traditionally opposing realms: urban life and the natural world. What is especially strange is that immediately after seeing a densely populated train station, a fixture of the urban world, the speaker imagines a peaceful part of the natural world. The poem may be suggesting that despite their obvious differences, urbanity and nature bear more of a resemblance to one another than they initially seem to.

Of course, it may also be doing the opposite. The abbreviated form might instead serve to highlight the incredible contrast between the two realms, rather than solely offer a visual similarity. In any case, the juxtaposition provokes an array of analytical questions, and allows the reader to wonder about the unusual visual transition happening before the speaker's eyes.

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**Imagery**

*Imagery* is extremely important to this poem. Beyond the two sets of images that make up its content, the poem comments on the nature of imagery itself, demonstrating the way that one image can lead to, or transform into, another.

The first image is an "apparition" of "faces" in a "crowd," or a host of dimly lit, almost ghostly, people in a packed train station. The use of the word "apparition" makes the people's faces seem blurry or ghostly, as though the speaker is visually detached from whatever they're looking at. It also implies that this image is fleeting—gone as quickly as it appears. This suggests that people are rushing past the speaker, each face visible only for instance before it's replaced by another.

This detachment sets up what comes across as a sudden shift in the next line: "Petals on a wet, black bough." Through the blurry, ghostly quality of the first line, the reader is invited to transition into a new image with the speaker. Readers can even imagine how people in a metro station might bear resemblance to petals on a tree branch, as commuters would line up on either side of a train like petals on a bough.

Petals (or leaves) are also a temporary fixture of a tree or plant, blossoming in the spring and falling in the autumn. Perhaps this reflects the fleeting nature of the imagery in the first line, as people rush past the speaker to get to wherever it is they're going. After all, the point of a metro station isn't to stand still—it's to move from one point to the next.

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**End-Stopped Line**

Each line in "In a Station of the Metro" is end-stopped. However, whereas the second line ends in a full stop, or period, the first ends in a colon. This colon serves an important, connecting function.

Grammatically, a colon can be used to expand on that which precedes it, or introduce something related. Upon first glance, an "apparition" of "faces" in a "crowd" seems entirely different from "petals on a wet, black bough." However, the placement of the colon acts as a bridge between these two images, as though the second led immediately from the first. This form of punctuation highlights how each image is connected in the speaker's mind despite initially seeming to be totally separate.

The punctuation at the end of each line also highlights that the entire poem is a fragment. Despite the existence of a colon and a period, each line is only a dependent clause, and neither contains a verb. This fragmentation suggests a kind of quickness on the part of the speaker, or observer, as if the image of petals came immediately after the image of a metro, without much time to process either. The quickness demonstrated here could further support the idea that each image is related in the speaker's mind, rather than distinct (that is, that there is some broader connection between a metro station and the branch of a tree).
PARATAXIS
The structure of this poem exemplifies parataxis, which allows for a clear link between its two main images. Notice how each line has a similar grammatical structure. The first line begins with the noun "the apparition of these faces" before using a preposition to show that they are "in the crowd." The second line does the same, beginning with the noun "Petals" before using a preposition, "on," to show that they are "on a wet, black bough." Yet another grammatical similarity is the absence of a verb in each line, making each one a dependent clause, and collectively a sentence fragment. Each image may seem visually distinct, but they are nevertheless grammatically inviting of some form of similarity.

The parataxis here is a structural method to show the seamless transition of one image into another in the speaker’s mind. In what seems like an instant (given the abbreviated form of the poem), the speaker moves from noticing people in a metro station to imagining petals on a tree branch. The sentence fragment itself speeds up this visual transition, the absence of a verb signaling a raw, instantaneous observation instead of a patiently constructed thought. The poem may be short, but it has been meticulously crafted to demonstrate the speaker’s unusual observation as clearly as possible.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:
• Lines 1-2

METAPHOR
Although this poem does not explicitly create a metaphor, it does suggest one given the visual and grammatical link between its two lines. The petals on a branch are presented as a metaphor for people in a metro station (or perhaps vice versa: the people in the metro station are presented as a metaphor for the leaves on the branches of a tree).

Think about it: on a visual level, people being lined up on either side of the train tracks might evoke the image of leaves on the branch of a tree. On an even more symbolic level, think of the city itself as a giant tree: the various metro stations are the city’s "boughs," connecting and nourishing all its distant neighborhoods just as a tree's branches carry water to all its leaves. The metaphor here suggests a connection between humanity and the natural world, or at least that they aren't quite as different as they may seem. Perhaps it’s meant to suggest that the human world itself is built in the image of nature, copying its processes.

The reason why the metaphor isn't explicit is because there are no linking words, like a form of the verb "to be" ("are" or "were"), to connect the images. A more commonly-phrased and obvious metaphor might appear something like "The apparition of these faces in the crowd are petals on a wet, black bough." However, the poem seems intent on avoiding the use of a verb, and is instead content to display one image after another in quick succession. This refusal to be a grammatically complete sentence prioritizes the images in the poem, and makes the poem read more like a raw, unfiltered presentation of images rather than a carefully curated exposition of thought.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:
• Lines 1-2

VOCABULARY

Metro () - In this poem, "Metro" refers to the largely underground train system that’s widely used in cities today. In other words, it’s a subway station.

Apparition (Line 1) - An "apparition" is a ghostly image of something, or simply the act of something appearing.

Bough (Line 2) - A "bough" is a tree branch.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM
The poem is a prime example of imagism, which is poetry that rejects long, flowing poetic descriptions in favor of concise, precise images. For an imagist poet, the image itself, rather than the explanatory descriptions associated with that image, is the primary way of making meaning. Pound actually helped spearhead the imagist movement with poems like "In a Station of the Metro," and inspired many other poets in the early 20th-century to attempt the same.

The poem was originally published with large spaces between some words (see an image of it here). These spaces might be said to represent all that's missing from the poem—that is, all the words ultimately deemed unnecessary by Pound as he whittled the poem down to its shortest, most evocative form.

The poem's brevity and focus on a simple aspect of the natural world also make it feel pretty similar to a Japanese haiku, though it doesn't match this form exactly. Traditionally, haikus focus on a specific element of the natural world, using extremely concise and specific images to do so. The form of a haiku, even if it isn't perfectly resembled here, allows for the kind of brief pairing of images that Pound likely wanted in associating a metro station with petals on a bough. (It's perhaps worth noting that Pound took time to learn the poetic histories and tendencies of other parts of the world, including Japan, and was well aware of the haiku form.)

METER
This poem in written in free verse and does not have a clear, overarching meter. That said, each line does seem to be
conscious of a kind of syllabic structure. The first line begins with iambs (unstressed-stressed), but is followed by irregular, mostly unstressed, beats:

The app- | ari- | tion of | these fa- | ces in | the crowd:

The second line might be read as featuring a trochee (stressed-unstressed), an anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed), and a spondee (stressed-stressed), which is a technical way of saying that most of this line’s syllables are stressed in contrast to the first line:

Petals | on a wet, | black bough.

The quick, sharp syllables of the second line seem especially punctuated in contrast to the more regular meter of the first line. Perhaps this metrical variation is another technique of Pound to make the second line stand out from the first, just as the natural element of its content (“Petals on a wet, black bough”) stands out from the urban fixture of the metro station. In any case, the lack of a consistent overall meter reflects that this poem is more concerned with making a striking visual observation than with sticking to a particular form.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not have a rhyme scheme, although the two words that end each of its lines share clear assonance and are slant rhymes. The fact that these words (“crowd” and “bough”) almost rhyme reflects the overall contrast between the two lines they inhabit.

The poem sets up a juxtaposition between two seemingly unlike things (faces in a crowd and petals on a tree branch), and simultaneously highlights those images’ similarities and differences. This small bit of assonance further highlights that simultaneous similarity and difference. Each line ends with the same vowel sound, yet ultimately does not fully rhyme. In other words, each line sonically resonates with the other, but is not quite the same.

SPEAKER

Many people have taken the speaker to be Pound himself, given that this poem was inspired by the poet’s experience in a Paris metro station. That’s a fair interpretation, but part of the poem’s power comes from its focus entirely on the image before the speaker rather than on the speaker themselves.

As such, the actual poem does not reveal much about the personality of its speaker, although it does relay several important pieces of logistical information. First, the speaker is in a metro station, a fact that is made clear by the poem’s title. The speaker is also likely in a “crowd” of people, and seems to be slightly detached from their surroundings given the use of the word “apparition,” which imbues the crowd with a blurry, ghostly quality. Lastly, the speaker spontaneously imagines “petals on a wet, black bough” after observing the crowd, which suggests a certain affinity for the natural world, or perhaps simply the speaker’s tendency to see nature’s presence in unexpected places.

The second half of the poem seems to occur after a break in the speaker’s focus. The abruptness of the jump to the phrase “Petals on a wet, black bough” might be read as an attempt to break the speaker’s trance or consciousness, much as a word or phrase can break the trance of a sleepwalker. This sudden change of subject is paralleled by the quick, sharp syllables of the second line, which seem especially out of place in comparison to the first line’s more regular meter.

The poem’s title relays its exact setting: “In a Station of the Metro.” By describing the setting in its title, the poem allows itself to be even more concise, sharing only the raw descriptions of images that arise from the speaker’s mind while in this metro (that is, “subway”) station. Though nothing within the poem itself makes this clear, Pound wrote “In a Station of the Metro” specifically about an experience he had in metro station in Paris in 1912.

This particular setting, which is likely dimly lit and full of noise, contrasts with the poem’s second and final line: “Petals on a wet, black bough.” A short description of a part of the natural world does not seem to belong “in a station of the metro,” and yet the poem’s crux is about defying expectation through an odd pairing of images. The speaker seems lost in the crowd, and, for some reason, can only think of petals on a bough.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ezra Pound was the so-called "Father of Modernism," an early 20th-century movement that had a radical, non-conformist approach to literature. Most poems appearing in the 19th century or earlier were heavily structured, and almost always had a discernible rhyme scheme or meter. The modernists, however, wanted to "make it new" (as Ezra Pound said), referring to a breaking away from poetry’s status quo.

"In a Station of the Metro" is a great example of what modernism espoused. A two-line poem with no clear rhyme scheme or meter about the everyday experience of gazing out into a crowded metro station was unlike anything anyone had written before. Furthermore, rather than telling a story or prioritizing long, flowing poetic diction, "In a Station of the Metro" prioritizes a relatively basic set of images, relying on the images themselves (rather than an explanation of them) to do the poem’s interpretive work.

Other poets living in the early 20th-century, like T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, and William Carlos Williams, had similarly radical approaches to poetry, each of them unafraid to prioritize different poetic structures and images to craft "new" forms of meaning. e.e. cummings, in particular, is especially famous for breaking grammar rules entirely, offering instead an intriguing
blend of musical language and imagery to create meaning. Although modernism only extended until the mid-20th century, the work it accomplished in inspiring authors to break from poetic convention helped to shape the incredibly diverse and experimental world of poetry we have today.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
The main historical context surrounding this poem is the advent of the metro system in Paris. The Industrial Revolution had long since ended, although society was still acclimating to new technologies on a regular basis. Underground trains designed to transport pedestrians throughout the city of Paris revolutionized the work life of many urban dwellers. Pound published this poem in 1913, so the metro system was still relatively new in the public consciousness, yet the poem could very well be describing metro stations today (an indicator that they perhaps haven't changed all that much in over 100 years!). The poem also seems prescient in its ability to foresee an increased conflict between humans' increased reliance on technology and the natural world (“Petals on a wet, black bough”), a conflict that began to catch on during the Industrial Revolution, and only escalated as time progressed.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "In a Station of the Metro" Original Publication — The Poetry Foundation's website shows a picture of the original 1913 publication of Poetry magazine, in which Pound's short poem was published. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=12675)

- Ezra Pound Modernism Lab — This blog maintained by students at Yale University has information and critical analysis of Ezra Pound and his works, including "In a Station of the Metro." (https://modernism.coursepress.yale.edu/ezra-pound/)

- Audio Recording of "In a Station of the Metro" — An audio recording of Pound's poem courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/76237)


HOW TO CITE

MLA

CHICAGO MANUAL