

## Symbolism in Modernist Poetry: A Comparative Study of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens

Fatma Abdul Ruhman Almoadab \*

Department of English Language, Faculty of Language, University of Derna, Derna, Libya

### الرمزية في الشعر الحدائي: دراسة مقارنة بين Ezra Pound و Wallace Stevens

فاطمة عبد الرحمن المؤدب \*  
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات، جامعة درنة، درنة، ليبيا

\*Corresponding author: [elmofatma026@gmail.com](mailto:elmofatma026@gmail.com)

Received: March 25, 2026

Accepted: April 27, 2026

Published: May 11, 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

#### Abstract:

This study explores how symbolism works in modernist poetry through a comparison between Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens. Rather than treating symbolism as a single, unified technique, it suggests that it may be more useful to think of it as a range of practices shaped by different artistic and philosophical concerns. Pound's poetry often reflects Imagist principles, relying on precise and concrete imagery, while Stevens tends to move toward a more abstract and reflective mode that focuses on perception and the way reality is constructed. Through close readings of selected poems, the study considers how these different approaches engage with key aspects of modern experience, including fragmentation, uncertainty, and the search for meaning. It also suggests that, despite their differences, the symbolic practices of both poets overlap in important ways. In this sense, symbolism appears less as a fixed device and more as an ongoing process of meaning-making.

**Keywords:** Modernist Poetry, Symbolism, Imagism, Philosophical Symbolism, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Modernism, Perception, Meaning.

#### الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة كيفية اشتغال الرمزية في الشعر الحدائي من خلال مقارنة بين إزرا باوند ووالس ستيفنز وبدلاً من التعامل مع الرمزية بوصفها تقنية واحدة موحدة، تقترح الدراسة أنه من الأنسب النظر إليها باعتبارها مجموعة من الممارسات التي تتشكل وفق اعتبارات فنية وفلسفية مختلفة. يعكس شعر باوند في كثير من الأحيان مبادئ التصويرية من خلال اعتماده على صور دقيقة ومحسوسة، بينما يتجه ستيفنز إلى نمط أكثر تجريداً وتأملاً يركز على الإدراك والطريقة التي يبنى بها الواقع. ومن خلال قراءات تحليلية لقصائد مختارة، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية تفاعل هذه المقاربات المختلفة مع سمات أساسية في التجربة الحديثة، بما في ذلك التفتت، وعدم اليقين، والسعي إلى المعنى. كما تشير إلى أنه رغم اختلاف الشعارين، فإن ممارستهما الرمزية تتقاطع في نقاط مهمة. وبهذا المعنى، تبدو الرمزية أقل كأداة ثابتة وأكثر كعملية مستمرة لإنتاج المعنى.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الشعر الحدائي، الرمزية، التصويرية، الرمزية الفلسفية، إزرا باوند، والاس ستيفنز، الحدائ، الإدراك، المعنى.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background

Modernist poetry developed at a time of major cultural and historical change, shaped by industrialization, rapid urban growth, and the aftermath of World War I (Perkins, 2014; Lewis, 2007). These changes did not only affect social and economic conditions; they also influenced how people understood and experienced reality.

Within this shifting context, poets such as Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens began to question established literary forms and experiment with new ways of writing. Pound's involvement in Imagism led him to focus on clarity, precision, and the direct presentation of images. Stevens, on the other hand, developed a more reflective style, one that places greater emphasis on imagination and perception (Longenbach, 1997).

These differences point to a broader shift in how symbolism functions in modernist poetry. Instead of working as a system of fixed meanings, symbolism often becomes more open and less predictable. As Abrams (1999) notes, symbols tend to generate multiple meanings rather than convey a single, stable one. This openness can be linked to a wider sense of uncertainty associated with modernity (Baldick, 2015), while Kermode (2000) connects it to disruptions in how time and narrative are understood.

Building on these ideas, this study suggests that symbolism in modernist poetry may be better understood as a continuum rather than a single method. From this perspective, Pound and Stevens do not represent completely separate approaches, but different ways of working within the same broader problem of meaning.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Despite extensive scholarship on modernist poetry, symbolism is often treated as a unified and stable feature. This tendency risks oversimplifying the diverse symbolic strategies employed by poets such as Pound and Stevens.

While Pound is commonly associated with Imagism and Stevens with philosophical abstraction, such categorizations may obscure the complexity and variability within their works. There is therefore a need for a more flexible analytical framework that conceptualizes symbolism as dynamic and evolving rather than fixed.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

1. How does symbolism function differently in the poetry of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens?
2. In what ways do imagist and philosophical forms of symbolism construct meaning through imagery, perception, and abstraction?
3. To what extent do these symbolic practices reflect broader modernist concerns such as fragmentation and uncertainty?

## **1.4 Research Objectives**

This study aims to:

1. Examine major forms of symbolism in the poetry of Pound and Stevens.
2. Compare imagist and philosophical modes of symbolic expression.
3. Analyze the relationship between symbolic practices and modernist concerns.
4. Propose a flexible, spectrum-based model of symbolism.

## **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to literary scholarship by re-evaluating the concept of symbolism in modernist poetry. It challenges the assumption that symbolism operates as a unified technique and instead highlights its variability and interpretive openness. By demonstrating how symbolism shapes perception and constructs meaning, the study offers a nuanced framework for understanding modernist poetics.

## **1.6 Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach based on close reading. Selected poems by Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens are analyzed as representative examples of imagist and philosophical symbolism.

The analysis focuses on three interrelated elements: imagery, abstraction, and diction. It examines how Pound's poetry emphasizes visual immediacy and emotional clarity, while Stevens's poetry relies more heavily on abstraction and reflective language.

Symbolism is thus approached as a dynamic process of meaning-making rather than a fixed literary device.

## **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited to selected poems and does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of the complete works of either poet. It focuses on texts that most clearly illustrate imagist and philosophical symbolism.

Furthermore, the study is confined to textual analysis and does not incorporate empirical or reader-response methodologies. Its conclusions are therefore interpretive and limited to the selected material.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Symbolism in poetry is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that resists singular definition. The theoretical perspectives of Abrams (1999), Ricoeur (1976), and Kermode (2000) offer distinct yet complementary approaches to understanding how symbols function.

Abrams conceptualizes symbolism as a structured system of meaning in which symbols generate layered but partially interpretable significations. While meanings may be complex, they are not entirely indeterminate.

In contrast, Ricoeur (1976) emphasizes the inexhaustibility of symbolic meaning. For him, symbols produce a “surplus of meaning” that cannot be fully contained within any single interpretation. Meaning is therefore, dynamic and continually evolving.

Kermode (2000) approaches symbolism from a temporal and existential perspective, arguing that meaning is not inherent in texts but constructed by individuals seeking coherence in a fragmented world.

These perspectives reveal a productive tension between stability, indeterminacy, and interpretive necessity. As Eagleton (2008) suggests, meaning is not fixed within the text but emerges through the act of reading.

Similarly, Armstrong (2013) argues that modernist art does not merely reflect reality but actively participates in shaping human experience. From this perspective, symbolism becomes a process through which meaning is constructed rather than simply represented.

This study adopts a synthetic approach that integrates these perspectives, viewing symbolism as a dynamic and interpretive process situated between structure, openness, and human meaning-making.

---

## 3. Literature Review

Scholars have long recognized that symbolism in modernist poetry resists fixed interpretation (Abrams, 1999; Childs, 2000). Symbols function as open structures that invite multiple readings.

Recent studies have further complicated this view. Harding (2016) argues that symbolism operates at the intersection of perception and cognition, suggesting that meaning emerges through the interaction between sensory experience and interpretation.

Bennett (2019) introduces the concept of a “crisis of meaning” in modernist poetry, emphasizing that such texts both seek meaning and expose its instability. Symbols, in this context, do not resolve ambiguity but rather foreground it.

Studies of Ezra Pound highlight his commitment to clarity and precision. Imagism, as discussed by Lewis (2007), emphasizes exactness of image, while Kenner (1971) describes Pound’s project as an attempt to reconstruct language through visual immediacy.

In contrast, scholarship on Wallace Stevens emphasizes abstraction and philosophical inquiry (Longenbach, 1997; Bates, 2007). Stevens’s poetry explores the relationship between imagination and reality, often blurring the boundary between perception and existence.

Nicholls (2017) argues for the plurality of “modernisms,” suggesting that modernist practices cannot be reduced to a single framework. This insight supports the present study’s argument for a flexible model of symbolism.

---

## 4. Discussion

A closer reading of selected poems shows that Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens do not simply use different types of symbolism; they seem to approach the problem of meaning from different starting points. Pound tends to rely on images that feel immediate and concrete, while Stevens often works through abstraction and reflection. Still, this distinction is not absolute, and the poems themselves complicate it.

In *The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter*, Pound builds symbolism through carefully chosen images. For example:

“The moss is grown, the different mosses,

Too deep to clear them away!” (Pound, 1915)

The image of moss suggests the passage of time and emotional distance, but it does not spell this out. The meaning emerges gradually, almost indirectly. In this sense, Pound’s symbolism aligns with Imagist principles, where the

image is expected to carry meaning without explanation (Lewis, 2007). At the same time, the image does not fully stabilize meaning. It invites interpretation rather than closing it down, which slightly complicates the idea that Imagism is purely about clarity.

A similar effect appears in Pound's short poem *In a Station of the Metro*:

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough." (Pound, 1913)

Here, the symbolic relation between "faces" and "petals" is not explained. The poem depends on juxtaposition rather than description. While the image feels precise, its meaning remains open. This seems to support Abrams's (1999) idea that symbols generate multiple meanings, even when they appear simple. So, although Pound aims for precision, his symbolism does not fully escape ambiguity.

Stevens, by contrast, moves in a different direction. In *The Snow Man*, symbolism is less about objects and more about states of perception:

"One must have a mind of winter" (Stevens, 1921)

This line does not describe a physical image in the same way Pound does. Instead, it introduces a mental condition. The symbolic meaning depends on how perception itself is framed. Later in the poem, Stevens writes:

"Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." (Stevens, 1921)

This line is harder to pin down. It suggests a paradox where presence and absence exist together. In this sense, Stevens's symbolism seems closer to Ricoeur's (1976) idea of a "surplus of meaning," where interpretation never really reaches a final point.

This approach becomes even clearer in *Sunday Morning*, where Stevens reflects more openly on the relationship between imagination and reality. The poem does not rely on a single dominant image but moves through a series of reflections:

"Death is the mother of beauty" (Stevens, 1923)

Here, the symbolic meaning is conceptual rather than visual. The line suggests that transience gives value to experience, but it does not fix that meaning in a concrete form. Instead, it opens up a line of thought. This seems to align with Kermode's (2000) view that meaning is something constructed rather than discovered.

At this point, the difference between Pound and Stevens becomes clearer, but also less rigid than it first appears. Pound's images may seem stable, yet they still depend on interpretation. Stevens's abstractions may seem open-ended, but they are not entirely disconnected from experience. Both poets, in different ways, engage with the difficulty of making meaning in a modern context.

It might be more accurate, then, to say that Pound leans toward controlling meaning through form and image, while Stevens leans toward questioning whether such control is possible at all. Even so, neither position is complete. Pound's poetry does not eliminate ambiguity, and Stevens's poetry does not abandon structure.

This tension reflects a broader modernist concern. As Bennett (2019) suggests, modernist poetry often stages a "crisis of meaning," where the search for clarity coexists with an awareness of its limits. From this perspective, symbolism is not just a technique but a way of engaging with that crisis.

So rather than placing Pound and Stevens at opposite ends, it may be more useful to see them as working within the same problem from different angles. Their symbolic practices overlap more than they separate, and it is in that overlap that the complexity of modernist symbolism becomes most visible.

---

## 5. Conclusion

This study has argued that symbolism in modernist poetry exists along a continuum between concrete imagery and abstract conceptualization. Through a comparative analysis of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, it has shown that symbolism is not a unified technique but a set of practices shaped by differing poetic aims.

Both poets confront the instability of meaning in a fragmented modern world. Pound seeks to stabilize experience through precise imagery, while Stevens explores the instability of perception and reality.

Neither approach fully resolves the problem of meaning. Instead, both reveal the conditions under which meaning becomes uncertain.

Symbolism in modernist poetry can therefore be understood as a site of interpretive tension in which meaning is continuously negotiated but never fully secured. Its significance lies not in what it represents, but in what it reveals about the limits of representation itself.

---

## References

- [1] Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A glossary of literary terms* (7th ed.). Heinle & Heinle.
- [2] Armstrong, T. (2013). *Modernism: A cultural history*. Polity Press.
- [3] Baldick, C. (2015). *The Oxford dictionary of literary terms* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [4] Bates, M. (2007). *Wallace Stevens: A mythological approach*. University Press.
- [5] Bennett, A. (2019). The crisis of meaning in modernist poetics. *Modernism/Modernity*, 26(2), 211–230.
- [6] Childs, P. (2000). *Modernism*. Routledge.
- [7] Eagleton, T. (2008). *Literary theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). University of Minnesota Press.
- [8] Harding, J. (2016). Symbolism and perception in modernist poetry: Rethinking Pound and Stevens. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39(3), 45–62.
- [9] Kermode, F. (2000). *The sense of an ending*. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Kenner, H. (1971). *The Pound era*. University of California Press.
- [11] Lewis, P. (2007). *The Cambridge introduction to modernism*. Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Longenbach, J. (1997). *Wallace Stevens: The plain sense of things*. Oxford University Press.
- [13] Nicholls, P. (2017). *Modernisms: A literary guide*. Edinburgh University Press.
- [14] Perkins, D. (2014). *A history of modern poetry*. Harvard University Press.
- [15] Pound, E. (1915). *The river-merchant's wife: A letter*. In *Cathay*. Elkin Mathews.
- [16] Ricoeur, P. (1976). *Interpretation theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning*. Texas Christian University Press.
- [17] Stevens, W. (1921). *The snow man*. In *Harmonium*. Alfred A. Knopf.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of **JSHD** and/or the editor(s). **JSHD** and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content