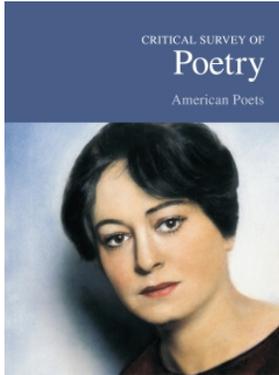


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Critical Survey of Poetry: American Poets

Amy Lowell

by Elaine Gardiner

Other literary forms

In addition to collections of poetry, Amy Lowell published translations, criticism, and a literary biography. Her output was as prodigious, fourteen of her books being published within a thirteen-year span. In addition, she wrote numerous essays and reviews and kept up an active correspondence, much of it concerning literature. Lowell edited a three-volume anthology of Imagist poetry: *Some Imagist Poets* (1915, 1916, 1917). Her three critical works were *Six French Poets: Studies in Contemporary Literature* (1915), essays drawn from her lectures on the post-Symbolist poets; *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), essays also drawn from lectures on contemporary poetry and six poets in particular, including two Imagists; and *Poetry and Poets* (1930), essays compiled from her lectures and published posthumously. Although she did other translations (of operettas and verse dramas), Lowell's only published translations, with the exception of those in the appendix to *Six French Poets*, were those in *Fir-Flower Tablets* (1921), a collection of ancient Chinese poetry done in collaboration with Florence Ayscough. Lowell's monumental two-volume biography, *John Keats*, appeared in 1925, shortly before her death. A sampling of Lowell's letters can be found in *Florence Ayscough and Amy Lowell: Correspondence of a Friendship* (1945).

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Amy Lowell
(Library of Congress)



Achievements

During her lifetime, Amy Lowell was one of the best-known modern American poets. This reputation had as much to do with Lowell the person and literary spokesperson as with Lowell the poet, though her work was certainly esteemed. In 1926, *What's O'Clock* won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. In the twenty-first century, her place in literary history as a whole is still to be determined, but her importance in the limited field of early twentieth century American letters is undisputed.

In her day, as F. Cudworth Flint has said, both Lowell and poetry were "new s." Between 1914 and 1925, she spoke out for Imagism, free verse, and the "New Poetry" more frequently, energetically, and combatively than any of its other promoters or practitioners. She took on all comers in Boston, New York, Chicago, and any other city where she was invited to speak. "Poetry Society" meetings were often the best show in town when Lowell was on the platform. In 1924, she was awarded the Levinson Prize from *Poetry* magazine.

Lowell's art probably suffered as a result of her taking on the role of promoter as well as producer of the new poetry, but she unquestionably helped to open the way for younger poets among her contemporaries and for free expression and experimentation in poetic form and theme. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which Lowell did not admire, might not have had such an immediate impact on the development of modern poetry had Lowell not helped to prepare for its reception.

Critical opinion on Lowell's own poetry is divided. Her detractors argue that she lacks passion and feeling; that she is concerned only with the surfaces of things; that she is imitative, an assimilator without any original creative force. Some even say that she never really understood the new poetry she so tirelessly advocated, that she was temperamentally grounded in the conservatism and sentimentality of the nineteenth century.

Her supporters, on the other hand, cite the enormous variety of her subject matter; the breadth of forms she employed and the extent to which she developed rhythmic variation in her polyphonic prose; the freshness and vitality of many of her lyrics, particularly her poetry dealing with love; her brilliant and vivid sensory perceptions; the intelligence that complemented emotion in her poetry; and the range of emotions that her verse expressed. Contemporary feminist critics, in particular, in their revisionist readings of Lowell, have found her worthy of greater prominence than literary criticism has generally accorded her.

What most critics would probably agree on is that Lowell wrote at least a handful of excellent poems worthy of inclusion in any anthology of American poetry. There would also be general agreement that she played a paramount role in the poetic renaissance of the early twentieth century.

Biography

Amy Lawrence Lowell was born in the family home (named Sevenels after her birth because there were then seven Lowells) in Brookline, Massachusetts, just outside Boston. Both of her parents were from distinguished and wealthy Massachusetts families. Her father, Augustus Lowell, was a member of the wealthiest branch of the Lowells, the prominent family who had come to America in 1639 and later had become a major force in the intellectual and industrial history of Massachusetts. The mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts, was named for the family. Lowell's mother, Katherine Bigelow Lawrence, was the daughter of Abbot Lawrence. The Lawrences were also an old American family, and another Massachusetts mill town was named for them.

Although the Lowells also owned a townhouse for the winter months, most of Lowell's childhood was spent at Sevenels, and she continued to live there, with the exception of summers in New Hampshire and abroad, until her death. After her parents' deaths, her mother's in 1895 and her father's in 1899, Lowell settled into Sevenels and made it her own, remodeling and refurnishing it extensively. The gardens there were the source of much of Lowell's imagery.

Lowell had two brothers and two sisters. Both brothers distinguished themselves, each in a different area. The elder, Percival, after ten years in Asia and the publication of two books on the Far East, went to Flagstaff, Arizona, where he founded the Lowell Observatory and made discoveries concerning Mars. The younger brother, Abbott Lawrence, became president of Harvard University in 1909.

Lowell's formal education was limited. She was a mischievous pupil who was easily bored and a challenge to her teachers. Although she received a private school education, she did not attend college. Her own comment on her formal education was that "it really did not amount to a hill of beans." Most of her real education came from her avid reading in her father's library and in the Boston Athenaeum, a building she later wrote about and saved from razing. Her future profession was foreshadowed when she discovered Leigh Hunt's *Imagination and Fancy* and

read it through and through. She was particularly taken with John Keats, about whom she later wrote a biography. Hunt's ideas about poetry were those of an earlier time, however, and were responsible, in part, for Lowell's unsuccessful first volume of rather old-fashioned poetry.

Because of a glandular condition, the five-foot-tall Lowell became obese in her adolescence and remained so, eventually weighing about 250 pounds. In spite of such corpulence, she was a successful debutante, having some sixty dinners given for her. Suitors, however, were few. Those who did appear were interested chiefly in her family connections. Lowell rejected two proposals of marriage and then accepted a third, only to be rejected later by her fiancé.

Eventually reconciled to spinsterhood, though not without much suffering, including a nervous breakdown requiring several years of convalescence, Lowell finally turned to poetry as a focus for her life. It also seemed to serve as a substitute for the orthodox Christian faith of her childhood, which she had rejected. Lowell had always been fascinated by the theater and was a creditable performer. Many thought that had she not been heavy, she would have become a professional actress. Her interest in theater, and indeed in all the arts, continued throughout her life. Perhaps not so coincidentally, then, it was as an actress, the great Eleanor Duse, who inspired Lowell to become a poet. It was 1902, the third time that she had seen Duse perform. Lowell later said that watching her "loosed a bolt in my brain and I knew where my true function lay." Having little training in poetry, Lowell began a long period of study and writing, with Hunt as her primary tutor. It was eight years before she published her first poems and ten before her first book appeared. During those years, she gradually withdrew from her many civic activities to concentrate on poetry. She received much support and encouragement throughout this period from Carl Engel, a young composer who also introduced her to new music.

On March 12, 1912, she met the person who was later to become her companion, critic, supporter, and confidante for life, Ada Dwyer Russell, an actress whom Lowell eventually coaxed into retirement. Many of Lowell's poems were inspired by, or written for, Mrs. Russell.

On October 12, 1912, her first collection of poems, *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass*, was published to uniformly bad reviews, including one by Louis Untermeyer, who was later to become her friend and eventually to edit her collected poems. The year 1912 was an important one in American poetry. Harriet Monroe launched her new magazine *Poetry* in that year, a journal to which Lowell contributed both money and poems. The early issues of *Poetry* alerted Lowell to a group of poets in England who called themselves Imagistes and who were led by Ezra Pound and T. E. Hulme. Recognizing her own poetic tendencies in what she read, Lowell sailed for England, in the summer of 1913, to meet with Pound and the other poets and learn more about Imagism. She returned enthusiastic about what she had learned and about her own future. Within a year, Pound was in the center of a new movement, Vorticism, though he had recently edited a small anthology called *Des Imagistes*. Lowell traveled to England again in 1914, meeting, among others, D. H. Lawrence, who was to become a close friend and whose talent Lowell immediately recognized. During that summer, Lowell and Pound parted in disagreement over the editorial policy of the next edition of *Des Imagistes*, and Lowell, with many of the poets on her side, took over the editorship of the anthology. She also took over the leadership of the Imagist movement and of the battle in the United States for the new poetic forms. Pound later dubbed the American movement "Amygism."

Lowell had learned much in two years, and *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* was published in 1914 to great success, although only about one-fourth of the poems were actually written in free verse. Lowell herself, in a short preface to the volume, used the term "unrhymed cadence." Three of the poems were written in what she called "polyphonic prose," a technique that she explained in the preface to a later book, *Can Grande's Castle*.

In 1915, 1916, and 1917, Lowell published the three volumes called *Some Imagist Poets*, picking up where Pound's *Des Imagistes* had left off and presenting seven to ten poems by each poet. Also in 1915, she published the successful *Six French Poets*, a book that brought her numerous speaking and reading engagements. From 1915 to 1918, Lowell was indefatigable. She gave countless lectures and readings, often traveling long distances on behalf of her own verse and of the New Poetry. She also wrote essays and reviews and produced several books. Always she was a friend to good writing and good writers, crusading tirelessly for others as well as for herself.

Men, Women, and Ghosts, her next collection of poems, followed her French study. Next came another critical work, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, followed by another volume of verse, *Can Grande's Castle*, her virtuoso production in polyphonic prose. In 1916, Lowell injured herself lifting a carriage out of a ditch, causing the hernia that would eventually necessitate four operations and contribute to her death.

Her next publications were *Pictures of the Floating World*, reflecting her long study of Asia, *Legends*, and *Fir-Flower Tablets*, translations of Chinese poetry done in collaboration with Florence Ayscough. *A Critical Fable* followed, and then Lowell began work on the book that was to be the culmination of a lifetime devotion to a single poet, John Keats. *John Keats* appeared in 1925; Lowell, driving herself to accomplish the task, became physically weaker and weaker during the course of its writing. On May 12, 1925, she saw the side of her face droop while looking in a mirror, and in that moment, according to Damon, she “recognized her death.” She died less than two hours later. On August 25, *What’s O’Clock* was published, and the following spring, it won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

Analysis

In its entirety, Amy Lowell’s work is, as F. Cudworth Flint has observed, a history of the poetry of her time. Born in the 1870’s, she died just three years after the publication of *The Waste Land*.

Although her first published work owed much, in both theme and form, to the Romantics and the Victorians, by her second book, Lowell was planted more firmly in the twentieth century and, more specifically, in what has come to be known as the Poetic Renaissance. She herself used this term in her critical work, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. It was a time of experimentation in all the arts, in the United States as well as abroad. Lowell took control in America of the movement to revolutionize and modernize poetic forms, and by the end of her life at fifty-one, she was largely responsible for the acceptance in America of the “New Poetry.” Poetry was popular in Lowell’s day, and Lowell made it even more so. Though both her poetry and her ideas about it often enraged her audience, they never failed to elicit responses, and Lowell was such a dynamic saleswoman that she usually had the final word. Not a highly original thinker or writer, Lowell was able, nevertheless, to absorb the best of what was going on around her and build on it.

Lowell’s work, though often faulted for being focused on externalities and devoid of emotion, is psychologically revealing, both of her own emotional states and, in some poems, of the ideas of Sigmund Freud and modern psychology. Many of her poems reveal her own experiences and emotions, and much of her imagery derives from her own life. Lowell’s childhood at Sevenels, at least into adolescence, when she became very heavy, was largely a happy one, and one of her greatest joys was her father’s garden, later to become hers. Her knowledge and love of flowers, gardens, and birds permeates her work. The imagery is not all joyful, however, for Lowell lived out her life at Sevenels and her life also had its great disappointments and pain. Her obesity was probably responsible for her failure to marry and have a family, and in disillusionment, she embraced poetry, almost as a spouse. Disillusionment about her work also occurs in the poems. In all, there is a tremendous amount of psychological as well as intellectual energy in her poems, partly a result of Lowell’s driving need to achieve and compensate for what she had lost or never had. There is also peace in many of the poems, inspired by the security and contentment she found during the last eleven years of her life with Mrs. Russell. Many of the poems centering on love and devotion were inspired by Mrs. Russell.

Lowell’s poetic subjects were wide-ranging. She wrote narratives on subjects as disparate as the frustration of a violinist’s wife and the attempted rape of the moon by a fox. She wrote lyrics on such traditional subjects as love, disillusionment, artistic inspiration, and gardens, but she also wrote poems on buildings, cities, and wars. She wrote quasi epics that encompassed different centuries and countries, and dialect tales set in rural New England.

Glenn Richard Ruihley finds these diverse subjects unified by Lowell’s transcendentalism, her search for the “Numinous or Divine” residing in all people and things. It was, according to Ruihley, the possibility of transcendence that she recognized that night while watching Duse act.

Her technical virtuosity was as great as her thematic range. Her use of metaphors and symbols was extensive. According to Ruihley, the only way to understand much of Lowell’s work is through a study of “her chosen symbols.” Though an outspoken advocate of poetic experimentation, she wrote in traditional forms as well as in free verse and polyphonic prose, often ranging through several forms in a single poem. Her virtuosity was unquestioned, but like most virtuosity, it was exhausting as well as dazzling. She exhausted not through sheer variety of poetic forms but through a prolixity, particularly in much of her polyphonic prose, that left the reader drugged with sheer sensation and unable to absorb more.

Though she professed to be an Imagist, at least in her early work, and was the movement’s leader in the United States, Lowell was never contained or restrained enough in her work to be truly Imagistic in the sense that the movement is usually defined. She was too expansive. In many of her poems, however, sometimes only in individual groups of lines, she did achieve what is usually thought of as Imagistic expression.

“On Looking at a Copy of Alice Meynell’s Poems”

One of the recurring themes in Lowell’s poetry is her disillusionment, self-doubt, and even despair. A representative poem in this vein is “On Looking at a Copy of Alice Meynell’s Poems: Given Me Years Ago by a Friend” (*Ballads for Sale*). When Lowell learned of Meynell’s death in November, 1922, she turned again to the volume of Meynell’s poems given to her twenty-five years earlier by Frances Dabney. In that year, 1897, Lowell had had her marriage engagement broken off by her young Bostonian suitor. Hoping to alleviate her grief, Dabney had given her the poems. In rereading the poems on Meynell’s death, Lowell found little to admire, but the poems did renew her feelings of despair and bitterness.

Written in a rhyming, metered, and regular stanzaic form, the poem records Lowell’s present and past reflections on Meynell’s book. She evaluates it both as a gift and as a work of art. As she reads again the “whispered greeting” inscribed by Dabney, the memories surface, “dim as pictures on a window wall,” but vivid enough in the illumination of the moment to revive her emotions. Dabney’s gift, intended “to ease the smart,” was instead a painful “mirror,” reflecting Lowell’s own tragic lack of fulfillment, yet Lowell remembers how she once “loved to quote” these lines.

From her present perspective, Lowell wonders at both her own and Dabney’s judgment. She distances herself from her memories as she contemplates the changes brought by time. Both Dabney and Meynell are dead, and the verses that once seemed so brilliant now seem merely “well-made.” Lowell has “lived the almanac” since that time and still has “so much to do.” Though Meynell’s and Lowell’s old griefs seem insignificant now and Lowell refuses to linger any longer with them, she is still sympathetic to the pain, a sympathy tempered, however, by her awareness of old age and death and the ultimate futility of fame and happiness. These feelings are briefly captured in the magnificent and poignant third-from-the-last stanza: “So cried her heart, a feverish thing./ But clay is still, and clay is cold,/ And I was young, and I am old,/ And in December what birds sing!” Lowell cannot allow herself to remain in this mood, and in the final two stanzas, she returns the book to its shelf where “dust” will again cover the pain. For Ruihley, “Lowell’s incompleteness” and “longing for wider satisfactions” are shared in some measure by everyone, albeit for varying reasons and in varying degrees. Her poem, then, transcends her own experience in its applicability and appeal.

Relationships between people and things

A second theme running throughout Lowell’s work, and one that is suggested rather than directly stated, is the relationship between human beings and material forms. Lowell’s pictorialism is brilliant and abundant, but rather than representing only surface effects as it was often unfairly accused of doing, it has its origin in sympathetic feeling and reveals a passionate heart. A beautiful example of this theme (and the poem that was most often requested at Lowell’s frequent readings) is “Lilacs” (*What’s O’Clock*).

“Lilacs” expresses clearly the relationship between things or places and people, a relationship indivisible and full of emotion. The poem expansively chronicles the spatial and temporal domain of the lilac. It is a list that finally incorporates the poet herself until she and New England and history and time and the lilac are one. Throughout the poem, the lilac is an active participant in its settings, playing many roles—conversing, watching, settling, staggering, tapping, running, standing, persuading, flaunting, charging, and calling. Having originated in the East, the lilac beckons to those who sail in from China, but it has become most fully itself in the soil of New England. The flower is both in its settings and of its settings, and finally it becomes its settings as it mingles with places and lives and takes on a significance far beyond that of any of its individual manifestations:

You are the great flood of our souls
Bursting above the leaf-shapes of our hearts,
You are the smell of all Summers,
The love of wives and children,
The recollection of the gardens of little children,
You are State Houses and Charters. . . .

In the last stanza, Lowell identifies herself directly with the lilac as it embodies her own soil, New England (“Lilac in me because I am New England”). Her litany of reasons for such a union, underscored by repetitive structures, serves to emphasize the force and passion of her

feelings.

Another example of the emotional import of material forms in Lowell's work is the popular "Meeting-House Hill." The scene portrayed is a simple one. The poet, from the eminence of "a squalid hill-top," observes a quiet scene: "the curve of a blue bay beyond a railroad track" and "a white church above thin trees in a city square." The scene itself is unremarkable except as it affects the poet, who suggests that she must be "mad, or very tired." The bay seems to sing to her and the church "amazes . . . as though it were the Parthenon." The imagination and emotion of the poet give movement to the scene until it is transformed into the final arresting image, which occupies ten of the poem's twenty-five lines. The spire of the church becomes the mast of a ship just returned from Canton. As the ship enters the bay carrying "green and blue porcelain," the poet sees a "Chinese coolie leaning over the rail/ Gazing at the white spire." It is a vivid scene and the reader moves within the imagination of the poet so that the reader too feels the emotion of the moment and sees the transformation.

The "coolie" is both of the spire (the mast of his ship) and gazing at it, both passive object of contemplation and active contemplator, so that the two worlds of reality and imagination merge fully. This is far from a mere portrayal of the surfaces of things. Objects, landscapes, flowers, and birds are emblems in Lowell's work and are always portrayed with feeling.

Love and devotion

A third dominant theme in Lowell's poetry is that of love and devotion. It is "love in its combined physical and spiritual totality," as Jean Gould points out, that is celebrated in Lowell's work. Poems on this theme take many forms and honor many subjects, but the greatest are those inspired by Eleanor Duse and Mrs. Russell. Among those written for Russell are several of Lowell's most popular and enduring lyrics: "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," "Venus Transiens," "A Sprig of Rosemary," and "A Decade," all from *Pictures of the Floating World*; "In Excelsis" (*What's O'Clock*); and "The Taxi" (*Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*).

The scene in "Madonna of the Evening Flowers" is again simple. Lowell, tired from her day's work, calls for Russell. She is answered only by the wind and the sun shining on the remnants of her companion's recent activity—her books and her sewing implements. Though Lowell impatiently continues the search for her friend, the scene above has foreshadowed for the reader the simple domestic setting in which Russell will eventually be found. When finally spotted, Russell is "Standing under a spire of pale blue larkspur,/ With a basket of roses on [her] arm." The rest of the poem records Russell's practical responses to Lowell and Lowell's concomitant reflections. Lowell's attitude is worshipful, in contrast with the secular nature of Russell's concerns, and the natural and human scene merges with the divine as Lowell hears the imagined "Te Deums of the Canterbury Bells."

"In Excelsis" again strikes a worshipful note and one full of rapture. In it, Lowell sees Russell as both the creator of the natural world and the embodiment of it. It is Russell whose movements control the processes of nature and Russell who is herself the "air—earth—heaven" of Lowell's universe. As in "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," the poet's impulse is to kneel before such glory, but she restrains herself from excesses: "Heaven" is not a "boon deserving thanks." She will accept the life that Russell brings to her; her poems will be her thanks, "rubies" set in "stone."

"The Taxi" has a different tone. Probably written during one of Lowell's separations from Russell, the poem speaks of the pain of separation. The images are vivid and startling, hauntingly modern in their metaphors. In the loved one's absence, the world turns hostile to the poet. The streets "wedge" Russell away from Lowell, and the city lights "prick" Lowell's eyes. The night has "sharp edges" that "wound."

Other love poems are more tranquil, projecting neither the rapturous adoration of "Madonna of the Evening Flowers" and "In Excelsis" nor the fearful tension of "The Taxi." The poet is often at peace in her love, admiring the beauty of her friend as if she were Botticelli's Venus ("Venus Transiens"), reflecting on the restfulness of her hands and voice ("A Sprig of Rosemary"), and savoring the simple nourishment of her presence ("A Decade").

Lowell's importance as a force in American literary history is undisputed. Her crusading efforts on behalf of modern poetry and poets had a formative influence on the development of American poetry in the twentieth century. The place of her own poetry is not as solidly determined. An untiring experimenter in verse forms, she was not a great poet, but she did write a few enduring poems that, it seems likely, will find a permanent place in the literary canon of her time.

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