

Amy Lowell's Life and Career

Amy Lowell was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, the daughter of Augustus Lowell and Katherine Bigelow Lawrence. Both sides of the family were New England aristocrats, wealthy and prominent members of society. Augustus Lowell was a businessman, civic leader, and horticulturalist, Katherine Lowell an accomplished musician and linguist. Although considered as "almost disreputable," poets were part of the Lowell family, including James Russell Lowell, a first cousin, and later Robert Lowell.

As the daughter of a wealthy family, Lowell was first educated at the family home, "Sevenels" (named by her father as a reference to the seven Lowells living there), by an English governess who left her with a lifelong inability to spell. Her first poem, "Chacago," written at age nine, is testament to this problem. In the fall of 1883 Lowell began attending a series of private schools in Brookline and Boston. At school she was "the terror of the faculty" (Gould, p. 32). Even at Mrs. Cabot's school, founded by a Lowell cousin to educate her own children and the children of friends and relations, Lowell was "totally indifferent to classroom decorum. Noisy, opinionated, and spoiled, she terrorized the other students and spoke back to her teachers" (Heymann, p. 164).

During school vacations Lowell traveled with her family. She went to Europe and to New Mexico and California. On the latter trip she kept a travel journal. Lowell enjoyed writing, and two stories she wrote during this time were printed in *Dream Drops; or, Stories from Fairyland* (1887), by a "Dreamer." The volume was published privately by her mother, who also contributed material, and the proceeds were donated to the Perkins Institute for the Blind.

Lowell's schooling included the usual classes in English, history, French, literature, and a little Italian. As Lowell later noted, "My family did not consider that it was necessary for girls to learn either Greek or Latin" (Damon, p. 87). She would also describe her formal education as not amounting to "a hill of beans" (Benvenuto, p. 6). School ended in 1891, and Lowell made her debut. Described as the "most popular debutante of the season," she went to sixty dinners given in her honor. Her popularity was attributed to her skills in dancing and in the art of conversation, but her debut did not produce the expected marriage proposal.

Although Lowell had finished formal schooling, she continued to educate herself. Unfortunately, higher education was not an option for Lowell women. She put herself through a "rigorous" reading program, using her father's 7,000-volume library and the resources of the Boston Athenaeum (her great-grandfather was one of the founders). Later Lowell would successfully speak out against the proposed relocation of the Athenaeum; this would also become the subject of a poem. Lowell's love of books themselves began with her first "Rollo" book, *Rollo Learning to Read*, which her mother gave her when she was six. This gift marked the beginning of an enthusiasm for book collecting that would last throughout her life. In 1891 she made her first major purchase of a set of the complete works of Sir Walter Scott with money she had received as a Christmas gift. It was, however, her collection of Keatsiana, including a rare first edition of *Lamia* inscribed to F. B. from J. K. (Fanny Brawne from John Keats), that put her in the forefront of international book collectors.

Following her debut, Lowell led the life of a prominent socialite, visiting, going to parties and the theater, and traveling. Her mother, who had been an invalid for years, died in 1895. A disappointment in love prompted a winter trip to Egypt in 1897-1898. Lowell had accepted the proposal of a Bostonian whom she loved, but before the engagement was formally announced he "became entangled elsewhere" (Damon, p. 120). "The family could do nothing to protect her except guard tenaciously the name of the errant suitor" (Gould, p. 65). The trip was also for "health" reasons. Doctors felt Lowell's obesity could be cured by the Egyptian heat and a diet of nothing but tomatoes and asparagus. The regimen almost killed her and resulted in a "prolonged nervous collapse." In 1900 Lowell's father died, and she bought Sevenels. She also bought a summer home in Dublin, New Hampshire, that she named "Broomley Lacey." The area was home to the MacDowell Artists' Colony as well as to other notable painters and sculptors.

In Brookline Lowell assumed her father's civic responsibilities. Early in 1902 she spoke against the reappointment of the elderly superintendent of the Brookline public school system. She was the "first woman in the Lowell family to make a speech in public" (Gould, p. 77). Initially booed, Lowell continued to speak with her usual forthrightness and, at the end, won applause as well as her point. Lowell became a member of the executive committee of the Brookline Education Society and chair of its Library Board.

In October 1902 Lowell became a poet. Her interest in verse had been growing beyond her childhood enthusiasm, fueled by her reading Leigh Hunt's *Imagination and Fancy*; or, *Selections from the English Poets*, which she had found "near the ceiling" in her father's library. The volume was a revelation to her, opening a "door that might otherwise have remained shut," Lowell remarked (Gould, p. 51). She had become enamored of poetry and the poets Hunt discussed, particularly Keats. After she saw Eleanora Duse perform one October night she wrote her first adult poem, "Eleanora Duse." Although some critics say that she was being too hard on herself, Lowell described the 71-line poem as having "every cliché and every technical error which a poem can have." Yet she also said, "It loosed a bolt in my brain and I found out where my true function lay" (Damon, p. 148). At age twenty-eight she had discovered her calling: to be a poet.

In 1910 four of Lowell's sonnets were accepted for publication by the *Atlantic Monthly*. "A Fixed Idea," published first, appeared in August of that year. By 1912 she had published her first book of poetry, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*; the title came from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais*, his elegy for Keats. It was not well received by either the public or the critics. Louis Untermeyer wrote that the book "to be brief, in spite of its lifeless classicism, can never rouse one's anger. But, to be briefer still, it cannot rouse one at all" (Damon, p. 192).

Yet 1912 was also the year that Lowell met actress Ada Dwyer Russell. The friendship between the two women has been described as platonic by some, as lesbian by others; it was, in fact, a "Boston marriage." They lived together and were committed to each other until Lowell's death. Russell was Lowell's companion, providing love and emotional support, as well as the practical skill of organizing Lowell's busy life. Biographer Richard Benvenuto observed that Lowell's "great creative output between 1914 and 1925 would not have been possible without her friend's steadying, supporting presence" (p.10).

The following year Lowell discovered some poems in *Poetry* by Hilda Doolittle, signed "H.D. Imagiste." Lowell felt an identification with the style of H.D.'s poetry and determined to discover more about it. Armed with a letter of introduction from *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe,

Lowell traveled to London to meet Ezra Pound, head of the imagist movement. In London Lowell not only learned about imagism and free verse from Pound, but she also met many poets, several of whom became lifelong friends. Over the years Lowell would develop many literary friendships that resulted in an enormous volume of literary correspondence, requiring Lowell to employ two full-time secretaries. Lowell not only supported and encouraged other poets with her writing, such as her favorable review of Robert Frost's *North of Boston* in the *New Republic* (20 Feb. 1915), but also with money and gifts.

Lowell's poems began to appear in increasing numbers in journals, and she was becoming a prolific writer of essays and reviews. Pound had requested the inclusion of her poem "In a Garden" in his anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914). Later Lowell and Pound would have a falling out over the direction of the imagist movement, and Pound would call the movement, as adapted by Lowell, "Amygism." Lowell became the spokesperson of imagism, leading the fight for the "renewal of poetry in her homeland" (Francis, p. 510), and her efforts were tireless. She traveled throughout the country, "selling" the new poetry.

Her own volume *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), written in free verse and polyphonic prose, a Lowell invention, "brought her an instantaneous phenomenal rise to fame" (Gould, p. 139). Lowell's first book of criticism, *Six French Poets* (1915), based on a series of her lectures, was also well received.

Lowell was publishing a book a year, alternating between volumes of short verse and longer poems. *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916) was highly regarded and contained "Patterns" one of her most famous poems. In it an eighteenth-century woman, walking in her garden, contemplates a future that has suddenly become empty because of the loss of her fiancé in battle; she mourns the fact that the "Patterns" of her role required her to remain chaste before marriage. The next year she published another critical volume, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, which included essays on six contemporary poets: Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, H.D., and John Gould Fletcher. Lowell also published anthologies of imagist poets in 1915, 1916, and 1917. Her next volume of poetry, *Can Grande's Castle* (1918), included four long poems; the title was taken from the name of the refuge where Dante, the Florentine exile, wrote portions of his *Divine Comedy*. Inspired by her lifelong interest in the Orient, *Pictures of a Floating World* (1919) is a translation of the Japanese word *ukiyo-e*, a term commonly associated with a form of eighteenth-century Japanese painting. It includes 174 short, free verse lyrics, considered by some as "overtly erotic." For example, "A Decade" and "The Weathercock Points South" are described as a celebration of lesbian devotion. *Legends* (1921) contains eleven longer poems, and *Fir-Flower Tablets* (1921) is a collection of poems based on translations of ancient Chinese verse. Since Lowell did not read Chinese, she was dependent on English translations by Florence Wheelock Ayscough, which Lowell then turned back into poetry.

A Critical Fable (1922) is a long, humorous poem, evaluating the state of contemporary poetry. Originally published anonymously, the poem pokes fun at fellow poets and at Lowell herself in lines of rhymed couplets. The poem was modeled on James Russell Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* (1848).

Her last publication was the momentous biography, *John Keats* (1925). In 1921 Lowell had given an address at Yale honoring Keats on the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth. The lecture stimulated her to write the book, which minutely examines Keats's life and corrects some long-standing misconceptions about him. Lowell was also the first biographer to see Fanny Brawne in a favorable light. The book was well received in the United States but not in

Britain, where she was accused of writing "a psychological thriller" rather than a literary biography. Lowell was angry and heartbroken but in typical fashion determined to confront the critics on their own turf. Accordingly, she planned to travel to England. The journey was never made; Lowell died of a cerebral hemorrhage at Sevenels.

Posthumous publications, edited by Ada Dwyer Russell, are *What's O'Clock*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1925 and includes the frequently anthologized poem "Lilacs"; *East Wind* (1926); and *Ballads for Sale* (1927).

Perhaps Lowell's poetry was not sufficiently recognized during her lifetime, but she did write more than 650 poems, and she is now acknowledged as the first American woman poet to see herself as part of a feminine literary tradition, reflected in poems such as "The Sisters." What her contemporaries did realize was that Lowell made things happen for American poetry through her own innovations and her support of other poets. Lowell's lectures on the "new poetry" of imagism and free verse drew large crowds, and she was so persuasive that the public began accepting her literary judgments "as nothing less than gospel" (Heymann, p.214). T. S. Eliot described her as a "demon saleswoman of poetry" (Heymann, p. 217), and Sandburg remarked on her forceful presence: "To argue with her is like arguing with a big blue wave" (Heymann, p. 217). Frost wrote in a tribute that she "helped to make it stirring times for a decade to those immediately concerned with art and to many not so immediately" (Francis, p. 512).

Lowell's correspondence, private papers, and some manuscripts are in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Her collection of rare books and manuscripts is also at Harvard. Brown has other manuscripts and pictures in the Harris collection. The Alderman Library at the University of Virginia has papers, and her letters to Harriet Monroe are at the University of Chicago. A complete list of her work is in the definitive biography by S. Foster Damon, *Amy Lowell. A Chronicle with Extracts from Her Correspondence* (1935). Other book-length biographies that include critical material are Richard Benvenuto, *Amy Lowell* (1985); Glenn Richard Ruihley, *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered* (1975); and Jean Gould, *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement* (1975). Several books have chapters on Lowell. Particularly interesting are C. David Heymann, *American Aristocracy: The Lives and Times of James Russell Lowell, Amy, and Robert Lowell* (1980), and Cheryl Walker, "Women and Feminine Literary Traditions: Amy Lowell and the Androgynous Persona " in her *Masks Outrageous and Austere* (1991). Significant articles include Lesley Lee Francis, "A Decade of 'Stirring Times': Robert Frost and Amy Lowell," *New England Quarterly* 59 (Dec. 1986): 508-22; Andrew Thacker, "Amy Lowell and H.D.: The Other Imagists," *Women: A Cultural Review* 4 (Spring 1993): 49-59; Lillian Faderman, "Cigar-Smoking Sappho: Lesbian Laureate Amy Lowell Took Her World by Storm," *Advocate*, 13 Feb. 1990; and Jane R Ambrose, "Amy Lowell and the Music of Her Poetry," *New England Quarterly* 62 (Mar. 1989): 45-62. An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 13 May 1925.

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