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## **Imagism in Amy Lowell "Patterns"**

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## *Dedication*

***TO :***

Our reason of what we become today ,

For a debt we can never repay.

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## **Abstract**

The Imagist movement included English and American poets in the early twentieth century who wrote free verse and were devoted to "clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images." In Amy Lowell's "Patterns," labeling the oppression of women to modes of dress, the hierarchy of romantic poets who see women only as blossoming love, and the stoic, warlike mentality of men who would rather play at war than sit beneath the sunlight, chasing after a blinding pink and silver love in a maze of laughter.

This paper consists of two chapters. While chapter one deals with Amy Lowell's life and career, chapter two scrutinizes imagism in Amy Lowell's "Patterns."

Finally the conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

## **Chapter One:**

### **Amy Lowell's Life and Career**

On February 9, 1874, Amy Lowell was born in Brookline, Massachusetts. Her family was Episcopalian, of old New England stock, and at the top of Boston society. Lowell was the youngest of five children. Her elder brother Abbott Lawrence, a freshman at Harvard, went on to become president of Harvard College. As a young girl she was first tutored at home, then attended private schools in Boston, during which time she made several trips to Europe with her family. At seventeen she secluded herself in the 7,000-book library at Sevenels to study literature. Lowell was encouraged to write from an early age .<sup>1</sup>

In 1887 she, with her mother and sister, wrote *Dream Drops or Stories From Fairy Land by a Dreamer*, printed privately by the Boston firm Cupples and Hurd. Her poem "Fixed Idea" was published in 1910 by the *Atlantic Monthly*, after which Lowell published individual poems in various journals. In October of 1912 Houghton Mifflin published her first collection, *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass*.<sup>2</sup>

Lowell, a vivacious and outspoken businesswoman, tended to excite controversy. She was deeply interested in and influenced by the Imagist movement, led by Ezra Pound. The primary Imagists were Pound, Ford Madox Ford, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Richard Aldington. This Anglo-American movement believed, in Lowell's words, that "concentration is of the very essence of poetry" and strove to "produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor

indefinite.” Lowell campaigned for the success of Imagist poetry in America and embraced its principles in her own work .<sup>3</sup>

On a visit to England in 1913 Lowell met Pound and discovered his circle, “The Imagists.” He included one of her poems in his anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914), and in that year she published her second book, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, which includes her first experimentation with free verse and “polyphonic prose.” *A Critical Fable* (1922), an imitation of her kinsman James Russell Lowell’s *Fable for Critics*, was published anonymously and stirred widespread speculation until she revealed her authorship. She acted as a publicity agent for the movement, editing and contributing to an anthology of Imagist poets in 1915.<sup>4</sup>

Lowell edited the three numbers of *Some Imagist Poets* (1915–17). Subsequent volumes of her own work include *Men, Women, and Ghosts* (1916), which contains her well-known poem “Patterns”; *Can Grande’s Castle* (1918); and *Legends* (1921). *What’s O’Clock* (1925), *East Wind* (1926), and *Ballads for Sale* (1927) were published posthumously. Her critical work includes *Six French Poets* (1915), *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), and the two-volume biography *John Keats* (1925).<sup>5</sup>

Her enthusiastic involvement and influence contributed to Pound’s separation from the movement. As Lowell continued to explore the Imagist style she pioneered the use of “polyphonic prose” in English, mixing formal verse and free forms. Later she was drawn to and influenced by Chinese and Japanese poetry. This interest led her to collaborate with translator Florence Ayscough on *Fir-Flower Tablets* in 1921. Lowell had a lifelong love for the poet Keats, whose letters she collected and influences can be seen in her poems. She believed him to

be the forbearer of Imagism. Her biography of Keats was published in 1925, the same year she won the Pulitzer Prize for her collection *What's O'Clock* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925).<sup>6</sup>

In 1916, Lowell published her masterwork, "Patterns," a tense, almost frenzied free verse minidrama spoken in first person. The speaker, traumatized by the news that her fiancé has been killed in combat, attends a formal dance. Dressed in the constrictive gown, powdered wig, and jeweled fan of the eighteenth century, she contrasts the natural colors and configurations of daffodils and squills, bulbs that flower in spring. Tears sprung from pent-up emotions parallel the silent shedding of blossoms from a lime tree Lowell died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1925, at the age of 51 and is buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery. The following year, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *What's O'Clock*.<sup>7</sup>

In the poem's second stanza, the poet enlarges the dual droplets to include a parallel "plashing of water drops / In the marble fountain," a rhythmic "dripping [that] never stops," symbolic of the grief she will never escape. As though casting off the constraints of fashion and social propriety, she fantasizes about meeting her lover among the hedges. By supplanting a silver and pink gown with the flesh hues of her own body, she envisions a passionate chase in which the man, graced by reflected light from "sword-hilt and buckles," stumbles after her as though held back by the trappings of military rank. At the climax, complex interweavings of grief and dreamlike seduction are emotionally too much for the speaker to handle, threatening in line 57 to overwhelm the dreamer.<sup>8</sup>

Lowell develops the narrative with romantic plotting in lines 60 through 71. After receiving a standard wartime communication, the speaker begins a rhythmic



pacing, replicated in the juxtaposition of short and long lines. Stiffly clad in "correct brocade," she sees herself upright among the blooms. To dramatize loss, she relives the blessing of sunlight, rhyming "And I answered, 'It shall be as you have said.' / Now he is dead."<sup>9</sup>

Line 91 retreats from past and present to predict the flow of seasons, each with its characteristic flowers and weather. Locked in a prim celibacy, the speaker regrets that war has negated passion. The closing couplet, suited to the charged atmosphere of tumbling emotions, crackles with defiance of the feminine role of mourner and the masculine world that wastes good men in war .<sup>10</sup>

"Madonna of the Evening Flowers," set at Sevenels and composed in honor of Ada Russell in 1919, is an opulent piece that displays Lowell's deft verbal abilities. The three-part text moves from simple description to sensuous impressionism. Composed in unrhymed cadence, it draws energy from visual profusion, including oak leaves feathered by the wind and late afternoon sun reflected off mundane objects books, scissors, and a thimble. From an unassuming domestic still life, the central stanza follows the seeker into a religious vision sanctified by the pure heart of the unnamed "you." Color and sound mount into a surreal chiming of bell-shaped garden flowers, which enrich the holy setting with connections between their common name, Canterbury bells, with the cathedral and shrine in southeastern England .<sup>11</sup>

The final stanza ,injects a playful note of miscommunication. The speaker, who stands transfixed by mystic thoughts, discounts the gardener's mission to assess growth, spray, and prune. Enraptured in wonder, the speaker shuts out sounds to absorb the aura of the gardener, whom the steeped larkspur transforms

into the Virgin Mary, traditionally clad in blue as a symbol of devotion. Lowell concludes the poem with a kinesthetic gesture by turning sight into sound; the color and shape of the bell-blossoms evolve into an organ swell, a traditional anthem, a Te Deum ([We praise] thee, God) of worship and adoration .<sup>12</sup>

Similarly majestic, "Venus Transiens" [Venus Crossing Over] (1919), replete with Renaissance awe at female grace, derives its title and drama from Sandro Botticelli's painting depicting Venus rising from the sea, a mythic birth of beauty out of sea foam. Again, Lowell wreathes her subject in silver and blue, colors that reflect the light of sea and sky. The sands on which the speaker stands anchor her to the real world while the waves and sky uplift her beloved to a sublime, exalted state. The viewer stands apart from subject, as though the human element is permanently distanced from the divine .<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw . *Amy Lowell, American modern*. (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 171.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Rollyson, *Amy Lowell Anew: A Biography* (London: Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, 2013), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>7</sup> George Sargen, *Amy Lowell : A Mosaic* (New York : William Edwin Rudge, 1962), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Delville ,*The American prose poem* (Florida: University Press of Florida,1998), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Horace Gregory, *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in her Own Time* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1958), 65.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two

### Imagism in Amy Lowell "Patterns"

"Patterns," Amy Lowell explores the hopes of women in the early 20th century through a central theme. A woman's dream of escaping the boundaries that society has placed on her dissipates when she learns of her lover's untimely death. She also expresses her emotions and what she truly feels. She must not show any form of feeling, so she feels as if there is "not softness anywhere" about her. Confined by "whalebone and brocade," the speaker continues to live up to the expectations society enforces upon her. The speaker also uses many images in this poem, the constant motions of the flowers and water drops, the dress the woman is wearing, and her daydreams of her lover are most crucial in developing this theme of freedom.<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning of the poem, as well as throughout the work, the speaker describes daffodils and other types of flowers moving freely in the wind. Using imagery to appeal to the reader's sense of sight, these flowers are given motion, and they are described as, "blowing," and "Fluttering in the breeze," This creates a sense of flexibility. The woman in the poem wishes to be like the moving flowers, carefree and self-confident. In the second stanza of the poem, the woman begins to describe the water in the marble fountain. The, "plashing of water drops describe liquid in motion. The fact that she notices such little details in a fountain shows how intent the woman is on being free and able to move about as she pleases. The unconstrained movement of the flowers and the water manifest a way of life that the woman would like to live.<sup>2</sup>

The poem "Patterns" of Men, Women and Ghost is a masterpiece for its symbolic worth of an image. This poem is about the narrator's reaction towards the death of her lover. The narrator, we can safely assume, is Lowell, and not someone she fantasizes to be. Her lover died at a relatively young age, and it greatly affected her. The protagonist gives the appearance of being strong, but is at war with herself and society's expectations .<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, this "pattern" is like a prison. And it's exactly what Lowell felt. She didn't know how to react to the death of her lover, and, it wasn't accepted by society that they were lovers in the first place. The poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue. It is a poem symbolic of modern woman's violent rebellion against the conventions of society, life and culture .<sup>4</sup>

I too am a rare  
Pattern. As I wander down  
The garden paths  
...  
  
I shall go ...  
up and down  
In my. gown  
Gorgeously arrayed  
Boned and stayed  
And the softness of my body will  
be guarded from embrace  
By each button, hook and lace  
For the man who should loose me is dead,  
Fighting for the Duke in Flanders  
In a pattern called a war. '  
Christ What are Patterns for? (C.P. 75-76)<sup>5</sup>

The poet is symbolically suggesting the two contradictory patterns

juxtaposed with each other. She herself is one pattern which we may tentatively call the pattern of life. Her dead lover who too should have been a living pattern by her side is representative of the pattern of death. The conflict here is between these two patterns. The poet's intense question is as to why these mutually discordant and destructive antithetical patterns of world are .<sup>6</sup>

At one place, there is that booming love and at the other, there is that cold regardless anti-pattern of reference to the dead lover. She fondly questions as to why these antithetical patterns are there in the life of man. The epitome of the poem lies in the categorical resolution she makes about remaining alone for the rest of her life. This is probably the third pattern which emerges as an interaction between the first two patterns.<sup>7</sup>

The determination that she poetically confections here is the outcome of the contradictory patterns of life. It is this outcome that ultimately becomes a supporting phenomenon of life in its liveability. Man has to arrive at a few blunt determination with the help of which he has to see an adjustment with life. Otherwise life is a blend of antithetical patterns in the presence of which life becomes unwithstandable. The determination she makes is that probably the expression of a sentiment or conviction that emerges into her as a result of antithetical patterns or formulas of life.<sup>8</sup>

Symbolically speaking, the poem demonstrates life both spiritual and physical through the bitter contradictory experiences. It is Lowell's manner of Imagistically presenting the most frustration and anxiety of life. Thus it is a poem with abundant poetic justice. But the patterns as well as the resolutions are unconsolably harsh. This is the symbolic meaning of the poem.<sup>9</sup>

The epitaphic line 'Christ! ·What are Patterns for?' was though conceived by the critics as the clue to delve in to the personal life of Amy Lowell but it registers an explicit protest against the patterns of life; the protest against Puritan inhibitions and repressive conventions. The poem presents the woman's point of view; and yet how well it merges into and suggests the man . The poem presents a clear image of the society, how man and woman exists in the conventional repressions of the society. These patterns cut across the natural desire of the individual. The poem because of its subtle appeal makes "Patterns" says a true thing a thing close to people's lives and hearts with beauty, and concentrated force.<sup>10</sup>

The thematic excellence, the symbolic effect and the technical strength make this poem an artistic piece of beauty. The poem is the best example of vers libre in which the rhythm meaningfully matches the thought content. Here the delicacies of occasional rhyme and the technique of return go together with the depth of thought and vision effecting subtle melody and sheer magic. The poem moves and develops as the woman got condensed with her increasing anguish. The images in this poem occur in slides as one image passes into another image with a musical thread. The interesting thing to note about this poem is that the images of this poem are not simply images but they become symbols in their gradual development in the poem.<sup>11</sup>

Through exotic imagery that appeals to the senses, the natural environment is described in motion, symbolizing the desire for freedom.

In Summer and in Winter I shall walk  
Up and down



The patterned garden-paths  
In my stiff, brocaded gown.  
The squills and daffodils  
Will give place to pillared roses, and to asters, and to snow.

This is powerful imagery that creates a strong sense of the persona's hope and desire for freedom, weeping as she gazes longingly at nature that liberates her soul, notifying every hint of beauty. However, when the persona hears of her lover's untimely death at war, she loses all hope of liberty. From this point in the poem, the natural environment becomes subdued to conformity and loses its delightful appeal.<sup>12</sup>

This is displayed as the speaker describes how :

The blue and yellow flowers stood up proudly in the sun,  
Each one.  
I stood upright too,  
Held rigid to the pattern  
By the stiffness of my gown.  
Up and down I walked,  
Up and down.

These lines presents a restricted sense to nature, creating the idea that there is no hope left for freedom. In this extract from the poem, the daffodils and squills have lost their identity and are instead identified and described by their appearance (colour.) "Patterns" centers on the unmet needs of a love-starved woman. While the woman in the poem yearns for an ecstatic eroticism, her civilization has denied

her a sexually responsive identity. Her unbearably constricted clothing articulates the theme of a world that has instituted a set of social controls that do not accommodate or recognize female sexuality. She is trapped in a system that has deprived her of her inmost identity as a passionate, sensual, and free-spirited young woman .<sup>13</sup>

Psychologically, her emotional state suggests suppressed hysteria, the result of a society that requires female passivity and affords few opportunities for spontaneous expression of feeling. A corollary of this theme is that of the female body. Although her social mask is that of a decorous product of her society, the socially constructed femininity represented by her gown and the formal garden acts as a prison for her body, which yearns to be free. This awareness of her own body is an inherently enlivening one, leading her to think of the fulfilling experience of sexual love .<sup>14</sup>

Amy Lowell's poetic images are essential and elemental in their operation. They are varied in their patterns. They are the product of Amy Lowell's scientific and technical innovations. Sometimes they are symbolic, sometimes ironic, sometimes pathetic, sometimes rhythmical, sometimes philosophical, sometimes erotic, sometimes mystic, sometimes sensuous and sensual, in a way, they are all characteristic of her iconoclastic nature of image-making .<sup>15</sup>

The form of "Patterns" undercuts the psychological reading and continually questions the idea of interior essence by the attention it gives to surfaces and artifice. The title "Patterns" itself points to the decorative, artistic design of the poem. Thereby, the poem underlines its own constructedness as text. The poem is

moreover openly theatrical, which becomes especially evident in the first two stanzas.<sup>16</sup>

I walk down the garden paths,  
And all the daffodils  
Are blowing, and the bright blue squills.  
I walk down the patterned garden-paths  
In my stiff, brocaded gown.  
With my powdered hair and jewelled fan,  
I too am a rare  
Pattern. As I wander down  
The garden paths.

Reiterating in variations the line "I walk down the garden paths," the speaker focuses on the act of walking in her garden as she introduces herself. Her self-description reads like a blazon a poetic convention in which usually a male speaker lists a catalogue of a woman's physical attributes. The lady in "Patterns," however, directs the reader's gaze less to her body parts than her apparel. The elaborate costume as well as the insistence on the activity of walking elicit the association with an actress on stage. Moreover, the speaker is clearly portrayed as a type rather than as an individual.<sup>17</sup>

Amy Lowell's acclaim as an eccentric poet came not only from her direct, Imagist style of writing and hard-hitting literary topics; her poetry readings themselves caught the attention of the public. Indeed, it may have been more appropriate to call her readings "performances" because of her theatrical presentations, which were not limited to sound effects and the use of different

voice qualities for characterizations. "Patterns", being a particularly dramatic piece in itself, is, in this way, an appropriate piece to set to music because the supplemental element of musicality creates an extra dimension to the meaning of the poetry.<sup>18</sup>

Lowell herself believed that poetry is musical in nature, that "the 'beat' of poetry, its musical quality, is exactly that which differentiates it from prose, and it is this musical quality which bears in it the stress of emotion without which no true poetry can exist." The marriage of text and music can, most importantly, also prepare the audience with a certain degree of expectation and provide context, environment, setting, and mood which would otherwise be unavailable .<sup>19</sup>

The form of the poem weaves an intricate pattern itself. While writing in free verse, Lowell creates a rhythm which almost seems metric through the use of repetitions, frequent end- and internal rhymes as well as a great variability in line length. The emphasis on rhythm underlines Lowell's demand that poetry be spoken. In fact, the rhythm only plays out if one actually if the poem is read aloud. Especially the alternation between very short and very long lines contributes to the rhythmic effect. Shorter lines have a tendency to emphasize individual words more and be slower than longer ones. In many instances, Lowell uses enjambment to sever phrases, as for example at the end of the first stanza. At the same time, the period following the word "pattern" creates a caesura. Had she made only two lines out of these three, with a break after Pattern, the rhythmic effect would have been different, following the syntactical structure of the sentences .<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harriet Monroe, *Poets and Their Art* (New York New York University Press 1926), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw, *"Introduction" in Amy Lowell: American Modern* (Rutgers : Rutgers University Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Lowell, "Patterns" in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson et al, 5th edn (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 1247.

<sup>6</sup> Coffman Stanley, *Imagism : A Chapter for the Historx of Modern Poetry* (Norman : University of Oklahoma Press,1951) ,173.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid,174.

<sup>9</sup> Horace Gregory, "Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in Her Time," *Books for Libraries*, 1958, 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Paula Bennett, 'Critical Clitoridectomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory', *Signs*, 18.2 ,1993, 242.

<sup>12</sup> Glenn Richard Ruihley, *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered* (Connecticut: Archon Docks, 1975), 91.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid,92.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Mary E. Galvin, *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers* (London: Greenwood, 1999), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Munich and Bradshaw, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Hayden Carruth, *Excellence in Poetry Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Revisions, 1951-81* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

Amy Lowell's imagery is keen, direct and clear in accordance with the Imagist creed. Her style is varied in organization and musical in flow. A serious and minute study of her poems only could reveal the structural roundness of her molds of poems. Being a champion of free rhythm she devoted herself to the pattern and form of the poetry which in its turn envelopes into itself the subtle variations of human emotions and experiences.

According to her, poetry is that art of expressive imagination that uplifts the mankind. And a poem is an exercise that an actress does to perform her role, moving across the stage. The poem moves on the interior stage of imagination and behaves like a true actress devoted to her role expressing her imaginative understanding of the part she plays in a play.

In her poem "Patterns", Amy Lowell created a vivid image of all the patterns surrounding the main character in the garden. She used patterns to describe the life of the woman and how it would have been if her lover had not passed away. She ends the poem by asking, "what are patterns for?" Lowell presents many questions of life in this poem by extending the meaning of "pattern". Pattern can be defined as "a recognizable way in which something is done, organized or happens" or "any regularly repeated arrangement." The woman in the poem is saddened by the death of her lover.

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