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| Amy Lowell (1874-1925) |
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| Born in Brookline, Massachusetts to a prominent Boston family, Amy Lowell was a poet, lecturer, editor, and critic most well known for her popularization of imagism in the U.S.. From 1912 until her death she lived with her companion ADA RUSSELL DWYER, to whom many of her love poems are directed. During her short but prolific writing career she published more than 650 poems and lectured widely on the “New Poetry,” introducing an American audience to free verse and shaping popular literary tastes. In 1925, at the height of her popularity, having struggled with ill health for much of her life, she died at the age of 51 of a cerebral hemorrhage. Later that year she was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *What’s o’Clock*. |
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Early Life & Family  The youngest child of Augustus Lowell and Katherine Bigelow Lawrence Lowell, Amy Lowell grew up on the family estate, Sevenels (named for the seven Lowells who resided there), learning horticulture from her father and writing stories and poems. An early collaboration with her mother and sister Elizabeth Lowell, *Dream Drops, or Stories from Fairyland* successfully sold at a country fair and the proceeds were donated to the Perkins Institute and Massachusetts School for the Blind. The Lowells’ position in Boston society was based on wealth derived from cotton mills and iron foundries and an ancestry with ties to the Mayflower. Lowell received a typical education for girls, first with a governess, then schooling in private schools in Brookline and Boston, learning French, Italian, history, and literature. She was the descendant of the New England Romantic poet James Russell Lowell, and the sibling of Percival Lowell, the astronomer, and Abbott Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard University. After her father’s death in 1900, Lowell purchased Sevenels, whose gardens inspired so much of her work, from her siblings and lived there until her death. Between 1900 and 1910 Lowell took an active role in civic affairs and wrote poetry privately.  Early Career  The performance of actress Eleonora Duse inspired Lowell, at the age of 28, to pursue poetry as a profession. Her career began in 1910 with the publication of the sonnet “A Fixed Idea” in *The Atlantic Monthly*. In 1912 she published *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass*, a collection of poems using traditional nineteenth-century verse conventions. She also met the actress ADA RUSSELL DWYER who became her intimate companion. On a trip to Chicago in 1913 she met HARRIET MONROE, editor of POETRY MAGAZINE, in the pages of which she discovered IMAGISM.  Imagist Period  In 1913 she traveled to London to meet EZRA POUND with whom she struck up a friendship. Her poem “In a Garden” appeared in the 1914 *Des Imagistes* anthology alongside the work of RICHARD ALDINGTON, SKIPWITH CANNELL, JOHN COURNOS, H. D., F. S. FLINT, FORD MADOX FORD, JAMES JOYCE, EZRA POUND, ALLEN UPWARD, and WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS. When her once cordial friendship with EZRA POUND soured, the movement fractured, with Lowell leading one camp and Pound another. Lowell went on to edit and publish three volumes of *Some* *Imagist Poets: an Anthology* in 1915, 1916, and 1917.  *Sword Blades and Poppyseeds* (1914) marks the beginning of Lowell’s imagist poetry period which shows the influence of the French Symbolistes and of Japanese haiku and tanka forms. Garden and flower imagery in these poems create erotic coded languages of same-sex desire. Much of her poetry’s homoerotic imagery went unnoticed until the 1980s when feminist and queer studies reclaimed her as a significant American lesbian poet.  In “Spring Day,” published in *Men, Women, and Ghosts* (1916) Lowell developed POLYPHONIC PROSE, a prose poem form that focuses on sensory experience and employs repetition, rhyme, and alliteration. For Lowell, poetry primarily is an oral art form, a spoken, not a written art. Reflecting this poetics, “Spring Day” is characterized by sentences rich in sensory description that sound like spoken language rather than metered poetry. “Spring Day” guides the reader through a day in the life of Amy Lowell, from morning ablutions, to breakfast table, to a midday walk through Boston, before returning home at evening. Her poem “Patterns,” also published in *Men, Women, and Ghosts* (1916), composed in stanza form, is an eighteenth century aristocrat’s dramatic monologue contemplating the death of her fiancé. The poem considers the happiness denied a chaste unmarried woman and compares social conventions to the formal gardens in which the speaker walks.  Critical Writing and Reception  Lowell’s critical essays were published as *Six French Poets* (1915) and *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917). The latter discussed the work of EDWARD ARLINGTON ROBINSON, ROBERT FROST, EDGAR LEE MASTERS, CARL SANDBURG, H.D., and JOHN GOULD FLETCHER. Although a friend of ROBERT FROST and praised by D.H. LAWRENCE and WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, following her death modernist critics like HUGH KENNER used Ezra Pound’s uncharitable witticisms about her weight and economic independence to characterize her as a poet who purchased her position and remained out-of-step with her time. Since the 1980s Lowell has emerged as a significant poet for understanding modernist aurality, the American *vers libre* movement, and modernist self-fashioning.  Final Years  Lowell’s final years were marked by ill health. Despite this, she continued her writing and lecturing schedule, publishing *Con Grande’s Castle* (1918), a work heavily-inflected with war themes, *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919), which expresses pacifist sentiments, and *Legends* (1921), which explores sexual themes, mythology, and folklore from North America, China, Peru, and the Yucotan. Her poem “Lilacs,” published in *What’s oClock* (1925), summons patriotic feeling through erotic descriptions of flowers in the spirit of Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed.”  Poetry  *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass* (1912)  *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914)  *Men, Women, and Ghosts* (1916)  *Can Grande's Castle* (1918)  *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919)  *Legends* (1921)  *Fir Flower Tablets* (1921)  *What's o'Clock (*1925)  *East Wind* (1926)  *Ballads for Sale* (1927)  *Selected Poems* (1928)  *Complete Poetical Works* (1955)  Critical Writings  *Six French Poets* (1915)  *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917)  *A Critical Fable* (1922)  *John Keats* (1925)  *Poetry and Poets* (unpublished lectures)  Anthologies (edited)  *Some Imagist Poets I* (1915)  *Some Imagist Poets II* (1916)  *Some Imagist Poets III* (1917) |
| Further reading:  (Benvenuto)  (Bradshaw)  (Faderman)  (Galvin)  (Gould)  (Munich and Bradshaw)  (Scott)  (The Houghton Library at Harvard University; Vasar College Special Collections)  (Wood) |