

# Excavating The Female Identity from The Margins: Amy Lowell's "A Fixed Idea," "The Lamp of Life", and "The Sisters"

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## **Abstract**

*Amy Lowell is one of the modernist female poets who employed poetry to visualize their personal experiences, constantly creating in the margins of patriarchal literature, overlooked and underappreciated for her personality as a woman artist but glorified because of her body and sexuality. Lowell's identity as a female poet enabled her to observe her female ancestors and contemporaries and talk about the female mind's intellectual interior design. Lowell conveyed her unique perspective with poetry, but her attempt at creating a female literary discourse and matrilineage remained invisible and unseen despite her expert craftsmanship. Three of her underexamined poems, "A Fixed Idea," "The Lamp of Life," and "The Sisters," share the same theme; the struggle of the female artist. Lowell illustrates the female experience, shadowed thoughts, works, and silenced voices in a patriarchal literature through poetic devices such as imagery, and metaphors. Lowell gives voice to the female identities residing in the margins with powerful imagery such as the binary images of day and night, joy and pain, and individuality and community with a tone of genuine comradery and sisterhood. By utilizing the first-person narrator, she addresses the women figures, always listening but silent, observing but never participating through apostrophe and dramatic monologue; her poems are the mediums for Lowell to build a distinct female literary genealogy, which is why they need to be examined with particular attention to the feminist discourse.*

## **Keywords:**

*Amy Lowell, female literary tradition, women and writing, female artist*



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### **Amy Lowell's "A Fixed Idea," "The Lamp of Life", and "The Sisters"**

Throughout literary history, women intellectuals have been forced to reside in the margins of society under the pre-determined rules and regulations of the patriarchal order; their authorial identities confined under strict restrictions on the definition and role of the woman. The area of women and writing discusses such restrictions and issues by illustrating the body of women's literature as something produced out of the conditions surrounding women. Women and writing aims to study the patriarchal literature from a gender perspective, trying to overcome the limitations by creating a literature of their own, their margins by redefining and recentering the body of women's literature. In women and writing, various individuals such as Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, and most significantly, Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar contributed to the extension of the field by theorizing key concepts such as "anxiety of authorship" that revealed the field's nature. They emphasize the roles and prohibitions of a woman in society as an artist and an individual; by exploring such conditions, they vocalize the women and empower them to authorize themselves. Through these theory works, the aim is to excavate the female identity and authorship in literary works written about women writers by focusing on the isolation and alienation in the minds of the women writers through female narration. Despite the challenges of having an identity of authorship, including the "anxiety of authorship," a term introduced by Gilbert and Gubar, a woman writer should seek her female power in her literature to establish a woman's literature can only be achieved through a new literary matrilineage. Gilbert and Gubar encourage the female writer to examine the paths of the 19th-century women and observe the process of surpassing their "anxiety of authorship." They do that by "recovering or remembering the lost foremothers who could help them find their distinctive female power," as they state in their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary*

*Imagination.* (59) A modernist, brilliant poet of the 20th century, Amy Lowell aims at precisely that notion; her poetry represents the internal conflicts of the female writers. She explores the lack of female tradition during those times, the contained, repressed under a patriarchal order, merely existing between the lines of female artists. Despite being a modernist, Amy Lowell is widely criticized and known for her body issues and sexual orientation. Most critics only focus on such topics instead of her authorial identity, leaving a woman to be discovered in the margins and leading to many underexamined poems. Three of her underexamined poems, “A Fixed Idea,” “The Lamp of Life,” and “The Sisters,” share the same theme; the struggle of the female artist. Lowell illustrates the female experience, shadowed thoughts, works, and silenced voices in patriarchal literature through poetic devices such as imagery and metaphors. Lowell gives voice to the female identities residing in the margins with powerful imagery such as the binary images of day and night, joy and pain, and individuality and community with a tone of genuine comradeship. Furthermore, she uses the first-person narrator to address the women figures, always listening but silent, observing but never participating through apostrophe and dramatic monologue. These poems are the mediums for Lowell to build a distinct female literary genealogy, which calls for the need for further examination in this research paper.

In her poem titled “The Sisters,” Lowell attempts a call to unite the female literary minds to establish a female literary genealogy, referencing the role models such as Elizabeth Browning, Emily Dickinson, and Sappho. Lowell explores the isolation and alienation that accompanies the condition of being a woman writer in the modernist era, struggling to be considered as one between the great male poets of the time. She inspects the paths of her foremothers and discovers her own body of literature; Lowell encourages and supports herself and future precursors in overcoming the “anxiety of authorship.”

How we lie, we poets! It is three good hours

I have been dreaming. Has it seemed so long  
To you? And yet I thank you for the time  
Although you leave me sad and self-distrustful,  
For older sisters are very sobering things.  
Put on your cloaks, my dears, the motor's waiting.  
No, you have not seemed strange to me, but  
Frightfully near, and rather terrifying. (Lowell, "The Sisters")

In the quotation above, her tone in the poem goes through a bittersweet change; Lowell dreams of having an intimate conversation with the figures in the form of a dramatic monologue. Using the literary device of apostrophe, she echoes their voices, their emotions. As Emily Dickinson states, "the despair we "inhale" even "at distances of centuries" may be the despair of a life that has no story." (Gilbert and Gubar 45) According to Lowell, these figures, either loud or silenced, are pained; they could not tell their stories. Symbolically, they have a functional role in the poem, representing the lost matrilineage as silent warning figures in cloaks. The imagery is quite strong in these lines; they are silhouettes close yet far away, terrifying because they might be lost permanently at the distances of centuries. She also emphasizes the importance of the sense of individuality versus community; when united, voices become louder; through comradeship and sisterhood, the obstacles of daily life feel less intense. A community of female literary figures makes it easier to cope with the patriarchal system.

"And how extraordinarily unlike  
Each is to me, and which way shall I go?  
Sappho spent and gained; and Mrs. Browning,  
After a miser girlhood, cut the strings

Which tied her money-bags and let them run;  
But Emily hoarded—hoarded-- only giving  
Herself to cold, white paper. Starved and tortured,  
She cheated her despair with games of patience  
And fooled herself by winning..." (Lowell, "The Sisters")

Through a series of images and metaphors, Lowell emphasizes the unique paths her literary sisters took concerning their authorships. She voices her reluctant stance on which side to take, unsure whether to take a firm stance or stay in the dark about her unpublished poems and her literary identity. Carl E. Rollyson gives a specific chapter to this poem in her biographical book *Amy Lowell Anew: A Biography* where he states the stance of Lowell as a poet and summarizes the poem in a brief sentence; "This is a biographer's poem that seeks identification with the subject and a poet's poem yearning for consanguinity of purpose in her predecessor's words." (Rollyson 167)

As a woman and a poet, Amy Lowell's unique perspective is affected by a woman's everyday struggle in daily life. For a woman to be an artist, she needs a certain level of life quality and a supportive environment. As Woolf mentions in her *A Room of One's Own*, "intellectual freedom depends upon material things, and poetry depends upon intellectual freedom." (89). The creation of poetry depends on material things, money, and private space. A woman must control her space and life to gain her freedom on both levels, intellectually and materially. In her research article about Amy Lowell, Melissa Bradshaw states, "She could not help but be aware of the expectations and limitations placed on her as a woman and as a Lowell, a family whose wealth and social prominence certainly precluded their female members from having careers." (142) However, in her case, such limitations and the awareness granted her a time and space for creation, even though Lowell was aware her literary creations might never be regarded as a public accomplishment. She was able to create through prejudices and financial and educational

disadvantages that inhibit a woman's creativity. Lowell reflects her natural and honest experience in her unique perspective; she never diverts from her authorship identity. In her poetry, her craftsmanship consists of words carved out of everyday life; words can carry almost a thousand meanings. In Woolf's words in her essay about the craftsmanship of the artist, "English words are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally." (Collected Essays 248) Lowell's perspective lies in her words, metaphors, and literary devices; she proves that a poet's work is inseparable from one's life; women reflect their experiences in their stories. However, their identities as ordinary women remain invisible and unseen in everyday life.

The struggle of the female artist is existent between the lines, shadowed thoughts of a woman writer; sentences are public and safe for an artist as the words appear to be confined in the front lines when in reality, the mind of the poet is striving between the lines at the risk of isolation and alienation from the society. The spaces between the lines cannot be controlled, they are unrestricted areas of intellectual freedom; for women the spaces transform into experiences and stories of the female experience through poetic expressions like observed in Lowell's poems, "A Fixed Idea," and "The Lamp of Life." Vivid imagery for Lowell's poetry is one of the significant elements, in her own words, "Vividness must impose itself upon the mind's eye in an inescapable picture." (Lowell 105) In these sonnets she uses vivid binary images of day and night, and joy and pain to describe the two opposite sides and perspectives in the society, male and female. Upon first look, the poems seem trivial, written as a sonnet in iambic pentameter; within the literary rules. It is only noticeable under close examination that Lowell might have deliberately chosen to write within the confinements of literary rules, alerting the reader to focus on the meaning between the lines.

"We journey through are hidden from our sight

Dim and mysterious, folded deep in night,

We care not, all our utmost need demands

Is but the light, the light! So still it stands

Surely our own if we exert our might.” (Lowell, “The Lamp of Life”)

The quote above conveys a powerful message through symbolism and strong imagery; women writers reside in the dark, hidden from the public view through steady progress. They aim for light, publicity, and a public presence in society without prohibitions. Here, Lowell's tone is suggestive and encouraging; she pushes the reader, her female counterparts, to get through the days until they can exist within the margins of society, free of any constraints. “But just a little farther on. Distaught, / But lighted ever onward, we are brought / Upon our way unknowing, in a dream.” (Lowell, “The Lamp of Life”)

In her poem “A Fixed Idea,” Lowell focuses on the binary of joy and pain, opposite to the previous poem, it draws an emphasis on the psychological perspective of a female identity. “What torture lurks within a single thought / When grown too constant; and however kind, However welcome still, the weary mind / Aches with its presence...” (Lowell, “A Fixed Idea”) Literature for a woman artist is a way of escaping and expressing their unspoken thoughts and opinions, it is easy to see how writing can transform into “a nest”, “a habit” for the artist. “That all recurring joy is pain refined, / Become a habit, and we struggle, caught. / You lie upon my heart as on a nest...” Lowell's tone in this poem is rather longing and upset; she explores the desire for writing literature.

Folded in peace, for you can never know

How crushed I am with having you at rest

Heavy upon my life. I love you so

You bind my freedom from its rightful quest.

In mercy lift your drooping wings and go. (Lowell, "A Fixed Idea")

As she is a woman writer, her literary creations are unlikely to be published, and the joy of creating and her passion for literature seems to be clashing with the complications of the male-dominated literary world. She personifies her literary creation, possibly a poem with apostrophes by a genuine tone; the psychological implications of keeping her creation and her lover confined push her to free her literary work from the constraints she created.

In conclusion, Lowell's identity as a woman poet enables her to observe her female ancestors and contemporaries to talk about the female mind's intellectual interior design in her poems "The Sisters," "The Lamp of Life," and "A Fixed Idea." Her particular focus on the struggles of female identity is expressed through poetic devices. She explores the physical and psychological strains around the containments of intellectual freedom in a patriarchal society and literary history. Through binary images of day and night, joy and pain, sense of individuality and community, a feminist reading of remarginalizing female identity is made possible. Like her contemporaries, Amy Lowell attempts to establish a female literary history with first-hand experience; by contemplating the concepts of femininity and authorship, she significantly contributes to the field of women and writing. She has freedom and fullness of expression in her writing, and despite being criticized for the lack of tradition by her male contemporaries, she carries the essence of art in her works. Women and writing is an ongoing field, as women writers and their works are often revisited in a gendered light; revisiting and commenting is a way to explore the unsaid and to give women writing visibility. Amy Lowell is just a mere example in the endless sea filled with incredible authors and bodies of literary works. The discovery of new meanings and perspectives hidden in literary works is possible through further research.



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