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Imagism, Oriental Elements, and Feminism in Amy Lowell's Poems

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Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of Imagism, Orientalism, and Feminism in the works of Amy Lowell, with a comparative analysis of her poetry and that of Ezra Pound, the founder of the Imagist movement. At the turn of the 20th century, American poetry underwent a radical transformation as a response to industrialization, modern science, and the cultural upheavals of World War I. Imagism emerged as a major literary movement, emphasizing economy of expression, clarity of language, and the use of vivid, primary imagery. While Pound championed the minimalistic, focal imagery of Imagism, Lowell diverged from him by employing multiple, equally weighted images that form continuous, fragmented perceptions, often infused with emotional depth. Alongside her engagement with Imagism, Lowell's work was also deeply influenced by Oriental culture, particularly Chinese and Japanese poetry, which she explored through translation and imitation. The paper delves into how Lowell's poetry reflects her personal affinity for Eastern aesthetics and themes, merging these with her modernist sensibilities. Furthermore, the study examines how Lowell's feminist perspective shaped her poetic voice, particularly in her exploration of gender roles and the representation of women in her poems. By examining Lowell's blending of Imagism, Orientalism, and Feminism, this paper sheds light on her unique position within the American literary landscape and her contribution to modernist poetry.

Keywords: Imagism; Feminism; Orientalism; Amy Lowell

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, American society was undergoing great changes. The progress of industry and modern science made the learned people gradually realize that people were no longer cold, numb, and lawless moral beings in the universe, but a group full of despair. The outbreak of World War I revolutionized the United States, and with it, literature, especially American poetry. American poetry of this period abandoned the Victorian form, the pentatonic iambic pentameter of the Victorian form, and was no longer strongly didactic; it was no longer imbued with extra-poetic events, but focused on economy of expression and the use of primary imagery. Ezra Pound's Imagism was born, and has had a great influence on modern American poetry since then.

Pound's Imagism rejected the overblown rhetoric of Romantic and Victorian poetry, instead advocating for simplicity, clarity, and precision. The movement called for poets to capture moments of intense visual and sensory experience through brief, sharp images. Imagism also sought to eliminate unnecessary words, focusing instead on the power of primary imagery to evoke emotions and convey meaning. This new approach to poetry marked a significant departure from the

poetic traditions of the 19th century and laid the foundation for much of 20th-century modernist poetry. Imagism, while originating with Pound, would be shaped by a variety of voices, and one of the most significant contributors to this movement was Amy Lowell. Lowell, who initially embraced Pound's ideals, would later develop her own interpretation of Imagism. The purpose of this paper is to explore how Amy Lowell's poetry engages with and diverges from the Imagist principles established by Ezra Pound. Specifically, it examines the role of imagery in Lowell's work, particularly how she employs multiple images that work together to create a sense of continuous, layered perception. In addition to the core principles of Imagism, this paper investigates the influence of Orientalism in Lowell's poetry, particularly her fascination with Chinese and Japanese poetry. It also explores the feminist undertones in Lowell's work, focusing on how she redefined the role of women in poetry. A staunch advocate for female poets, Lowell's writing reflects both a challenge to and a reinterpretation of the traditional gender roles in literature. By analyzing Lowell's representations of women in her poetry, this study will uncover how she used her literary voice not only to engage with the modernist movement but also to assert a feminist perspective that countered the male-dominated literary establishment.

2. Imagism in Amy Lowell's poetry

2.1. Connections and differences between Lowell and Imagism

Amy Lowell (1874–1925) first encountered the Imagists in 1903 and found that their core beliefs coincided with her own poetic credo. She then met Ezra Pound (1885–1972), the founder of the Imagists, and began to devote herself to the Imagist movement. Later in the movement, she and Pound parted ways due to a disagreement over the development of their philosophies. Determined to continue to focus on developing Imagist poetry, Lowell published her collection *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* in 1914. This collection of poems ushered in critical acclaim for Lowell. In this collection, she used free verse and polyphonic prose, which would become a distinctive label for her later poetry, and in 1916, she published one of her most popular works, *Men, Women and Ghosts*. In 1919, Lowell published the poetry collection *Pictures of the Floating World*, in which most of the poems were English parodies of traditional Japanese haiku, along with dozens of parodies of ancient Chinese poems. Lowell did not stop exploring the art of Eastern poetry, and in 1921 she published *Fir-Flower Tablets*, a collection of English translations of ancient Chinese poetry [1].

Lowell attempted to write some sonnets when she first started out in poetry, but she found that the strict meter of the sonnet seemed to limit the expression of emotion and was not in line with her own philosophy of poetry. So she gave up writing sonnets altogether and began to write free-form poems that were more suitable for the free expression of emotions. At that time, the Imagist Poetry Movement was also in its infancy. The following year, when Lowell first read the poetry of Hilda Doolittle (1886–1961), she was attracted to this style of poetry. Lowell then traveled to London, the center of the Imagist movement at the time, to meet the famous poet Pound, the originator of the Imagist movement. Pound was so impressed with Lowell that he soon included her poems in a collection of Imagist poems that he edited. Since then, Lowell was officially included in the Imagists under Pound's leadership. However, in the later stages of the Imagist movement, they disagreed sharply on the direction of the school, and Lowell, a strong and confident person, left Pound in anger and continued her own journey as an Imagist.

In fact, the reason Lowell established herself as an Imagist was not because she had given up the tenets of Imagist writing founded by Pound. On the contrary, she still firmly believed that Imagist poetry should be guided by the following principles: "The object depicted must be dealt with directly and to the point, whether it be subjective or objective; the words used must be concise and clean, and not a single word that has nothing to do with the content must be used; as to rhythm and rhyme, the natural sense of meter of poetry should be followed, and there is no need to adhere to strict meter and rhyme." These principles of imagistic composition, as put forth by Pound, are the same guidelines for Lowell's poetry that she has lived by her entire life, except that she places more emphasis on the expression of her emotions and senses, and disregards the meter and rhyme of poetry even more than Pound did.

The real reason for Lowell's determination to abandon Pound's Imagism altogether was that she could not identify

with Pound's authoritarian and dictatorial image of leadership [2]. She believed that the Imagist movement should evolve into a more democratic model. Having established her own separate Imagist school, she quickly published a collection of poems co-edited by poets, *Some Imagist Poets* (1917). Under Lowell's strong publicity and marketing campaign, the collection gained wide recognition at the time, and people seemed to have accepted Lowell as the new leader of the Imagists. In terms of poetic skill and achievement, Lowell was not as noteworthy as Pound, but she was able to establish herself as a stronger Imagist leader than Pound because of her strong business skills, and she was not shy about using her large inheritance to publicize and promote Imagist poetry. It was her poetic talent and business acumen that made her the new leader of the Imagists, replacing Pound, who was more interested in pure art [3]. Pound was so displeased with Lowell's approach to Imagism that he considered it a complete stain on Imagism. In 1914, he angrily renamed his own Imagism as "Vorticism." Since then, Lowell succeeded Pound as the absolute leader of the Imagist movement, and "in the minds of American readers at the time, was the most authoritative spokesperson for the new poetic movement." Her poetic outlook reproduced the core propositions of the Imagists, and she put forward six principles in 1915: first, language should be plain and precise, not merely decorative; second, new rhythms should be created to express new moods, rather than reproducing the old ones; third, the choice of subject matter should be absolutely free; and fourth, imagery should be presented (hence the name of the "Imagists"); fifth, write hard, clear poems, never vague or boundless ones; sixth, thematic concentration is the essence of poetry (Lowell, 1915: vi–vii), and later Lowell added the principle of "to be subtle, not to be direct" in her *Trends in Modern American Poetry* published in 1917.

2.2. Features of Lowell's Imagism poetry

2.2.1. Imagism influenced by impressionism

First of all, her imaginative poetry is marked by the influence of impressionism. The impressionism of poetry "advocates the poet's subjective understanding to scrutinize the objective world, to capture the impression of the moment when feelings are sublimated into emotions, to create; to focus on the infectious force of things rather than the things themselves; to regard feelings as the main content of poetic creation, and to put the theme in a secondary position." The difference between this school and the Imagist school is clearly seen here, with the former emphasizing feeling or the subject and the latter emphasizing imagery or the object. Amy Lowell is embracing the teachings of Imagism in her concise, hard-edged use of language and presentation of concrete imagery, while at the same time she is infusing her poems with her narrator's feelings as well as some prominent visual impressions through her imagery. Also, Amy Lowell shows the influence of the Impressionist school of painting in her use of light and color. For example, in her "Opal," "You are cold and flame. You are the crimson of amaryllis, The silver of moon-touched magnolias." and "My heart is a frozen pond gleaming with agitated torches." The use of light and color in verses such as these is extremely charming. Especially the equating of people with colors brings whimsy and spirituality to the poems and reflects the important role played by imagination in the poet's works.

2.2.2. Comparison with Pound: Multi-image juxtaposition and emotional richness

The use of imagery in Amy Lowell's poetry is quite distinctive. As far as the use of imagery is concerned, proto-imagist poetry focuses on capturing the scene at a particular moment in time and conveying the poet's inner feelings through dominant imagery. This dominant imagery blends seamlessly with the momentary feeling that the poet is trying to express; the imagery itself is the carrier and language of the poet's emotion. On the other hand, Amy Lowell's imagistic poetry tends to "record the details of each image in turn, thus producing a cinematographic effect." Therefore, it is generally not easy to find in her Imagist poems the focal image that stands out and carries the poet's emotion, but rather an arrangement of several images on an equal footing, so that they form a continuous fragment of imagery. We can compare Pound's "Subway Platform," a classic in the history of Imagist poetry, with a similarly short poem, "Dairy" by Amy Lowell.

Pound uses two images, "the apparition of these faces in the crowd" and "petals on a wet black branch," which demonstrate the poem's focal imagery. By contrasting the faces of the crowd with the petals, Pound conveys a sudden,

fleeting, and beautiful impression. The faces appear as visions, symbolizing the myriad of hurried passersby in the crowd, while the petals convey a fragile, fleeting beauty. By contrasting these two images, Pound not only demonstrates the indifference and loneliness of the anonymous crowd in the city, but also implies a succinct and precise depiction of natural beauty. The poem presents a very concentrated imagery—faces and petals—which are not interfered with by other elements; together they form the core of the poem, showing Pound's capture and cohesion of instantaneous perception. This minimalist expression is one of the characteristics of Imagism, and by removing redundant descriptions, Pound demonstrates the essence of poetry: a concentrated presentation of the beauty and emotion of the moment.

In "Diary," on the other hand, Lowell intertwines natural scenes with her inner emotions through a vast array of parallel imagery. In the first section, she lists images of grass, sky, trees, moon, wind, and sea, and although these images are independent of each other, they work together in the poem to form a rich picture of nature. Each image is equal; they are not prioritized, but participate together in expressing the poet's emotions and perception of nature. In this poem, the imagery is not focused on a particular focal point, but rather, like a collage, a continuous flow of perception is formed through the superimposition of multiple levels of imagery and emotion. This poetic structure, composed of multiple equal images, makes the poem emotionally richer and more multidimensional, and at the same time closer to the diversity and complexity of life.

Pound's "Subway Platform" focuses on one focal image, highlighting the way in which momentary emotions and perceptions are conveyed through contrast and condensation. The simplicity and concentration of the poem make the imagery have a strong impact, and readers can feel Pound's unique perception and expression of a slice of life in just a few lines.

3. Orient elements in Amy Lowell's poetry

3.1. Lowell's love for Eastern culture and its influencing factors

Lowell had never set foot in the East in her life; she had never been to Japan or China. However, from an early age, she had a passion for Eastern cultures [4]. This love was first triggered by her older brother, the famous astronomer Percival Lowell. Percival had lived in China and Japan for several years, and every time he returned to the United States, he would tell his curious sister about what he had seen in the Orient and bring back some Chinese and Japanese paintings and calligraphy. Lowell became fascinated by the history of Oriental art. Percival himself had studied the Orient and had published scholarly works on it. In such an atmosphere, Lowell never stopped pursuing the culture of the Far East [5].

Secondly, Pound, the founder of Imagist poetry, had always been fascinated by Chinese culture, especially classical Chinese poetry. At the beginning of founding the Imagist school, Pound borrowed a lot from the creative concepts and forms of classical oriental poetry [6]. As an original follower of Pound, Lowell was inevitably influenced by Pound's ideas and poetic tastes, and even though they later went their separate ways, Lowell's love of classical Chinese poetry remained.

Lowell envied and praised Pound's translations and adaptations of Chinese poetry (especially Li Bai's), and for Lowell, who had a strong sense of triumph and self-esteem, she even believed that she "could do a better translation than Pound, and a more accurate one than he could." In 1921, Lowell published a collection of English translations of classical Chinese poems, *Fir-Flower Tablets*, in which poems were mainly selected from some famous poets of the Tang Dynasty, with the poems of Li Bai, whom Lowell admired the most, being the most popular, with 83 out of the 150 poems in Chinese being by Li Bai. This does not exclude her desire to compete with Pound [7]. In addition to adopting the technique of imaginative poetry to present the content and mood of the selected classical Chinese poems in English, Lowell also pioneered the more controversial technique of translating Chinese characters into English, such as the "split-word method," which shows her good intentions for this collection.

3.2. Application of Eastern elements in imitation and translation

In 1919, Lowell published a collection of poems called *Pictures of the Floating World*, which is a Japanese folk art form

that has been passed down for a long time. The second chapter of the collection, titled "Chinoiseries," contains seven imitations of classical Chinese poems. The seven poems are: Reflections, Falling Snow, Hoar-Frost, Gold-Leaf Screen, A Poet's Wife, Spring Longing, and Li TaiBai. In this way, Lowell presents many of the common images of classical Chinese poetry, and she utilizes the techniques of imagist poetry to deal with them, combining East and West to bring a different kind of beauty to the poems [8].

3.2.1. Imitation analysis of "Reflection"

The first poem in the chapter is titled "Reflection," which reads,

When I looked into your eyes,
I saw a garden
With peonies, and tinkling pagodas,
And round-arched bridges
Over still lakes.
A woman sat beside the water
In a rain-blue, silken garment.
She reached through the water
To pluck the crimson peonies
Beneath the surface,
But as she grasped the stems,
They jarred and broke into white-green ripples;
And as she drew out her hand,
The water-drops dripping from it
Stained her rain-blue dress like tears. (Lowell 27)

The common imagery of classical Chinese poetry that appears in the poem includes pavilion, arch bridge, peony, and ripples, and in depicting these images, Lowell adheres to the principles of Imagist poetry, using simple and precise wording to sketch the image of a lonely woman who misses her lover in just a few words. Imagist poetry focuses on the conveyance of visual imagery, and in this poem, a variety of colors, such as the aqua blue of the woman's silk dress, the red of the peony, and the white-green of the lotus ripples, form a rich picture. At the same time, the superposition of imagery in the poem is in line with the distinctive and condensed characteristics of Imagism, which is integrated with the poet's emotion in the imagery, and is also consistent with the artistic principle of expressing emotion through imagery in classical Chinese poetry. It can be seen that the creation of Lowell's imagist poetry was influenced by classical Chinese poetry to a certain extent.

3.2.2. Imitation analysis of "Falling Snow"

The second poem in this chapter is titled "Falling Snow," and "snow" is a common image in classical Chinese poetry. For example, Bai Juyi's "Ask Liu XIX," Liu Zongyuan's "River Snow," Li Bai's "Hard to Walk," Cen Sen's "The Song of White Snow Sends Judge Wu to Return to the Capital," and Zu Yong's "Looking at the Remaining Snow in the Final South" all contain excellent lines using "snow" as an imagery. The poem adopts the common Chinese poem image of "snow" in Tang poetry to express Lowell's style of utilizing scenery and blending objects. Lowell uses the imagery of footprints in the snow as a metaphor for the footprints of life, which come and go in the long river of history, leaving no trace, no matter how much satisfaction one has in life [9]. This slightly pessimistic argument speaks the true meaning of life. To speak the truth through imagery is another quality of Lowell's imagistic poetry.

3.2.3. Other imitations and translations of Chinese poems

In the following three poems, White Frost, Yellow Leaves, and Spring Thoughts, Lowell expresses the feelings of loss and

loneliness through the depiction of herons, autumn, falling leaves, dusk, and other common imagery in ancient Chinese poetry. In the poem "The Poet's Wife," Lowell chooses the love story of Zhuo Wenjun and Sima Xiangru, and writes a letter to Sima Xiangru in the tone of Zhuo Wenjun, denouncing the latter's abandonment of himself for the sake of fame and fortune and expressing his anger and deplorable feelings [10]. Finally, Lowell closes the chapter with Li Taibai. In this poem, which is directly named after the Chinese poet Li Bai, Lowell spares no words of praise and expresses his reverence for the classic poet, which is exactly the kind of imagery that Lowell tries to present as an echo of English and American imagistic poetry and classical Chinese song [11].

4. Feminism in Amy Lowell's poetry

4.1. The formation and struggle of Lowell's female consciousness

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United States established its own empire in the Asia-Pacific region, and the word "Asia" appeared frequently in various fields of different cultures, resulting in the formation of a new culture, American Orientalism. Orientalism advocated a break with tradition and the adoption of new forms of reproduction in literature, especially poetry. For women, Orientalism provided a means of adventure, freedom, and self-realization, and had a profound impact on the formation of modernism in American literature. A group of women writers, represented by Amy Lowell, took advantage of this opportunity and created a series of literary works with strong personal and oriental elements.

Lowell's imagist ideas are clearly feminine. First of all, her family background provided objective conditions for the formation of her character. Born in Massachusetts, Lowell's family was rich and unruly since childhood. Although she did not receive a complete formal education, the example of her father and brothers created an external atmosphere for her self-education, and also established the ideological foundation for her literary pursuits. A rich and prestigious family would also bring Lowell another psychological influence, i.e., psychological advantage, and this potential influence created her self-confident, self-conceited, to be a strong and enthusiastic character [12].

Lowell's struggle with Pound, as some critics have come to realize, was her struggle with an already long-established tradition of misogyny toward women and women writers [13]. She was a staunch advocate of American poetry, and an even more staunch advocate of women poets, and she went around proclaiming The Pat-ters as her spokesperson for American poetry, and even if her advocacy was covert, and even if she was often dressed in Victorian ladylike garb, Amy Lowell seemed to embody the image of the liberated new woman [14]. This apparent contradiction stems from the conflict between Amy Lowell's identity as a female poet and the male-dominated poetic tradition, and the difficulty for female writers to create in a male-discursive society.

4.2. Female perspectives in poetry

In Amy Lowell's strongly Orientalist poems, women are often used as the narrator, while the object of the dialogue appears in the second person. Even though the reader clearly recognizes the poet's own American identity, the narrator "I" can rightfully represent the voice of a Chinese or Japanese person. Through this interlocking of identities, the poet, narrator, and reader participate in the masking of race, thereby revealing more of the poem's connotations. The qualities of women's emotional loneliness, sadness, and fidelity are heavily expressed in classical Chinese poetry. Lowell shared similar feelings. She has translated the poems of Xue Tao, a Chinese poetess of the Tang Dynasty. Since Xue Tao's poems were mostly love poems, which dealt with Chinese women's emotional subtlety and gentleness, Lowell learned from them the qualities of Chinese women's sadness, self-discipline, fidelity, and patience, and thus triggered her inner touch and admiration for Chinese women.

In her translation of Li Bai's poem "The Long Dry Walk," Amy Lowell takes a very different approach to personification than Pound does [11].

Pound's translation reads:

"*While my hair was still cut straight across my fore-head*
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse, You walked my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living the village of Chokan.
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion."
Amy Lowell's translation reads:
"*When the hair of your Unworthy One first began to cover her forehead.*
She picked flowers and played in front of the door.
Then you, my Lover, came riding a bamboo horse.
We ran round and round the bed, and tossed about the sweetness of green plums.
We both lived in the village of Ch'ang Kan.
We were both very young, and knew neither jealousy nor suspicion."

Unlike Pound, who simply translates the narrator as "I," Amy Lowell begins her poem with "your Unworthy One" to emphasize a patriarchal, paternalistic social relationship that defines female identity by her husband's relationship. A social relationship in which a woman's identity is defined by her relationship with her husband. Although the rest of the poem describes a childhood relationship between a man and a woman, Amy Lowell uses the phrase "you, my Lover" to refer to the woman's relationship with her husband and "jealousy" to denote "no suspicion of suspicion" in the original text, making the reader associate this with a love poem. On the contrary, Pound simply uses "you" to refer to the narrator's husband and the common word "dislike" to mean "no suspicion" in the original text. This makes the reader feel that Amy Lowell's translation has a strong female color from the very beginning.

In addition, Lowell intentionally implanted the background of the story of Wangfushi, which is not mentioned in Pound's translation of the same poem. It can be seen that Pound was more interested in the expressive techniques of Chinese poetry, while Lowell was more in-depth in his psychological exploration and emotional experience of ancient Chinese women's poetry.

5. Conclusion

As a leading figure in the later stage of the Imagist poetry movement, Amy Lowell had a unique creative concept of Imagism. Although she disagreed with Pound, whom she initially followed, she was influenced by Pound in her poetic thoughts and creative concepts, especially Pound's interest in classical Chinese poetry. Lowell developed her own Imagist style based on translations and adaptations of classical Chinese poetry. The seven Chinese poems in her collection *The Floating World* and the collection of poems *Fir-Flower Tablets* are her attempts to combine Imagist poetic techniques with classical Chinese poetic imagery. This practice produces the beauty of the integration of Chinese and Western poetic imagery into one and mirroring each other, leaving a valuable literary treasure for future generations and providing a case study of cross-cultural creation between the East and the West. Lowell's feminist perspective added another layer of depth to her poetry. By redefining the role of women in literature and challenging traditional gender roles, she used her poetic voice to advocate for female empowerment and equality. Her work serves as a testament to the resilience and creativity of women in a male-dominated literary landscape, inspiring future generations of female writers to assert their voices and challenge societal norms.

In conclusion, Amy Lowell's contributions to Imagist poetry, her exploration of Eastern aesthetics, and her feminist advocacy have left an indelible mark on the literary world. Her legacy continues to inspire and influence contemporary poetry, offering a rich tapestry of ideas and perspectives that enrich our understanding of both the past and the present. As a modern woman who defied conventions and pursued her passions with determination, Lowell's life and work stand as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of art and the enduring importance of cultural exchange.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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