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Emily Jinju Cottam
Utah State University

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A STIFF, BROCADED GOWN:
PATTERNS IN THE LIFE OF AMY LOWELL

by

Emily Jinju Cottam

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Approved:

Thesis/Project Advisor
Dr. Cindy Dewey

Departmental Honors Advisor
Dr. Sergio Bernal

Honors Program Director
Dr. Kristine Miller

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

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A Stiff, Brocaded Gown: Patterns in the Life of Amy Lowell

Amy Lowell's poetry serves as a reflection of the challenges and struggles that permeated her life. Her late entry into the world of published poetry at the age of 38 resulted in the presentation of already-solidified beliefs that she had developed since childhood. Although the techniques she employed and the quality of her writing varied in the last decades of her life, Lowell's focus on imagery, rhythm, and mood remained consistent in many of her works. Published in 1916, the poem “Patterns”, from Men, Women, and Ghosts, contains themes that are of particular note when placed into the context of Lowell’s life. Besides the obvious references to her anti-war sentiment and the unabashed employment of sensual language as descriptive tools, “Patterns” places a spotlight on the issues that had repeatedly come to plague Lowell’s life. The cycle of life and death, the unstoppable force of time, the conflict of living as a female in society with pervasive pressures of conformity, and fears of never finding love as a social outcast and homosexual woman are all patterns in Amy Lowell’s life that assert themselves in this particular poem. The ostentatious nature of her writing also serves as a reflection of the lifestyle and performance decisions she made in her journey as a nationally-acclaimed poet.

Through her frequent employment of descriptive language and her strong focus on pacing, verse, and rhythm, Amy Lowell addresses the subjects of sensuality, social conformity, death, and anti-war sentiment in “Patterns”. This poem is an accurate representation of the life values and poetic aesthetic that she attempted to exude during
her lifetime, for she felt that “the poet with originality and power is always seeking to give his readers the same poignant feeling which he has himself.”

POETIC TOOLS FOR EXPRESSION

Amy Lowell utilizes a range of literary tools in “Patterns” that are of particular note in her writing style, such as imagism. Compared to a more romantic, flowery style of writing, the Imagist faction is a poetic movement that stresses “simplicity and directness of speech; subtlety and beauty of rhythms,” and “clearness and vividness of presentation”; it is based more in free-verse, or as Lowell calls it, “unrhymed cadence.” In imagism, the “essence” of the subject is often described through a concise use of imagery in writing. This can be done through the description of the image itself, or through the suggested qualities of a concept through the sonance, or phonetic sound of the descriptive language used. As a self-proclaimed Imagist poet, her writing style is particularly dependent on her ability to concisely describe whatever theme or subject she is trying to expound upon.

In “Patterns” we can see how she uses imagism in line 73; her use of the words “stiff” and “correct” capitalize on the percussive or turbulent nature of the [t] in “stiff” and [k/kt] in “correct” to create an abruptness in the line, thereby also influencing the flow and cadence. In line 16, her use of the word “tripping” also uses the plosive [t] and [p] to interrupt the flow of the line, suggesting the instability and precariousness with which the speaker stands in her restrictive attire.

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3 Lowell, *Sword Blades*, x.
In contrast, the more lyrical sections (lines 28-58) are playful and song-like, employing an abundance of smooth, voiced consonants instead of containing very few percussive consonants. This can be seen in lines such as the following: (line 53) “In a month, here, underneath this lime...”, or (lines 34-35) “A basin in the midst of hedges grown so thick...”

Lowell also manipulates meter for the sake of representing the underlying meaning of the text. This is particularly noticeable in her alternation of long and short lines in stanzas. In lines 75-90, the lines are markedly shorter than those surrounding it, highlighting the “rigidness” and “stiffness” of the gown. When placed in juxtaposition with the next section, beginning in line 28, the restrictiveness of the gown compared to the ethereal atmosphere of the speaker’s daydreams becomes particularly noticeable. This dream section, framed again by the shorter lines starting in line 93, becomes more agitated by virtue of the stanza contour.

THEMES

Because of her frequent employment of imagery and the high value she places on the evocation of a particular concept through the phonic qualities of language, Amy Lowell demonstrates a well-developed descriptive language in her poetry, using Imagist concepts to her advantage when addressing multiple thematic elements in a single piece such as “Patterns”. There are several themes that can be found in “Patterns” and many of the ideas that are found in this poem are a reflection of the issues and important subjects in Lowell’s life.
Conformity and Restriction

The first theme to be addressed in “Patterns” centralizes around the topic of conformity. Lowell begins the poem with the juxtaposition of different elements of nature with that of man-made creations, using vivid descriptions of the “garden paths” and the “brocaded gown”. This method allows her to direct that audience’s attention to the concept of conformity brought on by social expectations of class and sex. For instance, the “blowing” daffodils and the “bright blue squills”\(^4\) (lines 2-3) are contrasted with the speaker’s “stiff, brocaded gown” (line 5). The visual imagery used to describe the flowers provides the reader with a sense of flexibility, with the word “blowing” suggesting the flow-like qualities of wind, calling to mind the stalk of a flower bending with the current. In contrast, by using tactile language to describe the dress of the speaker, Lowell reinforces the constrictive nature of the gown that adorns her.

The dress’ restrictiveness in the way that it is built, the patterns of speech for the speaker and her behavior towards her footman, and the predetermined trajectory of the garden paths are also indications of the social restrictions that are imposed on her. The dress is described as “stiff,” “correct,” “upright,” and “rigid,” and inserting details regarding its structure, like “whalebone,” “arrayed,” “stayed,” and “guarded,” adds emphasis to the uncompromising build of the gown. When addressed by the footman, the speaker responds curtly, and her language suggests that the restrictiveness of societal expectations are ingrained into her behavior, not just in her clothes, as seen in lines 68-70: “No... See that the

\(^4\) A small flower from the lily family.
messenger takes some refreshment. No, no answer.” These are the only lines spoken by her, and the language is polite and collected, despite the sudden news of her lover’s untimely death. The confining nature of the garden paths is not described by what Lowell writes, but rather by what she does not. The entirety of this poem takes place in the setting of the garden, on the paths. There is no deviation, leading the reader to believe that the speaker is unable or unwilling to leave; the garden is a beautifully cultivated shield from the harsh, outside world, while it is also a type of cage hiding the life of a woman living in the upper class. These restrictions are highlighted by juxtaposing them with the sections involving Lord Hartwell’s courting, in which the speaker is freed from the constraints of her gown, surrounded by free-flowing water (lines 28-39).

This free-flowing water, however, is also constrained by a man-made fountain, so the direction of its flow has already been predetermined, suggesting that the freedom of these natural elements has been suppressed. The two lovers are also never described as actually leaving the constraints of the garden paths; they merely follow it with more abandon. With these constraints in mind, the fountain and the dress represent the significance of the manmade constructs that restrict what is natural or free—water and the human body—reflecting the experience of a woman in a society that frowns on outspokenness and openness regarding sexuality.

In the event of Lord Hartwell’s death, the dress also becomes a personal shield against the perceptions of the rest of the world, hiding the speaker’s grief (which is finally described in the very end of the poem in “Christ!…”) as a means of self protection. The expectations of female behavior and the maintenance of one’s composure, even in the face
of events of heightened emotion, is embodied by the gown despite its restrictive nature, and it is a mask behind which the speaker hides.

**Conformity in Lowell’s Life**

By addressing the restrictiveness of the dress, Lowell is able to bring into focus her qualms regarding the role of the woman in society in terms of not only fashion, but behavioral expectations. As a female member of the Bostonian elite, these issues were of particular concern; throughout her life, she faced criticisms of her outgoing, “business-like” behavior which was unbecoming of women during that time. Coming from a high-profile family, there were also certain expectations regarding her behavior in the public that she did not conform to as well. According to Glenn Ruihley, author of *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered*, the expectations of the aristocratic ideal was a “central tension in her life, expressed in many different forms, but most often as the rebellion of the heart against external constraints.”

The theme of conformity as seen in “Patterns” is reflective of Lowell’s opinions regarding society’s expectations and restrictions in her own life, overshadowing things such as fashion, love, and behavior.

**Love and Sensuality**

Of all the many themes presented in “Patterns”, the subject of love—in both its *eros* and *agape* forms—is overwhelmingly present. Appearing mid-way through the work, it

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pairs particularly well with Lowell’s use of descriptive language, describing both the physical and emotional aspects of the romance that the speaker is involved in.

The appearance of Lord Hartwell, the love interest, in the poem also introduces a new theme, which centers around the idea of sensuality and sexual freedom. Lowell is, especially in this poem, particularly notorious for her broaching of sensual topics in her discussions of love and its affairs. In lines like 37-39, “the sliding of the water / seems the stroking of a dear hand upon her,” Lowell is particularly descriptive in terms of suggesting the sexual nature of the attraction between Lord Hartwell and the speaker. Again, this can be seen in lines 50-52:

Till he caught me in the shade,

And the buttons of his waistcoat bruised by body

as he clasped me,

Aching, melting, unafraid.

The idea of “softness” and delicateness as a descriptor of what lies beneath the speaker’s gown (lines 33, 102) also becomes a subtle but extremely effective means by which Lowell suggests the physicality of a naked, sensual woman.

Of course, the death of Lord Hartwell (lines 63-64), the daydream sequence (lines 28-55), and the unstoppable pacing of the speaker through the garden is reflective of the unease that comes from a suddenly terminated love affair. Following the revelation of Lord Hartwell’s fate in lines 63-64, the restriction of the gown also becomes much more than just

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a representation of the societal expectations on females—it also becomes a representation of the self-restraint regarding her grief and the realization that her love affair will never be continued, as seen in lines 102-107:

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 with the Duke in Flanders,
In a pattern called a war.

Love in Lowell’s Life

As a young woman, Lowell struggled with the nature of love and her seeming inability to comprehend how to find it for herself. It was foreign and slippery, and after denying two proposals for marriage and suffering through a failed engagement by the age of 23, she dedicated herself more to poetry after seeing Eleonora Duse, an Italian actress, in performance in 1902.\(^7\)

The realization of Lowell’s homosexuality also shed more light regarding the seeming impossibility of finding a romantic relationship for herself. Considering the negative societal perceptions of lesbianism during the early twentieth century, it is no wonder that there was a disconnect. In the latter years of her life, her relationship with Ada Dwyer Russell could have inspired other erotically-charged writings besides “Patterns”, and

\(^7\) Moore, introduction, xxvii.
this “taboo” that came with her romantic tastes would have been an apt inspiration for her unrestrained references to sensual topics.⁸

Death and Anti-War Sentiment

Finally, the subject of death in this poem is of particular note, because it places the content of the rest of the work into a different perspective. Once Lord Hartwell’s death is revealed, the wanderings of the speaker and her focus on the patterns surrounding her become a sort of fixation that arises as a result of shock. The speaker flits in and out of control, and it is not until the very end of the poem with her exclamation that she seems to lose herself and give in to grief when she says (line 107): “Christ! What are patterns for?”

Lowell takes care to place the announcement of Lord Hartwell’s death relatively late into the poem, placing it in the second half of the piece after detailing the intimate meetings between the speaker and Lord Hartwell. This adjusts the dramatic structure of the piece as a whole, making the announcement of his death all the more dramatic and sudden. The fluidity of the reverie is abruptly offset by the speaker’s robotic response to the messenger’s delivery, and the movement of the speaker’s thoughts from daydream to reality paves the way for the culmination of all her “stayed” emotion in the final line.

Although difficult to identify at the onset of the poem, the subject of war is ultimately the central theme around which this poem revolves; the consequences of war subtly underlie the speaker’s fixation on the constriction of her dress and her constant

references to her romantic escapades with Lord Hartwell. It is not until the final four lines (104-107) that the speaker directly addresses the atrocities and consequences of war:

For the man who should loose me is dead,
Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,
In a pattern called a war.
Christ! What are patterns for?

In her final question, with the realization of war as a pattern, the speaker questions the purpose of the institutions that are restricting her: Why are these social structures laid down, if not to prevent the unnecessarily violent end of someone like Lord Hartwell? These "gowns" of society are put into place for organization, order, and predictability—like unto a pattern. However, what is the point of these "patterns" if, even when they are in place, they cannot prevent war?

Lowell's use of the verb "wars" in lines 19-21 is also significant: "And I sink on a seat in the shade / Of a lime tree. For my passion / Wars against the stiff brocade..." This line explains that there will always be a resistance to these structures, and it is only with the freedom to pursue what is natural and beautiful, such as love, that the violent, "rigid," and "stiff" ideologies that cause war will disappear.

Death and War in Lowell's Life

A topic not unfamiliar to Lowell, this depiction of grief and dealing with loss may very well be a reflection of Lowell's own experiences. With the death of her mother in 1895
and father five years later, her response was, as the speaker's is in "Patterns", quite professional from an historical standpoint—soon after the death of her parents, Lowell bought the family estate and worked to figure out her own business ventures.

Lord Hartwell's death by means of battle is also of no coincidence. Written just as the first World War was beginning, Lowell herself became a staunch anti-war activist, particularly after being affected by its violence when she was unable to return home to the U.S. during her stay in England in 1914.

PATTERNS IN MUSIC

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. 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."[10] The marriage of text and music can, most importantly, also prepare the audience

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with a certain degree of expectation and provide context, environment, setting, and mood which would otherwise be unavailable.

In “Patterns: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano,” the central method around which Neil McKay sets the text of the poetry is, at its most fundamental core, the careful use of repetition in order to reflect the theme of “patterns” rendered by Amy Lowell’s writing. The recurring usage of specific lyrical motives, intervals, chords, and rhythms are all representative of the different recurring themes that present themselves in “Patterns”. By highlighting these repetitions of thought, McKay demonstrates a masterful understanding of text through his employment of motivic language, articulation to punctuate and add additional characterization to the tone of the speaker, melodic contour, and balance of dissonance and consonance between musical sections. His use of articulation and dynamics is very instinctual, and his employment of this elements makes it easy for the listener to understand what his interpretations of the text is through the music. All these musical elements provide additional insights to themes in the poetry that may have otherwise gone unnoticed or overlooked.

There are three areas in McKay’s musical setting of “Patterns” that employ the frequent use of repetition: Intervals, chords, and rhythms. These elements can be found interchangeably between the piano and vocal parts, and because of the subtle nature with which McKay inserts these repetitions, it imposes an eerie sense of familiarity or recognition in a style of music that could otherwise seem disjointed, random, or unorganized.

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The intervals most frequently employed by McKay throughout “Patterns” are the minor 9th or the condensed minor 3rd, the augmented 4th or tritone, and the Major 7th or its inverted counterpart, the minor 2nd; these are found both in arpeggios and block chords. McKay constructs a series of melodic motifs that can be found in the voice and piano based off of these intervals.

The dissonant and unresolved qualities of these intervals serve as a reflection of the inner turmoil of the speaker, particularly in terms of the “unresolved” romance with Lord Hartwell and the underlying conflict between the speaker’s desire to grieve and the restraints imposed by the expectations of her class, sex, and society.

Although McKay does use these specific intervals throughout the piece, these are more recognizably constructed by McKay’s emphasis on musical themes or motifs in order to employ dissonance or consonance in a way that is representative of the underlying meanings of the text.

The “Garden-Paths” Theme

At the very beginning of the piece, there is a collection of detached quarter-notes in the piano, occurring at seemingly random intervals, resulting in a tonality that does not seem very centered.
This re-appears frequently throughout the piece in various forms, and it serves as a marker for all mentions of “the patterned garden paths” in the poetry. Its repetition throughout the piece depicts an obsessive pacing that not only appears when the speaker is directly referencing walking down the paths, but it also is in places where the paths are not specifically mentioned. This adds an extra dimension to the vivid imagery of the poetry, because McKay uses the music as a suggestion of the physical reactions of the speaker that are not necessarily delineated in the text. After its initial appearance in measures 1-5, this “garden-paths theme” makes a brief re-appearance at mm. 28 following the line “I walk down the patterned garden paths.”

In the first appearance of the motif in the pick-up to m. 1, McKay utilizes the “perfect” quality of the 8th to starkly contrast with the dissonant intervals that separate each pitch in the bass—a minor 9th, tritone, and minor 7th. By connecting this figure to every mention of the garden paths, McKay presents the paths as a structured, organized plan meant to guide the speaker through an otherwise “maze-like” environment that is as much an obstacle as it is a safety net. The conflict between the speaker’s desire to take control of her life and to fight against the constraints of society is ironically set to her repeated, or even obsessive,
walking “up and down the patterned paths” within the constricting rigidity and stiffness of her gown; this can be heard in mm. 197-208 and mm. 220-230 in the piano with the reappearance of the “garden paths” theme.

Similarly, McKay employs a similar technique in order to highlight the speaker’s awareness of the garden paths and her continual travelling along them. In the vocal part, the introductory melody and rhythm in mm. 11-16 can be found, in part or in whole, at almost every mention of the garden paths, such as in mm. 26-32, m. 139, and mm. 260-261. Although the themes found in the piano and voice do not necessarily serve as direct reflections of each other, where the theme manifests itself can give hints to understanding how the speaker is thinking or behaving. When the speaker is consciously aware of the paths, the “garden-paths” theme appears in the voice part, and when the speaker is actively and physically treading on the paths, the theme can be found in the piano, whether or not the speaker’s walking is a conscious decision.

The “Call to Reality” Theme

McKay also uses open M7 intervals combined with a brief staccato quarter-note pattern (as introduced in the piano passages in mm. 6-10) in order to represent a shift in thinking—a call back to reality, or a shift away from the speaker’s reminiscent thoughts. Of particular note is the ascending septuplet run and its variations (mm. 6, 21, 53), as well as the staccato quarter-note Major 7th intervals (mm. 9-10, 24-25, 148, 178, 191).
Although these elements may not always appear in conjunction with each other, these “reality motifs” serve as a strong auditory cue for the listener, representing the returned consciousness of the speaker to the abrupt, harsh present time, rather than the intangible dream and soft nature of memory. In mm. 178-182, the Major 7th chords and staccato articulation further underline the severity and solemnity of the vocal line above it with the text, “Madam, we regret to inform you that Lord Hartwell Died in action Thursday se’nnight\(^{12}\).”

There is a re-usage of this same theme during a similarly candid moment in mm. 191-194: “Any answer, Madam,’ said my footman. ‘No,’ I told him.” The dissonant quality of the 7th interval and the “almost resolved” character of this interval places the listener in a heightened state of discomfort or uneasiness—a suitable reflection of the internalized distress of the speaker. The measures of rest following those lines in mm. 195 also reflects the stillness and disturbing silence that comes with shock or disbelief. Although it does not necessarily use the same interval as usual, the use of the staccato quarter-notes in mm. 148-151 in the piano similarly uses the steady rhythm and abrupt articulation in order to

\(^{12}\) An abbreviation for “seven days and nights,” or a week. In other words, “in the last week.”
evoke an awareness of reality, despite the dream-like nature of the text: "And the buttons of his waistcoat bruised my body as he clasped me, aching, melting, unafraid." Because of the sensual nature of the text, the physical reactions of the speaker in response to the vividness of her imaginings are enough to evoke an awareness of her current, restrained, physical self.

**Triplet vs. Duple Patterns**

In this piece, rhythm has a very specific purpose, which is to demonstrate the conflict between the speaker's desires and the constraints placed upon her that prevent her from acting on them. The triplet patterns are indicative of things such as passion, daydreams, love, sensuality, the naked human body, and freedom; we can see how triplet patterns are incorporated into the music of both the piano and the voice to portray these things. In contrast, the duple patterns are representative of everything opposite of the triple patterns: Restriction, reality, control, expectation, and the brocaded gown. Whenever the piano and voice have matching rhythms, that is the speaker giving in to whatever reverie, hope, or passion she is experiencing, but when they are offset, the music provides an underlying context, showing what contradictions may be lying beneath the surface of the text alone. Whenever these triplet patterns are interrupted or offset by duple rhythms, it can be a representation of inner conflict within the speaker or an instability of emotion.

Beginning in measures 16-20 and 30-37, McKay briefly introduces a legato, flowing passage in the piano that calls to attention the unstable, flighty nature of the speaker's current state of mind through the use of triplet patterns in the right hand, a pattern that
contrasts strongly against the abrupt staccato duple rhythms that surround it. The disjointed usage of these dream-like passages further underlines the instability of the speaker's emotions. It is not until mm. 123-147 that the speaker falls completely into her reverie, when the piano accompaniment settles into a triplet feel.

![mm. 125-127: An example of the "dream-like" passages.]

The music in the piano reflects the fantastical descriptive language in the poetry, matching her "richly figured" dress with a train that "makes a pink and silver stain on the gravel." In the beginning of the piece, McKay's use of triplet patterns are exclusively reserved for passages describing the flowers in the garden and the flow of the gown, as seen in mm. 84-95—but beginning in mm. 123-146, it becomes apparent that the central subject of these dream motifs also rely on the speaker's remembrance of Lord Hartwell, recalling not necessarily memories, but also the desires and hopes that accompanied their romance. The descriptive lines that address the flowers and gown are simply lead-ins to the memories and hopes of the speaker in these lines: "I would be the pink and silver as I ran along the paths... to lead him in a maze along the patterned paths." Perhaps the use of this
rhythmic pattern in mm. 210-217 and 268-274 also serves to identify the things that trigger the memory of Lord Hartwell in the speaker.

The “Lord Hartwell/Sorrow” Theme

McKay also utilizes another pattern that relies heavily on the use of a specific rhythm. First seen in mm. 233, this theme consists of homophonic chords in a steady, quarter-note rhythm that, when framed by the “garden-paths” theme, initially appears to be musically out of place. These heavy, abrupt sections are representative of a theme of sorrow that is directly associated with the speaker's grief over the death of Lord Hartwell. The relatively simple rhythmic patterns underline the text, “In a month, he would have been my husband...,” and it returns at the very end in mm. 286. Although the chords differ from the theme’s first appearance, the consistent rhythm recalls the theme from before, with the text, “And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace...” mirroring the emotions of the speaker in response to her lover's passing.

[mm. 233-235: An example of the “Sorrow” theme, as seen in the piano.]
When detached from the chordal presentation, these steady, quarter-note rhythms can be found throughout the piece, representing a constant awareness of the memory of Lord Hartwell, and this can be seen beginning in mm. 148 with the text “And the buttons of his waistcoat bruised my body as he clasped me, Aching, melting, unafraid.” Here, the singular, steady, un-wandering pitches found in the piano accompaniment serve as a direct source from which the sudden texture change in mm. 233 takes its inspiration.
The similarities found in the text above the accompaniment lines also serves as a connecting device for this musical theme of sorrow. The sensual language in the text, referencing the physical relationship between the speaker and Lord Hartwell, shares a commonality in their topics, which is the stripping of the speaker’s gown:

- (mm. 148, lines 51-52) “And the buttons of his waistcoat bruised by body as he clasped me, / Aching, melting, unafraid.”
- (mm. 236, lines 82-86) “In a month, here, underneath this lime, / We would have broke the pattern; / He for me, and I for him, / He as Colonel, I as Lady, / On this shady seat.”
- (mm. 285, lines 102-104) “And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace... / For the man who should loose me is dead...”

McKay and Text Painting

Besides his use of motivic representations, McKay employs the use of articulation, figurative melodic contour, and other methods for the purpose of text painting. For example, in measures 71-73, McKay highlights the shoes’ percussive language in the poetry as well as the clicking of the speaker in the text: “Tripping by in high-heeled ribboned shoes.” This particular use of staccato can also be seen in the piano accompaniment that underlines the text, “I walk down the garden paths,” and other lines like it (mm. 13-15, 27-29, 41-52, 197-209, 220-230).
Beginning in mm. 100, McKay invokes an auditory representation of the imagined environment or setting surrounding the speaker in her daydream. The falling 32nd notes followed by the ascending tritone figure represents the “plashing of the water drops in the marble fountain,” and “the sliding of the water seems the stroking of a dear hand upon her.”

In mm. 220-223, McKay utilizes interruptions in the melodic line in order to emphasize the feeling of restraint—the eighth-note rests interrupting the triplet patterns holds further significance when recalling the use of triplet patterns in the daydream.
sections of the poetry. “Held rigid to the pattern by the stiffness of my gown,” as presented with those hiccup-like interruptions, places further emphasis on the “warring passion” within the speaker.

Throughout the piece, McKay also briefly inserts grace-notes into the piano accompaniment, and their appearances are quite random (i.e. mm. 9, 83, 105, 163, 296). Although these do not appear to be directly connected to the text, the grace-note articulations could, again, be representative of the instability of the speaker’s emotions, or an auditory reference to sporadically falling teardrops, whether they be literal or figurative.

[mm. 220-223: An example of the interrupted rhythms in the voice.]

[mm. 83: An example of McKay’s use of grace-notes, as seen in the piano.]
CONCLUSION

"Patterns" displays a wide array of literary techniques that are representative of the style that is quintessentially Amy Lowell's. Her use of imagism in her language combined with the unabashed presentation of topics such as women in society, conformity, love, sexuality, death, and war results in a clear reflection of the subjects that were most important to the poet during her lifetime. In "Patterns: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano," Neil McKay is able to marry poetry and music into a single unit that not only highlights the important literary themes in Lowell's writing, but provides additional insight into the "essence" or ambience of the poetry by utilizing music as a means to provide setting, mood, and atmosphere.
Annotated Bibliography


An article describing the budding relationship between Amy Lowell and Carl Engel to foster a growing love and respect for music, possibly influencing her later writings. The author utilizes a series of letters exchanged between the two friends that discuss Lowell's evolving opinion of music.


A book describing the life, works, and reception of Amy Lowell. Benvenuto makes a point to discuss her lesser known works (even if they are not equal in terms of quality to some of Lowell’s more popular pieces). The book is divided into sections about her life, early works, narrative works, and the Imagist movement.


An article describing how Amy Lowell’s career had been shaped by her sex, especially as a poet with so many male contemporaries. Bradshaw mentions how Amy was first and foremostly a business woman that promoted her writing as a theatrical event, more than the quality of the writing itself. The struggles she faced included not only her gender, but having poetry as her choice in career made things all the more difficult in the beginning.

A collection of poetry by Amy Lowell. The forwards by Bradshaw and Munich at the beginning of the book are of most interest to me. In Bradshaw's segment, she concisely summarizes the circumstances of Lowell's birth, her journey as a writer, and audience reception (positive and negative) of her work. On the other hand, Munich writes about the inspiration behind the content of Lowell's poetry, briefly pointing out the most controversial subjects in her most provocative writing, including sexuality and anti-war sentiment.


A biography on the life of Amy Lowell, going into detail regarding her family and upbringing, her earliest attempts at writing, the years of study that preceded her first publication, health issues, her life as a sort of literature "diva," her time as a critic, and aftermath of her early death. Uses sources from letters, Lowell's own writings, peer and contemporary reviews, and interviews with family and friends.


A short biography on the life of Amy Lowell. Flint includes information about Lowell's life before her rise to fame, including the influence of several mentors on her opinion of poetry. He provides several short analyses on the most significant of Lowell's work, as well as some short comments on the parallels in her writing that could be seen in her own life. A relatively objective perspective on Amy Lowell.

Another biography detailing Amy Lowell's personal and professional life. Something of particular note: In the beginning of the book, Gould gives details regarding the political, social, and military atmosphere surrounding the United States during Lowell's rise to fame, providing insight to the subjects that inspired much of Lowell's writing and perspective on poetry.


An article that focuses on the works and life of Amy Lowell through the lense of her homosexuality. It addresses Lowell's fascination with John Keat's literary work, and how she may have modeled her "heterosexual" writing off of Keat's inspiration in order to more subtly address her lesbianism during a time when openly discussing these topics could have been more taboo.


The score that I will be referring to for a combined musical and poetic analysis.


Another collection of Amy Lowell's poetry. The introduction includes a short poetic analysis of "Patterns," and also addresses how this poem differs from several other works by Lowell.
A collection of essays and articles written by Amy Lowell that discuss her philosophy on writing. These essays include her thoughts on what poetry is and how it is created, her own literary role models, and what she thinks of her contemporary poets.

A collection of poetry compiled by Amy Lowell herself. According to the preface, Lowell created these poems inspired by the “unrhymed cadence” used in French poetry, and modeled her writing after this type of meter that does not resemble “classic English metres.” There is a quote that sums up her opinion on poetry quite nicely: “...[P]oetry should not try to teach... it should exist simply because it is a created beauty, even if sometimes [it is] the beauty of a gothic grotesque.”

A literary critique and analysis by Amy Lowell on a handful of her contemporaries, including Robert Frost and John Gould Fletcher. She looks into the life and upbringing of the poet to determine how these factors influence their values and leak into their writing style. “Literature is rooted to life, and although a work of art is great only because of its aesthetic importance, still its very aestheticism is conditioned by its sincerity and by the strength of its roots.”

A collection of essays written by multiple different authors on different aspects of Amy Lowell’s life and writing. These things include multi-cultural inspirations, her family, her sexuality and approach to eroticism in her poetry, her hand in Imagism, and her influence on the evolution of American poetry.

An analysis on a selection of the most significant works of poetry by Amy Lowell. Rollyson includes a short introduction that briefly describes Lowell’s professional life, with brief mention of a few female contemporary poets. An analysis on “Patterns” is included.


An analysis on the poetic writings of Amy Lowell. Similar to her biographies, this text focuses more on the writing itself over the course of Lowell’s lifetime, addressing the sources of her inspiration, the evolution of her writing technique, and her overall execution.

"70 Heath St., Brookline, MA 02445." Zillow.


A website containing information about the current state of Sevenels, Amy Lowell’s home in Brookline, Massachusetts.
“Patterns”  
by Amy Lowell

I WALK down the garden paths,  
And all the daffodils  
Are blowing, and the bright blue squills.  
I walk down the patterned garden-paths

My dress is richly figured,  
And the train  
Makes a pink and silver stain  
On the gravel, and the thrift  
Of the borders,

Just a plate of current fashion,  
Tripping by in high-heeled, ribboned shoes.  
Not a softness anywhere about me,  
Only whalebone and brocade.

And I sink on a seat in the shade

Of a lime tree. For my passion  
Wars against the stiff brocade,  
The daffodils and squills  
Flutter in the breeze

As they please.

And I weep;  
For the lime-tree is in blossom  
And one small flower has dropped upon my bosom.

And the plashing of waterdrops  
In the marble fountain

Comes down the garden-paths.

The dripping never stops.  
Underneath my stiffened gown  
Is the softness of a woman bathing in a marble basin,  
A basin in the midst of hedges grown

So thick, she cannot see her lover hiding,  
But she guesses he is near;  
And the sliding of the water  
Seems the stroking of a dear  
Hand upon her.

What is Summer in a fine brocaded gown!  
I should like to see it lying in a heap upon the ground.  
All the pink and silver crumpled up on the ground.

I would be the pink and silver as I ran along the paths,  
And he would stumble after,

Bewildered by my laughter:  
I should see the sun flashing from his sword-hilt  
and the buckles on his shoes.

I would choose  
To lead him in a maze along the patterned paths,  
A bright and laughing maze for my heavy-booted lover,

Till he caught me in the shade,

And the buttons of his waistcoat bruised my body as he clasped me,

Aching, melting, unafraid.  
With the shadows of the leaves and the sundrops,  
And the plopping of the waterdrops,

All about us in the open afternoon --

I am very like to swoon  
With the weight of this brocade,  
For the sun sifts through the shade.

Underneath the fallen blossom  
In my bosom,

Is a letter I have hid.  
It was brought to me this morning by a rider from the Duke.
"Madam, we regret to inform you that Lord Hartwell
Died in action Thursday se'nnight."

As I read it in the white, morning sunlight,
The letters squirmed like snakes.
"Any answer, Madam," said my footman.
"No," I told him.
"See that the messenger takes some refreshment.
No, no answer."

And I walked into the garden,
Up and down the patterned paths,
In my stiff, correct brocade.
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.

In a month he would have been my husband.
In a month, here, underneath this lime,
We would have broke the pattern;
He for me, and I for him,
He as Colonel, I as Lady,
On this shady seat.
He had a whim
That sunlight carried blessing.
And I answered, "It shall be as you have said."

Now he is dead.

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.

I shall go
Up and down,
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 with the Duke in Flanders,
In a pattern called a war.
Christ! What are patterns for?
"Patterns": Themes

- Conformity and Restraint
- Love and Sensuality
- Death and Anti-War Sentiment

Themes and Motifs in
"Patterns: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Sop. And Piano"

Poetic Style

- Imagism
  - Emerged in the early 1900s.
  - "Simplicity and directness of speech..."
  - Free-verse, or "unrhymed cadence."
  - Employs descriptive language (visual)
  - Phonetic quality of language (auditory)

- Meter
  - Stanzas, lines, contour
  - Combined with word sonance

The Composer: Neil McKay

- 1924 - 2016
- M.A. and Ph.D. in Composition from Eastman School of Music
- Professor of Music at the University of Hawaii
  - Orchestration and Composition

The Poet: Amy Lowell

- Born in 1874
- Socialite
- Began career in poetry in 1910
- Never married
- Toured around Europe and the U.S.
- Died of a stroke in 1925

"Patterns" by Amy Lowell
From Men, Women, and Ghosts, 1916
Hey everybody! First off, thank you all for coming! As many of you know, this has been a long time coming.

I had been thinking about what I could do for my honors thesis, and I happened to get really lucky when Cindy handed me the music for “Patterns: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Sop.” by Neil McKay. “This is perfect.”

So, the work is based off of a poem by Amy Lowell, and I figured it would be quick work to do some research on her while learning the music and doing some poetic analysis, but of course, it ended up being a lot more... interesting... than I had initially foreseen.

With that said, let’s get started! My hope is that, by introducing the poet, going over important themes within her poetry and Neil McKay’s music, you’ll understand and appreciate this wonderful piece a little more.

Amy Lowell was born in 1874 as the youngest child to a family of considerable wealth in Massachusetts, and she grew up as a member of the Bostonian elite.

Because of this, she lived most of her life in a social spotlight, and the ongoings of her life were often being watched or scrutinized, and we can see how the criticisms she received as she grew up influenced her later writings.

In 1891, Lowell stopped her formal education at the age of 17, because her father didn’t think it was appropriate for women to attend college.

However, she had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and ironically, during this year, she discovered the works of John Keats in her father’s library. He was a poet that heavily influenced her later writings. She also would begin her impressive literary collection during this time.

Amy suffered from a variety of health problems throughout her life, whether they were related to her weight or to injury.

Growing up, she was often ridiculed for her weight, so during the years 1897-98 (~age 23), Amy traveled to Egypt with a couple of friends and some servants, hoping that a strict diet of tomatoes and asparagus, combined with the heat of the Egyptian sun, would cause her to lose significant amounts of weight. She ended up collapsing under the stress, and it left her considerably

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2 Ibid.
weakened for several years. Doctors would later speculate that her issues with weight could be contributed to a thyoidal problem—something that couldn't be fixed through diet.

○ That aside, her injuries throughout her life included an umbilical hernia from a carriage accident, an unsuccessful surgery to fix it, and then a reinjury when she lifted a carriage in a separate incident.

• By the time Amy was 26, both of her parents had passed away (her mother in 1895, and her father in 1900), and soon after the death of her father, she quickly bought the family estate, Sevenels (Brookline, Massachusetts) from her siblings, and began her ventures as a business woman and exploring her personal education.

• In 1902, just two years later, Lowell saw a performance by the Italian actress Eleanora Duse, and according to several biographical sources and interviews, Lowell refers to this performance as being the inspiring moment that led her to pursue poetry as a vocation.

• Eight years later, in 1910 at the age of 36, she had her first published poem, "A Fixed Idea," in The Atlantic Monthly. This is interesting, because this poem was a sonnet—a form of poetry that is very structured and versed, whereas Amy became famous for a poetic style that was more free-verse.

• One of the controversies that surrounded Amy Lowell included the rumors of her homosexual relationship with Ada Dwyer Russell, another actress that she met in 1912. Many scholars speculate that Lowell's more erotic and suggestive works describe her affairs with Ms. Russell.

• During the last decade of her life (1912-1925), Lowell publishes several books on critique and poetic collections, and she published her research/biographical works on John Keats. She traveled and toured, reading her poetry and lecturing on her philosophies regarding poetic writing, even as she grew considerably weaker due to her carriage injuries.

• Finally, in 1925 at the young age of 51, Amy Lowell passed away in her home in Brookline. One thing that a lot of my sources liked to mention was how Lowell recognized that she was going to die. She had family over visiting since she was ill, and when she raised a mirror to look at her face, she noticed that half of her face wasn’t responding and recognized that she was suffering from a stroke. She passed away a half hour later.

[SLIDE 3: SEVENELS]

• So, I thought it would be interesting to show you a photo of Sevenels, the home that Amy Lowell lived in. It's 8,448 sq. ft., and it sold for $4,000,000 in 2015.

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https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/70-Heath-St-Brookline-MA-02445/56572364_zpid/
It was interesting to discover that the house was still standing; it made things a little bit more real for me to see that it's still habitable.

[SLIDE 4: “PATTERNS”]
- The poem that we are going to be discussing today is “Patterns,” from Men, Women, and Ghosts, published in 1916.
- This is one of the most famous poems to have survived her, if not the most famous, and this is because of its dramatic, narrative qualities.
- Before we get into the details of Amy’s poetic style and the themes found in “Patterns,” there are a few images that I would like to show you.

[SLIDE 5: IMAGES]
- “Patterns” takes place in England during the Queen Anne period, which is from 1702-1714, and one of the most frequently referenced subjects in “Patterns” is that of a restrictive dress.
  - With the help of Prof. Nancy Hills from the Theatre Department, we were able to procure some images of what this dress may have looked like during the early 18th century. They’re very elaborate, beautiful dresses in the Mantua style, and not only did the women have to be tied into a tight corset to fit into these gowns, but they were sewn directly into them.
  - You can see the brocade, which is a woven fabric with raised, embroidered floral designs, in the blue patch of fabric there, and this is something that is referenced quite a bit as well.
  - She also describes a “whale bone” corset, otherwise known as “stays.” You can see in the “V”-shaped striations in the front where the whale bone would go to make that shape. I have some friends in the opera who can tell you personally just how restrictive these corsets can be.
  - So there are some images to keep in mind as we go over the poetry.

[SLIDE 6: POETIC STYLE]
- Amy Lowell utilizes a range of literary tools in “Patterns,” and Imagism shows through pretty prominently in this poem. Compared to a more romantic, flowery style of writing, Imagism is a poetic movement that stresses “simplicity and directness of speech; subtlety and beauty of rhythms;” and “clearness and vividness of presentation;” and is based more in free-verse, or as Lowell calls it, “unrhymed cadence.”

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4 Amy Lowell, Sword Blades and Poppy Seed, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1919), x.
In Imagism, the “essence” of the subject is often described through a concise use of imagery in writing. This can be done through the description of the image itself, or through the suggested qualities of a word through the sonance, or phonetic sound of the descriptive language used.

In “Patterns,” we can see how she uses this in line 73; her use of the words “stiff” and “correct” capitalizes on the percussive or turbulent nature of the [t] in “stiff” and [k/k] in “correct” to create an abruptness in the line, thereby also influencing the flow and cadence.

- In line 16, her use of the word “tripping” also uses the plosive [t] and [p] to interrupt the flow of the line, suggesting the instability and precariousness with which the speaker stands in her restrictive attire.
- In contrast, the more lyrical sections [lines 28-58] are playful and song-like, containing very few percussive consonants, instead employing an abundance of smooth, voiced consonants. This can be seen in lines like the following: [53]“In a month, here, underneath this lime...”, or [34-35] “A basin in the midst of hedges grown so thick...”

Lowell also manipulates meter for the sake of representing the underlying meaning of the text. This is particularly noticeable in her alternation of long and short lines in stanzas. In lines 75-90, the lines are markedly shorter than those surrounding it, highlighting the “rigidness” and “stiffness” of the gown.

- When placed in juxtaposition with the previous section, beginning in line 28, the restrictiveness of the gown compared to the ethereal atmosphere of the speaker’s daydreams become even more noticeable.

Because of her frequent employment of imagery and the high value she places on the evocation of a particular concept through the phonic qualities of language, Amy Lowell demonstrates a well-developed descriptive language in her poetry, using Imagist concepts to her advantage when addressing multiple thematic elements in a single piece such as “Patterns.”

[SLIDE 7: “PATTERNS”: THEMES]

- There are several themes that can be found in “Patterns,” and many of the ideas that are found in this poem are a reflection of the issues and important subjects in Lowell’s life.

Conformity

- The first theme that I would like to discuss is that of “conformity” or “restriction.”
- Lowell addresses this topic by juxtaposing different elements of nature with that of man-made creations, which highlights the concept of conformity brought on by social expectations of class and sex. From the very beginning of
the poem, the “blowing” daffodils and the “bright blue squills” [lines 2-3] are contrasted with the speaker’s “stiff, brocaded gown” [line 5]; the visual imagery used to describe the flowers provides the reader with a sense of flexibility, like with the word “blowing” suggesting the flow-like qualities of wind.

- In contrast, by using tactile language to describe the dress of the speaker, Lowell reinforces the constrictive nature of the gown that adorns her. She describes the dress as “stiff,” “upright,” and “rigid,” and inserting details regarding its structure, like “whalebone,” and “stayed” adds emphasis to the uncompromising build of the gown.

- In the event of Lord Hartwell’s death, the dress also becomes a personal shield against the perceptions of the rest of the world—hiding her true emotions and grief as a means of self protection. The expectations of female behavior and the maintenance of one’s composure, even in the face of events of heightened emotion, is embodied by the gown despite its restrictive nature, and it’s a mask behind which the speaker hides.

- By addressing the restrictiveness of the dress, Lowell is able to bring into focus her qualms regarding the role of the woman in society, in terms of not only fashion, but behavioral expectations. Especially as a female member of the Bostonian elite, these issues are of particular concern; throughout her life, she faced criticisms of her outgoing, “business-like” behavior that was unbecoming of women during that time. Coming from a high-profile family, there were also certain expectations regarding her behavior in the public that she did not conform to as well. The theme of conformity as seen in “Patterns” is reflective of Lowell’s opinions regarding society’s expectations and restrictions in her own life, overshadowing things such as fashion, love, and behavior.

**Love and Sensuality**

- In “Patterns,” the subject of love is overwhelmingly present, and it pairs particularly well with Lowell’s use of descriptive language, describing both the physical and emotional aspects of the romance that the speaker is involved in.
  - The appearance of Lord Hartwell in the poem also introduces a new theme, which centers around the idea of sensuality and sexual freedom. Lowell is, especially in this poem, particularly notorious for her broaching of sensual topics in her discussions of love and its affairs. In lines like 50-52, Lowell is particularly descriptive in terms of suggesting the sexual nature of the attraction between Lord Hartwell and the speaker:
    - “Till he caught me in the shade, | And the buttons of his waistcoat
      bruised by body | as he clasped me, | Aching, melting, unafraid.”
The idea of “softness” and delicateness as a descriptor of what lies beneath the speaker’s gown (i.e. lines 33, 102) also becomes a subtle but extremely effective means by which Lowell suggests the physicality of a naked, sensual woman.

Of course, the death of Lord Hartwell [lines 63-64], the daydream section [lines 28-55], and the unstoppable pacing of the speaker through the garden is reflective of the unease that comes from a suddenly terminated love affair. Following the revelation of Lord Hartwell’s fate in lines 63-64, the restriction of the gown also becomes much more than just a representation of the societal expectations on females—it also becomes a representation of the self-restraint regarding her grief and the realization that her love affair will never be continued, as seen in lines 102-107:

- “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 with the Duke in Flanders, | In a pattern called a war.”

As a young woman, Lowell struggled with the nature of love and her seeming inability to comprehend how to find it for herself. She denied two proposals for marriage and suffered through a failed engagement, all by the age of 23.6

The realization of Lowell’s homosexuality also shed more light regarding the seeming impossibility of finding a romantic relationship for herself. In the latter years of her life, her relationship with Ada Dwyer Russell could have inspired other erotically-charged writings besides “Patterns,” and this “taboo” that came with her romantic tastes would have been an apt inspiration for her unrestrained references to sensual topics.7

Death and Anti-War Sentiment

- Finally, the subject of death in this poem is of particular note because it places the content of the rest of the work into a different perspective. Once Lord Hartwell’s death is revealed, the wanderings of the speaker and her focus on the patterns surrounding her becomes a sort of fixation that seems to arise as a result of shock. The speaker flits in and out of control, and it is not until the very end of the poem with her exclamation that she seems to lose control and give herself to grief when she says: “Christ! What are patterns for?” [line 107]

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A topic not unfamiliar to Lowell, this depiction of grief and dealing with loss may very well be a reflection of Lowell's own experiences. With the death of her mother in 1895 and father five years later, her response was, as the speaker's is in "Patterns," quite professional from a historical standpoint—soon after the death of her parents, Lowell bought the family estate and worked to figure out her own business ventures.

Lord Hartwell's death by means of battle is also of no coincidence. Written just as the first World War was beginning, Lowell herself became a staunch anti-war activist, particularly after being affected by its violence when she was unable to return home to the U.S. during her stay in England in 1914.8

So, those are the most important poetic themes that I would like you to keep in mind as we move on to examine the musical aspects of today's performance.

[SLIDE 8: THE COMPOSER: NEIL MCKAY]9

- Like I said, I will be performing "Patterns: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano" by Neil McKay.
- Neil McKay was born in 1924 in Canada (British Columbia), and he demonstrated promise in his musical abilities at the relatively young age of 17 arranging music.
- He studied at the Toronto Conservatory of Music, the University of Western Ontario, and Eastman School of Music, where he received his M.A. and Ph.D. in Composition.
- His works span a variety of mediums, writing for "symphony orchestra, chamber ensemble, band, chorus, solo voice, piano, and two short operas."
- He received several awards and competitions for his music.
- He passed away very recently, in December of last year (2016) at the age of 92.

[SLIDE 9: THEMES AND MOTIFS]

- 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. It may have been more appropriate to call her readings "performances" because of her theatricality, which was 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 added dimension/depth to the meaning of the poetry. Lowell herself believed that poetry is musical in nature, and she says, (Quote):

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8 Bradshaw, introduction chronology in Selected Poems of Amy Lowell, xl.
"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."\(^{10}\) (End quote.)

- The marriage of text and music can, most importantly, also prepare the audience with a certain degree of expectation and provide context/environment/setting/mood that would otherwise be unavailable.
- In "Patterns: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano," the central method around which Neil McKay sets the text of the poetry is, at its most fundamental core, the careful use of repetition in order to reflect the theme of "patterns" rendered by Amy Lowell's writing. The recurring usage of specific lyrical motives, intervals, chords, and rhythms are all representative of the different recurring themes. By highlighting these repetitions of thought, McKay demonstrates a masterful understanding of text through his motivic language.
- His use of articulation and dynamics is very instinctual, and his employment of this elements makes it easy for the listener to understand what his interpretations of the text is through the music.
- That being said, however, there are a couple of musical ideas that I would like you to keep an ear open for:

The "Garden-Paths" Theme
- At the very beginning of the piece, we see a collection of detached quarter-notes in the piano, occurring at seemingly random intervals. The tonality of these notes don't seem very centered, and it sounds like this: [mm. 1-5]
  - I like to call this the "Garden-Paths" theme, because it is introduced whenever the speaker mentions walking down the paths. It depicts a sort of obsessive pacing that not only appears when the speaker is directly referencing walking down the paths, but also in places where it's not specifically mentioned.
  - It adds an extra dimension to the vivid imagery of the poetry, because McKay uses the music as a suggestion of the physical reactions of the speaker that aren't necessarily delineated in the text.

The "Call" Theme/"Reality" Motifs
- McKay also uses these open M7 intervals with a similar articulation as the "Garden-Paths" theme in order to represent a "call back to reality," or a shift away from the speaker's reminiscent thoughts.
  - These "reality motifs" serve as a strong auditory cue for the listener, representing the returned consciousness of the speaker to the abrupt/harsh

present time, rather than the intangible dream and soft nature of memory. For example, [mm. 178-182] the Major 7th chords and staccato articulation further underline the severity and solemnity of the vocal line above it with the text, “Madam, we regret to inform you that Lord Hartwell Died in action Thursday se’nnight.”

○ The dissonant quality of the 7th interval and the “almost resolved” character of this interval also places the listener in a heightened state of discomfort or uneasiness—a suitable reflection of the internalized distress of the speaker.

Triplet vs. Duple Patterns
- In this piece, rhythm has a very specific purpose, which is to demonstrate the conflict between the speaker’s desires and the constraints placed upon her that prevent her from acting on them.
  ○ The triplet patterns are indicative of things such as passion, daydreams, love, sensuality, the naked human body, and freedom, and we can see how triplet patterns are incorporated into the music of both the piano and the voice to portray these things.
    ■ Whenever these triplet patterns are interrupted or offset by duple rhythms, it can be a representation of inner conflict within the speaker or an instability of emotion.
  ○ That being said, the duple patterns are representative of everything opposite of the triple patterns: Restriction, reality, control, expectation, the brocaded gown.
    ■ Whenever the piano and voice have matching rhythms, that is the speaker giving in to whatever reverie, hope, or passion she is experiencing, but when they are offset, the music provides an underlying context, showing what contradictions may be lying beneath the surface of the text alone.
- A good example can be found in sections about the flowers: [mm. 15-18]
  ○ In the beginning, she says, “And all the daffodils are blowing, and the bright blue squills.” Here, the rhythms of the singer matchup with the piano in triplets.
  ○ In mm. 213-217, the singer says “The blue and yellow flowers stood up proudly in the sun...” However, the rhythmic pattern is changed to duple, because events between the first line and the latter line cause her associations with the flowers to change.

“Lord Hartwell and Sorrow” Rhythms/Theme
• Speaking of rhythms, there is one final theme that I would like to mention: There is a section in the music that took me a long time to determine what it was, especially because it seems so musically out of place when put into the context of the piece.

[mm. 233]
  ○ It consists of homophonic chords in a steady, quarter-note rhythm. When it’s framed by the “Garden-Paths” theme, it seems so random. Dallas and I finally decided that it could be, very simply, a theme of sorrow that is directly associated with the speaker’s grief over the death of Lord Hartwell.
  ○ We see that these relatively simple rhythmic patterns underlines the text: “In a month, he would have been my husband...”
  ○ This rhythmic pattern also returns at the very end, with different chords, [mm. 286] but the consistent rhythm recalls the theme from before, with the text: “And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace...”

[END OF SLIDES]
• With all of this information regarding the poetic and musical themes found in “Patterns,” I hope that you’ll be able to recognize some of these elements in the piece that we will be performing today. If, as Dallas and I perform this music, there are some observations or questions that arise, please feel free to come talk to me after the performance!

• I would like to thank you so much for coming, and I would also like to thank Dr. Cindy Dewey and Prof. Dallas Heaton for all of the help they have provided me with over these last few months as I prepared for this presentation.

• Now, without further adieu, it is my pleasure to present “Patterns: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano” by Neil McKay.

Lecture: ~30 minutes
Performance (with Prof. Dallas Heaton): ~15 minutes
Bibliography


Thesis Reflection

There were a number of challenges that I ran into as I worked to complete my capstone project. However, one of the biggest issues I had to overcome was simply discovering how to approach research in my field—the performing arts. My study of Neil McKay’s “Patterns: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano” has given me the opportunity to delve more deeply into the background of a piece in order to supplement my interpretation in performance. My research regarding the life of the poet, Amy Lowell, and her poetic style gave me insight into the meaning behind the subjects and themes that she discussed in her writing, and my analysis of Neil McKay’s compositional style helped me to discover a more specific interpretation of the meaning of the text. In this way, I have learned that research in the arts is less quantitative than it is subjective and abstract, and the process of rehearsing and preparing for a performance is the most important aspect. By doing all of this research, I have been able to discover a method for approaching new music that is similar to how professionals in my field begin learning a new role, and this process is something I can take into my future endeavors as a performing musician.

When learning a new piece, Vocal Performance majors are not only required to memorize the music and the lyrics, but they are also required to know the direct
translation of a piece (if it is in a foreign language), and research surface-level background
information about the composer, librettist, or poet. When I began my thesis project, I went
deeper into the process of preparing a new piece of music, specifically seeing how the
events in Amy Lowell’s life and her values influenced the themes and subjects found in her
writing. I also examined Neil McKay’s music to see how his writing reflected those
elements. Analyzing the poem and discovering connections with Amy Lowell’s life turned
out to be much more difficult than I had anticipated—the sources that I read were difficult
for me to understand at first, because I never had any formal training in poetic analysis
prior to this project. However, because I had a long time to become acquainted with the
poetry, I was slowly but surely able to discover the underlying meaning of the language.

Analyzing the music alongside the poetry also helped me to find connections that
would have otherwise gone unnoticed. Because of the 20th-century style of the music, I
initially had a hard time learning it, and as a result, my ability to learn and memorize the
piece was hindered by the atonality and inconsistent rhythms and meters. It was not until I
took the time to really study the music and find thematic repetitions and moments of text
painting that the music really began to settle well in my memory.

Throughout the process of working on my capstone project, my faculty mentors
provided a valuable resource. As I rehearsed the music with Prof. Dallas Heaton, he would
ask me questions regarding my interpretation, and he would give me valuable insight from
a musical perspective, which in turn gave me new ways that I could approach my analysis
of the poetry. Because of Prof. Heaton’s role as the piano accompanist, his help in the
performance of this piece was integral to the final product of the music, and his insight
regarding the interpretation of the piece was just as valuable as my own. In turn, the ideas that he provided about the meaning of the music reflected on my ability to interpret the poetry as well, and making connections between the poetry and that of Amy Lowell’s life became all the more straightforward and recognizable when the central themes of the music became apparent.

Dr. Cindy Dewey, as my vocal instructor, also provided me with valuable tools to help me with the expression of the piece through the use of my vocal instrument and overall physicality. She helped me to ensure that my final performance had clarity in diction as well as healthy vocal production. She gave me feedback regarding my performance choices, as well as tips in terms of what was effective and what was not. Working with Dr. Cindy Dewey also gave me the chance to explain my findings in the music and the poetry with greater clarity, both in writing and in lecture and performance.

During the time that I was working on my capstone project, I spent a lot of time focusing on my acting, because acting is something that I do not consider to be a natural skill for myself. However, during my time in the Theatre Department, I have had several opportunities to work on developing these abilities, whether it be through direct training, study of acting methods, or observation. The skills and knowledge that I had obtained from the acting contract that I had completed previous to this capstone project provided me with the foundation to begin working on my stage presence, and the observation of professionals in my field also gave me insight as to how I could go about performing. With suggestions and promptings from Prof. Heaton as well, I was slowly able to connect more with Neil McKay’s work as time went on.
The purpose of my capstone project was not to simply give myself the opportunity
to delve deeply into a piece of music and its history. As it is for any performer, sharing the
product of my work was the fundamental goal, and I wanted to be able to make music that
is atonal and unfamiliar more accessible for the listener. The lecture-recital presentation
was geared towards helping my audience have a greater understanding (and as a result, a
greater appreciation) for the intense expressivity of Amy Lowell’s poetry and Neil McKay’s
music. In doing so, my goal was to encourage my audience to explore different styles of
music, even if it may seem unusual to them.

Overall, my experience completing my capstone project enriched and added to my
educational experience during my undergraduate studies, and it has given me the
opportunity to explore and understand my own artistic development and learning style.
The relationships that I was able to establish during my project proved to be extremely
informative and helpful. Being able to share what I have learned and studied has been a
very fulfilling experience, and it was a fresh reminder for why I chose Vocal Performance as
a vocation.