

Amy levy poem analysis

[Business](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

On November 10, 1861, Lewis Levy and Isabelle Levy nee Levin (Diniejko), an affluent couple in Clapham, England (“ Levy, Amy, Poet” 211), introduced a legacy to the world. “ Very much her own woman,” (Whittington-Egan, 42) Amy Levy, whose literary and social influences began from a young age, left quite an impression on the Jewish population, the feminist approach, and, mainly, the world of poetry. Levy’s poems, for which she is most well-known today (Shires 151), reach a wide scope of different styles, including various structures, lengths, and devices.

Her diverse set of poetry expands on the themes and, specifically, troubles, in her personal life. It was Amy Levy’s novels and essays which expressed her concern for the Jewish community. In fact, Levy’s literary credits originated in the form of articles and editorials, wherein she criticized her Jewish culture and attacked the stereotypes Jewish women were becoming accustomed to. Linda Zatlin, in a review of Melvyn New’s biography of Levy, asserted she was the “ first Anglo-Jewish writer to write critically about her community,” and explained that, especially in her essays and earlier writings, Levy “ concerned herself strongly with middle-class Jewish life and women’s issues” (Zatlin 512) Her criticisms of the Jewish community, including “ Jewish Women and Women’s Rights,” and “ Middle-class Jewish Women of Today” (Whittington-Egan 44), were showcased in the magazine the Jewish Chronicle (Diniejko). Levy looked at Jews “ from the inside, seeing how they struggled for acceptance yet lived a life apart” (Neuberger 3).

“ Although Levy wrote essays, short stories, and novels, she is primarily read as a poet today” (“ Levy, Amy, Poet” 211). It was, in fact, her poetry that showcased Amy Levy’s personal turmoil and struggles including a ubiquitous

darkness, longing for love, and search for identity as her structurally diverse poems, often constructed as “cries for help,” utilized sensory imagery, alliteration, and repetition. The first and perhaps most prominent theme in Levy’s poems is a force seen in much of her own life story: the presence of darkness. In fact, editors describe much Levy’s poetry, specifically that featured in her collection *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* as “sad, [mainly] about death and suicide,” as well as “conventional melancholy of the female tradition in nineteenth-century poetry” (Whittington-Egan 42). In “A Cross-Road Epitaph,” for instance, Levy describes calling on God in a time of darkness: “When first the world grew dark to me / I call’d on God, yet came not he.” Although Levy was presented with numerous opportunities for greatness and scholarly success from a very young age, she faced much personal difficulty in her life, difficulty which reflected in her writings and especially her poetry, later on.

She was the second born of seven siblings into a “religiously unobservant” (Shires 151) Jewish family, and consequently, felt as though she was a part of a group that she never truly accepted (Shires 151). Her discomfort affected her social life as well, as she strived to find her place in middle and high school. She attended the High School for Girls in Brighton (Diniejko), which was a boarding school started by feminists (Shires 151), where she began to explore ideals and form her own values, all of which were undoubtedly influenced by her strong-willed teachers. “[Defining] herself by exclusion and by resistance” (Shires 151), Levy was the first Jewish woman to attend Newnham College in Cambridge, in 1876 (“Levy, Amy, Poet” 211).

However, her achievement was diminished when she dropped out of school two years later, apparently due to episodes of deep depression.

This was the first time her struggles with depression outweighed her desire for attainment, and it was certainly not the last. This articulated unhappiness, a theme common among much of her poetry, is often viewed as her life long struggle to find love and find herself. Despite these hardships, Levy continued to search and pursue her dreams, mainly: literature. After she left Cambridge, she decided to travel through Europe, including Germany and Switzerland (Diniejk), learning and writing along the way. Over the next couple of years, she experimented with many different styles, publishing poems, verse, short stories, essays, and, eventually, novels. Her works, which were all either political and social or personal and reflective, were very successful.

She was published in many popular and influential collections and magazines, including the Jewish Chronicle, the Spectator, London Society, and Women's World between 1879 and 1890 alone, according to Richard Whittington-Egan, author of *Amy Levy: A Tragic Victorian Novelist*.

Additionally, she was equally successful in asserting herself into a wide literary social circle, among the ranks of Beatrix Potter, Eleanor, daughter of Karl, Marx, Clementina Black, and Olive Schreiner. It is safe to assume their literary excellence influenced Levy's writing success. Levy produced a vast scope of different writing styles and techniques. Levy is known for having an exceptionally broad range of styles and structures in her poetry.

As mentioned earlier, the poem, “ A Cross-Road Epitaph,” although very short, reveals much about the darkness Levy often felt surrounding her. It is a shorter piece of Levy’s, containing only six lines. Along with such poems as “ At a Dinner Party,” and “ The Sick Man and the Nightingale,” each containing eight lines, “ A Cross-Road Epitaph” represents a sample of her shorter poetry. She also wrote many longer poems, like “ A Greek Girl,” containing sixty-three lines, and “ Ralph to Mary,” which has forty. Some poems include a repetitive phrase, such as while some seem to have no repetition, or even any structure. Some utilize alliteration to emphasize sensory imagery, such as Ralph to Mary: “...where the stilly sunset sea, / Ever receding silently, / Lays bare a shining stretch of sand.

” (Lines 2-4) Others convey a dark tone, such as in a Greek Girl, where she employs parallelism so as to express her thorough sorrow and discontent with the sunshine: “ O cruel, cruel sunlight, get thee gone! / O dear, dim shades of eve, come swiftly on!” (Lines 60-61) A searching and longing for both love and identity are other ideas expressive of Amy Levy’s own insufficiencies, themes which prevail in many of her poems. Julia Neuberger, in a brief reflection on Levy’s life, points out that well before her demise, Levy had been “ questioning ideas of identity, [and] belonging” (Neuberger 3). Levy’s recorded life actions and decisions point in many ways to feelings of loneliness as well as confusion in her relationships, both amicable and romantic. The poem “ A Greek Girl” is a story written in first person describing a young girl who is in love with a man who does not love her back. Line 20 simply states, “ He loved me not.

” This brief statement expresses the simplicity, yet depth, of her personal longing for love. Although many of her poems and writings scrutinize the relationships between men and women, Levy herself began developing crushes on girls as she attended her all-girl preliminary schools, and experienced many relationships with women later on that were often “ platonic or largely emotionally one-sided.” Levy was already treated according to her being a woman, a writing woman, plus being a Jew. Her lesbianism only added to the judgment she received. “ Longing for acceptance,” Levy became “ depressed by her failure to make something special out of her life” and was often “ tormented by feelings of self-loathing and displacement” (Moran 65). However, she continued to promote her feminist, among other, ideals as she often fought the standards of society and stood up for the minority opinions that she held.

Her poem, “ At a Dinner Party,” expresses the role lesbianism played in her life as she tells the story of a person who sees a lover from across the room but cannot communicate with him or her because their love has to be a “ secret” since “ all the world is blind.” Especially near the end of her life, Levy began to feel helpless and lost. Many of her poems can be translated as calls for help, from a lost and broken woman. “ Cross-Road Epitaph” is perhaps the poem most revealing of Levy’s personal turmoil as it can very easily be interpreted as a “ call for help.” Amy Levy’s feeling unloved added to her already severe depression, which she herself described as “ the great devil who lyeth ever in wait in the recesses of my soul” (Whittington-Egan 45), and eventually contributed to the pitiful desperation she experienced near the end of her life.

Linda Hunt Beckman, who wrote *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters*, described her as having a “sense of personal failure” that stemmed from the fact that she was an “unloved woman.” Not only does she live on through her poetry and analyses, but Amy Levy left behind a trailblazer image that, through her controversial ideals and outspoken individualism, influenced many. On September 10th of 1889, Amy was found dead in a small room of a summer home her parents owned in London. Investigators soon found that she had committed suicide, purposefully inhaling carbon monoxide from charcoal she burnt in the “sealed and oxygen-starved” room (Whittington-Egan 40). Her break from tradition continued even after she was gone, for she had requested that when she died, she be cremated, a custom highly unusual in Judaism, but is an option if done by request (Shires 151).

Her suicide, “attributed to her tragic response of identity conflicts” (Shires 151) and came after many years of deepening depression as well as worsening health, including a growing deafness. Even now, it is nearly impossible to not read Levy’s works “through the lens of her suicide,” as Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman assert in their analysis *Amy Levy: Critical Essays*. Oscar Wilde, an extremely influential author and playwright at the time, reflected on Levy in his magazine, *Woman’s World*, “hailing” her as “a girl who has a touch of genius in her work” (Whittington-Egan 40). There is no doubt, though, that although Levy was taken quickly from the world, she contributed a plethora of memorable literature pieces as well as new ideas and forms of self-expression that set her apart. She broke through the conformity of her community and expressed, especially in her poetry, her discontent with average, the darkness she and many others often felt in life,

and her searching for self along with love. In the end, it was her outspoken uniqueness that set her apart: she was one-of-a-kind, socially, politically, and literarily.

Oftentimes, literature, especially fiction and poetry, is an outlet in which writers express their feelings and emotions. Amy Levy uses poetry to convey her discontent in life and lack of love that she felt. Her poems additionally revealed her feminism and lesbianism, two qualities that were unpopular and unaccepted at her time. However, whether it was through her poetry, novels, or essays, Amy Levy expressed herself how she knew best, writing, and left her creative mark on the literary world after she left.