

How meaning emerges from poetic technique in amy lowell's 'a fixed idea'

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



In 'A Fixed Idea', Amy Lowell presents a speaker tormented by reoccurring thoughts which cease to become pleasurable when are repeated in a monotonous cycle. As the stanza continues, the thought is revealed to be a memory of a loved one: whilst the speaker seems conflicted as to whether she finds joys or sorrows in such a thought, the overall message is one of listlessness as if the thought has lingered for too long a time and any pleasure sought from it has now soured.

Through sonnet form, the poet focuses on the potential of thoughts to become tedious and unsavoury once they have been stored in the mind for too long. Indeed, the interlocking ABBAABBA rhyme scheme acts as a structural metaphor for the speaker's entrapment within her own mind, and such is furthered by the title 'A fixed idea' used to convey the speaker's thought as all consuming as she is unable to conceive of anything else. Highlighting this is the personification of the thought throughout the poem, through a series of dynamic verbs from 'grown' to 'aches' to 'taught' in order to convey the utter powerlessness of the speaker to a domineering thought which remains constant. This is summarised in the opening line 'What torture lurks', with the personification of torture through verb 'lurks' suggesting that the speaker's painful thoughts have utterly consumed the speaker's identity and are now more powerful than her. This is furthered by the repetition of words throughout the poem; 'However' is twice repeated in close succession, as is 'remembers', and 'find' is implicitly echoed in diction choice 'refined': this creates a sense of the speaker's claustrophobia as she is unable to disentangle herself from memories of a loved one. Indeed, the form of a single stanza is used to suggest that the speaker feels unable to

distinguish between various thoughts as the thought of her lover is all-encompassing, and such is furthered through the caesura ‘;’ distinguishing the clause ‘ however kind’ from the rest of the line, suggesting that the speaker feels unable to seek solace in her current mindset. Indeed, the speaker addresses her mind in third person through the declarative ‘ the weary mind/ Aches with its presence’; perhaps in an attempt to distance herself from the dreadful pain of her thoughts.

Nonetheless, the enjambment used here is symbolic of the emotional drain of said pain on the speaker; implying that despite her attempts, she cannot shield herself from the harm of her thoughts. Furthermore, the antithesis created through referring to the thought as an ‘ old delight’ conveys the speaker’s upset that she will remain unable to seek such ‘ delights’ in the future. The perfect rhymes throughout the poem link diction choices ‘ thought’, ‘ taught’, ‘unsought’ and ‘ caught’; and to associate the ‘ thought’ in such a way with a catalogue of active verbs, and to do so emphatically through structurally positioning them at the end of lines, implies that the one thought of the speaker’s lover is able to gage utter control over other thoughts the speaker may have. Additionally, the phrase ‘ and we struggle, caught’ separates verb ‘ caught’ through caesura perhaps suggesting that the speaker feels unable to actively seek external help having been ‘ caught’ and entrapped by her mindset. The frequent use of punctuation throughout such as end-stops and commas suggests a speaker so intensely in pain that she must often pause in order to regain her rationality and continue speaking. The form of monologue and first person voice created through

personal pronoun ' I' reinforces the sense that the speaker is unable to look past her own perceptions concerning the situation and gain broader insight.

There is a central antithesis entertained throughout the poem between the speaker's current dismay with her thoughts, and memories of prior pleasure that they have provided her. This is mirrored in the movement from an octet concentrating on the pain kindled by the thought, and an increasingly romantic sestet; with the structural movement perhaps suggesting the speaker still finds some enjoyment in her thoughts. The bathetic transition in the line ' That all recurring joy is pain refined' between the juxtaposed concepts of happiness and pain represents the speaker's constant struggle between desiring her thoughts of the lover to stay, whilst simultaneously rejecting them. The form of declarative employed here is one frequently used throughout, to perhaps suggest that the speaker has colluded with her fate of never being freed from the trappings of her mind. The direct address which opens the sestet in personal pronoun ' You' humanises the thought, and when the pronoun is repeated throughout the speaker's inability to move forward from an obsession with her lover becomes apparent. That the personal pronouns ' I' and ' you' are repeated in close succession throughout the sestet echoes the speaker's desire for a close relationship with the addressee. Such is summarised by the monosyllabic simplicity of the declarative ' I love you so', with the syntactical hyperbaton positioning emphasis on modifier ' so', therefore intensifying the speaker's love as unable to be contained through standard linguistic structures. Highlighting this are the frequent enjambments used throughout which imply that the

speaker feels unable to control the deep feelings of romantic love which seek to overpower her.

Indeed, there are contrasting semantic fields throughout the poem of love ('heart', 'love', 'joy') and pain ('aches', 'weary', 'drooping') to dramatise the speaker's internal conflict between a desire to be with her partner, and a knowledge that such a scenario is impossible. Indeed, the natural imagery in the simile 'You lie upon my heart as on a nest' adds a degree of heartfelt care to a love that otherwise remains impassioned, and yet this is immediately juxtaposed with the revelation that the speaker is 'crushed'; a dynamic verb which in its hyperbolic nature highlights the capacity of the consuming thought to affect her very physical being. Indeed, the sonnet form as one renowned for its focus on romantic love reiterates the idea that despite her desire to escape from her mental torment, the speaker cannot quell her heartfelt emotions for her lover. Reinforcing this is the relatively steady iambic meter which through echoing the rhythm of the human heartbeat implies that the speaker's love for the addressee cannot be distinguished from her very physical being and will continue to affect it. The statement 'Aches with its presence.' is therefore particularly interesting as the stressed syllable of 'aches' deteriorates from the poet's standard use of iambic pentameter, suggesting that the acute pain felt by the speaker stems from and is a byproduct of romantic emotions. To close the statement with an end-stop further evokes the blunt pain felt by the speaker due to the 'torture' of her thoughts. The final line personifies the thought as a winged bird in the lines 'lift your drooping wings and go', and the form of imperative

perhaps suggests that the speaker is beginning to regain a degree of control over her own thoughts, and to end the poem on verb 'go' perhaps forwards a hopeful idea that the thought will leave the poet in peace. Nonetheless, this is perhaps undermined by the phrase 'In mercy' in which the speaker commands the thought to leave, creating a pleading and plaintive tone used to imply that the imperative comes not from a place of control but from a place of listlessness and languidness.

In 'A Fixed Idea', Amy Lowell focuses on the capacity of a single thought – presumably concerned with a loved one – to gain control over both a person's mindset, and indeed, their physical being. Nonetheless, the speaker is not entirely willing to allow the thought to go. This persona within the poem, therefore, must accept a degree of blame in the pain that the thought has caused.