Biography

*Childhood:* Born in London, England in 1861, Amy Levy was the second of seven children in her family. Growing up in a wealthy, Anglo-Jewish family, Amy Levy’s life was centered around literary works. Her family participated in home theater productions where Levy’s siblings would write literature and Amy would turn them into poetry and plays. At the young age of 15, Levy was sent to study in Brighton and gained her own independence. Unlike most women during this time period, Levy lived on her own away from her family. Throughout her childhood she suffered from depression, however, still continued to travel and write.

*Death:* Since she had dealt with depression since she was a child, her mental health took over her actions just before celebrating her 28th birthday. Amy Levy committed suicide in her bedroom on September 10, 1889. Her mental instability led her to shut herself in her bedroom, shut the door, light charcoal and inhale the fumes. This dramatic aspect of Levy’s life severely impacted the rest of her family. Her mother and sister were the ones who were most effected because they were the ones who found her dead on her floor. Like mentioned above, although Amy Levy’s life was cut short, she was a very successful and an influential female author that challenged gender roles during the Victorian era.
Introduction

Characteristics: Amy Levy is perceived as a very independent woman, striving to find her place as a published author in society. She was the first Jewish woman to study at Cambridge, demonstrating her assertive and brave personality. Her completed literary works were driven by her experimental and persistent work ethics.

Career: Although her life was short-lived, she was still known as a successful and accomplished author. Throughout her life, she wrote two novels, a few non-fiction articles and many volumes of poetry. Her first book of poetry, *Xantippe*, was published in 1880. This was a great accomplishment for her since she was only 19 years old. Levy's friends and colleges helped to frame and capture her emotional ideas for this book of poetry. *The Romance of a Shop*, published in 1888, was her first novel that was published. This book was well reviewed by critics during this time period and was also praised by Oscar Wilde.

Lines from *Xantippe*:

WHAT, have I waked again? I never thought
To see the rosy dawn, or ev'n this grey,
Dull, solemn stillness, ere the dawn has come.
The lamp burns low, the lamp of life:
The still morn stays expectant, and my soul,
All weighted with a passive wonderment,
Waiteth and watcheth, waiteth for the dawn... Poem
The Four Sisters

Gertrude- The main character of this novel and one of the four sisters. She is hardworking and represents the core of G. & L. Lorimer: The Photographic Studio. Her elite talent in photography led to the beginning of the four sister's new occupation. Gertrude's inner emotions are revealed several times throughout the novel and longs for societal acceptance. Readers tend to sympathize with her because Gertrude, "was not a beautiful woman, and such good looks as she possessed varied from day to day, almost from hour to hour; but a certain air of character and distinction clung to her through all her varying moods, and redeemed her from a possible charge of plainness" (51).

Lucy- One of the four sisters. Her advanced skills for photography are put to use with the new development of customers in their business. She travels London doing several jobs for well-known artists and eventually falls into relations with Frank Jermyn. She is described as, "a young girl of about twenty years of age; fair, slight, upright as a dart, with a glance at once alert and serene" (52).

Phyllis- One of the four sisters. Her young spark for life is entertaining and enthusiastic throughout the book. She likes the feeling of freedom and enjoys not having to always feel as if she is being chaperoned. Phyllis is "the youngest, tallest, and prettiest of the sisters; a slender, delicate-looking creature of seventeen, who had outgrown her strength; the spoiled child of the family by virtue of her youth, her weakness, and her personal charms" (53).

Frances- One of the four sisters. She represents the older, traditional women of this time period even though she is only a few years older then rest of her sisters. She is a very melodramatic character and often does not gain sympathy from readers. She is described as, "the eldest of them all, and half-sister to the other three, was a stout, fair woman of thirty, presenting somewhat the appearance of a large and superannuated baby" (52).

Other Supporting Characters

Constance "Conny" Devonshire- "a blooming young woman, dressed in the height of fashion" (60). - "She spoke in high tones, but with an exaggeration of buoyancy which bespoke nervousness" (60).

Fred Devonshire- "a tall, heavy young man, elaborately and correctly dressed, with a fatuous, good-natured, pink and white face" (61).

Aunt Caroline- "Mrs. Septimus Pratt belonged to that mischievous class of the community whose will and energy are very far ahead of their intellect and perceptions" (63).

Mr. Russel- "the friend of their father to whom she had applied for advice the day before. He carried on a large and world-famed business as a photographer in the north of England" (66).

Uncle Septimus- "said little, but managed to convey to his nieces quiet marks of support and sympathy" (72).

Mrs. Devonshire- "She liked the Lorimers, but feared them as companions for her daughter; there was no knowing on what wild freak they might lead Constance to embark" (75).

Frank Jermyn- "he's an artist; works chiefly in black and white for the illustrated papers. . .He and another man have a studio in York Place together" (89).

Stephanie- "The woman's mincing, sallow face, with its unbashed smiles, sickened her" (95).

Mr. Oakley- "a middle-aged Bohemian, who had made a small success in his youth and never got beyond it" (111).

Sidney Darrell- "He was not, strictly speaking, handsome, but he wore that air of distinction which power and the assurance of power alone can confer" (107).
Themes

Beauty vs. Intellect

“But I don't know that it matters about being good when you are as beautiful as all that” (88). This quote was said by Phyllis and she was talking about Mrs. Watergate.

“Gertrude Lorimer was not a beautiful woman, and such good looks as she possessed varied from day to day, almost from hour to hour; but a certain air of character and distinction clung to her through all her varying moods, and redeemed her from a possible charge of plainness” (51).

“But there could be no doubt about your brains with that face” (128). Said by Phyllis about Gertrude.

According to the characters in *The Romance of a Shop*, if women are not beautiful, they need to be intelligent. Although Gertrude is a strong character, her appearance leaves something to be desired. Her wit and intelligence is what makes her an intriguing woman. Contrasting her person, Phyllis' most prominent characteristic is her beauty. The quotes above help to further explore this idea. The quote from page 128 bluntly says that ugly women are assumed to be intelligent. Contrary to this idea, the quote from page 88 explains that substance doesn’t matter when external appearance is pleasing. The characters in this novel prove that no woman can possess both beauty and intelligence, but both types can find their place in society. Each sister knows their place at the start of the novel and follows their role throughout the narrative.

Appearsances

“Fanny is a fool, and the other are children; but don’t you, Gertrude, know what is meant by a lost reputation?” (101). Said by Aunt Caroline.

“Conny’s been dancing every night this week-making me take her, too, by Jove!-and now, if you please, she’s got hot coppers” (89). Said by Frank.

“Do you realise that this latest development of our business is likely to excite remark?” (97). Said by Gertrude to Lucy.

The characters’ reputation is at times valued above their happiness. Aunt Caroline expects her nieces to obtain a positive image at the expense of their happiness. But the three biological sisters have a different opinion about the best way for them to live. The choices they make reflect their decision to live contently, ignoring the expectations of society. It is a transitional time period and because of this women are starting to engage in activities that were formally thought of as inappropriate. Because they are doing things differently, their elders, such as Aunt Caroline, are worried about their reputation. Fred worries for Conny’s status because of her gallivanting until all hours of the night. These late night activities are new to the social conversation of this time but still looked down upon by others. The sisters are also worried about their “lost reputation” due to their odd work environment. It was looked down upon for female photographers to enter men’s apartment without a chaperone.
DQ: What do you think would become of the shop if the sisters were to lose their reputation?

DQ: What does it say about a society that values appearances over happiness?

Old vs. New

“Frances Lorimer was behind the age. She was an anachronism, belonging by rights to the period when young ladies played the harp, wore ringlets, and went into hysterics” (56).

“But a business- that is so different. It is progressive; a creature capable of growth; the very qualities in which women’s work is dreadfully lacking” (55).

“As for Fanny, it was touching to see how this faded flower had revived in the sunshine” (140).

This is one of the first feminist novels in the 19th century; therefore, there are two distinct types of women: the old and the new. Some of the characters seem to be stuck in the past in ways that they view as traditional. Gertrude, Phyllis, and Lucy are great examples of this New Woman. Fanny and Aunt Caroline are two examples of women who are stuck in the old female roles. “The old woman” is more accepted by society; this is shown by Fanny being the first to marry. Fanny was reluctant to open the shop with her sisters because her goal in life was to be married. Before her marriage her life was full of disappointment but after her proposal from Mr. Marsh we begin to see light in her character. Opening a photography shop solely ran by women was progressive for this time period.

Money and Happiness
“They both laughed; they could, indeed, afford to laugh, for, regarded from a financial point of view, the morning had been an unusually satisfactory one” (98).

“We are poor people, and we are learning to find out the pleasures of the poor, to approach happiness from another side” (101).

“Poverty seemed to her the greatest of human calamities; she pitied even more than she despised it” (102). This quote is about Aunt Caroline.

Having money was seen as one of the more important characteristics of families in the 19th century. Some of the characters in the novel equate this wealth to happiness. Aunt Caroline would rather be rich and unhappy than be poor and happy. Fanny refused a marriage proposal due to lack of income despite her desire for matrimony. The sisters place themselves into the latter but choose to find happiness in their poverty. Although at times money can be the source of their happiness, such as the first quote above, but the majority of the time they are content despite their lack of financial stability.

**DO:** The “New Women” in the novel appear to care less about money, but considering how the novel concludes, do you believe this to be true?

**DO:** Do you believe that the Lorimer sisters are truly happy without money?

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**19th Century British Slang**

Quote from the novel: “Conny’s been dancing every night this week-making me take her, too, by Jove!—and now, if you please, she’s got hot coppers” (89).

Modern Translation: Conny has been out late every night-making Fred go out with her—and now she has a hangover.

Quote from the novel: “We rich girls always end up with sneaks—no decent person comes near us” (132).

Modern Translation: Women with fat bank accounts always end up with jerks—no good guys want to date them.

Quote from the novel: “Don’t look so poetical over it all, Gerty!” (75).

Modern Translation: Don’t be so dramatic, Gerty!

Quote from the novel: “You have no earthly right to take her against her will” (173).

Modern Translation: You can’t make her leave if she doesn’t want to go.
Works Cited


Helpful Links

Scholarly Article written by Kate Flint about Amy Levy's novel, The Romance of a Shop. Article

Quiz over basic context. Quiz

Scholarly Article written by Rebecca Shapiro about Amy Levy Article.

Amy Levy's first book of poetry, Xantippe Poetry

Quick Link to Important Dates Timeline of photography technology

19th Century British Photography

This video exemplifies 19th century photography.

Modern Photography

This video shows modern day photography techniques in contrast with the video to the left.
Typical fashions of the 19th Century

Brady Stand, typically used in the 19th Century