
Linda Hunt Beckman. *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000.

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Linda Hunt Beckman's biography of Amy Levy breaks down into chapters concerning the important periods in Amy Levy's life: her childhood, her years at boarding school, her experience at Newham, Cambridge's second college for women, and her life as a renown writer, until her untimely death at the age of 27. The recounting of her life is followed by all her letters, which were for the first time made available to the public in 1990. The most fascinating part of this book is definitely the prologue and first chapter in which we discover the difficulties of being Jewish in 19th-century England. This book is therefore not valuable to Victorian literature experts alone, but also to those interested in British and Jewish cultures in Victorian times.

Amy Levy, a well-educated and depressive young Jewish lesbian poet of the Victorian era who takes her own life a few months short of her 28th birthday, is at the same time representative of her era and at odds with it. Beckman's enthusiastic style and deep knowledge of the topic makes the reader eager to find out more about her and her family, who, supportive of her intellectual endeavor, also excites our curiosity.

Beckman succeeds in developing a vivid portrait of the poet as a child and adolescent, for example capturing a lively and witty personality. The author also offers interesting facts about Levy's upbringing, which is described as being typical of most Jewish people of her generation living in England, who shared the difficult task of holding on to their culture while trying to fit into English Gentry.

Beckman makes it quite clear, though, that Levy doesn't fit the stereotype of either a Victorian or Jewess of her time: she is indeed described as a feminist who, because of her beliefs and actions, qualifies as a New Woman. Beckman defines the New Woman as striving "for an autonomous, achievement-oriented existence" instead of "centering her attention on home and family" (7). Levy sensed "an apprehension of the devaluation of women and the need to widen their opportunities" (6).

Along with participating in redefining the role of the women of her era, Levy tried to cope with the contradictions stemming from being a Jew in the world of English Gentry. This conflict seems to have triggered an identity crisis in Levy that must have surely been felt by many other young Jews. Amy, of dark skin and unmistakable roots, suffered her whole life from her people's appearance and conduct. Her description of Jews led her to be accused of anti-Semitism. Her most

famous novel, *Reuben Sachs*, that addresses Jewish self-hatred, created such a negative reaction that Beckman believes it to be, with the general treatment of Victorian women poets in these days, the cause for the darkness in which her literature was thrown.

Her love for women also sets her apart from the mainstream, although homoeroticism was not systematically condemned at the time. Beckman does add, though, that it was difficult “to structure one’s life around romantic relationships between women, especially for a Jewish woman” (7). Levy first fell in a love with her heterosexual school teacher, whom she adored “without return,” as she wrote in one of her letters to her sister. She later had several unhappy relationships with women artists who never seemed to reciprocate her passionate feelings for them. Her disastrous love life, along with her identity crisis and her depression, led her to commit suicide in 1889.

The author’s approach to Amy’s writings is consistently rich and enlightening. Her best poems are reproduced, contextualized, and analyzed. Beckman deplors the fact that most critics have focused primarily on *A Minor Poet*, completely leaving aside Levy’s last volume of poems. She sets out to revalorize these later works, and succeeds in giving them justice while at the same time recognizing the existence of Amy’s poorer commercial writings.

Levy’s letters fill the sixty pages that follow the recounting of her life and the analysis of her work. The first one was written at the age of nine, the last one in August of 1889, the month before she committed suicide. These touching letters confirm the portrait painted by Beckman of a witty, tortured, young woman.

Levy’s life has been the subject of biographical errors and myths, which Beckman sets out to put straight. At times, she is so intent on setting the record that she produces quite a bit more information than the reader may find necessary. When trying to trace the last weeks of Levy’s life, Beckman tracks the poet’s whereabouts with overwhelming minute detail. Eager to unravel the events preceding the young woman’s death, Beckman can be excused for such zeal. However, the reader who has less at stake might find these passages at times unnecessarily drawn out. The chapter on Levy’s childhood can also be quite lengthy at times with detailed accounts of the plays written by Amy for family entertainment, numerous “Confessions Book” entries, and the reproduction of too many excerpts of young Amy’s letters. It also includes excessive descriptions of the family’s acquaintances whose length cannot be justified.

Yet Beckman’s biography of Levy is hard to put down; Levy’s personality draws the reader in, as does her poetry. Fortunately, her writing, while previously not readily accessible, is now starting to receive more attention thanks to Melvyn New’s

edition of her complete works. And in the end, I would agree with Beckam's statement that "This book too should play a part in allowing Amy Levy to take her rightful place in literature" (214). ✱