



Woolson, Constance Fenimore (1840-1894)

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Though one of the most popular and respected writers of her time, Constance Fenimore Woolson is perhaps best known today for her close relationship with Henry James. This is largely due to Leon Edel's influential biography of James, which treats Woolson as a second-rate writer and suggests that she harbored unrequited romantic feelings for James. Feminist critics have since disputed both claims, demonstrating Woolson's value as an accomplished realist writer and dismissing the insinuation of an unrequited love for lack of evidence. Certainly Woolson and James shared a queer friendship, James being the only one to call Woolson by her masculine nickname, "Fenimore."

Woolson never married, and though most of her closest friends and correspondents were men, there is no indication of a romantic interest in any of them. But unlike her friends Katherine Loring and Alice James, who shared one of the most famous "Boston Marriages" of the era, Woolson never entered into a female partnership either.

Daughter of Charles Jarvis Woolson and Hannah Cooper Pomeroy, and grandniece of writer James Fenimore Cooper, Constance Fenimore Woolson was born on March 5, 1840 in Claremont, New Hampshire. After suffering the loss of three young daughters to scarlet fever the year of Constance's birth, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. There, Woolson was educated at Miss Hayden's school and the Cleveland Female Seminary. She later went to Madame Chegary's School in New York City, graduating in 1858.

Little is known of Woolson's life during the Civil War, but she spent time in Cleveland and New York and worked for the Union cause. In 1870 and 1871 she wrote travel sketches about New York for the *Daily Cleveland Herald*. Beginning in 1873, she moved South, traveling with her mother through Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Florida. She left for Europe in November 1879 following Hannah Woolson's death.

Though she had planned to retire in St. Augustine, Florida, Woolson never returned to the United States. She traveled extensively throughout Europe and the world, visiting Austria, Germany, Switzerland, the Greek Islands, and Egypt, but she lived primarily in Florence and Venice, where she was a neighbor, for a short time in 1883, of John Addington Symonds, an art critic and outspoken defender of homosexual rights.

Woolson died in 1894 from injuries she sustained after falling from a balcony in Venice. Contemporary newspapers and a letter by James indicate that she probably committed suicide. Throughout her life, Woolson suffered from long periods of depression and isolation due to a hearing impairment that brought on increasing deafness.

Scholarly interest in Woolson's work, particularly her short fiction, has grown significantly in recent years. Feminist critics have focused on her strong female protagonists, especially artists, and on her ambivalence toward heterosexual love and marriage. Scholars of the U. S. Civil War and Reconstruction have admired her depictions of the post-war South, some of the first and best produced by a Northern woman.

Woolson published widely in the periodicals of the day, but her first two short story collections, *Castle Nowhere: Lake-Country Sketches* (1875) and *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches* (1880) earned her respect as a serious regionalist writer among contemporary critics, including James. Her novels include *Anne* (serialized in 1880; published as a book in 1882), *For the Major* (1883), *East Angels* (1886), *Jupiter Lights* (1889), and *Horace Chase* (1894). Two other story collections, *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (1895) and *Dorothy and Other Italian Stories* (1896), were published posthumously.

Woolson's fiction frequently depicts intimate relationships between women, often with an undercurrent of homoeroticism, but two stories in particular, "Felipa" and "Miss Grief," appear to address the issue of female homosexuality directly.

"Felipa" is the story of a boyish twelve-year old Minorcan girl who develops an obsessive crush on a beautiful woman named Christine, who is vacationing in Florida with her friend Catherine, a painter. The young girl becomes a double for Catherine, who also seems to have romantic feelings for Christine but represses them. Lillian Faderman suggests that "Felipa may be seen as a subtle meditation on the connection between romantic friendship and sexual inversion."

Indeed, Karl Ulrich's pamphlets on "Urnings" (individuals who have a female mind trapped in a male body or vice versa) and Karl Von Westphal's writing on "contrary sexual feeling" had been published in Germany in the mid-1860s, and the character of Felipa does seem to reflect this new discourse to a large extent. However, the story indicates that Felipa has been raised almost entirely by men, suggesting that her masculine tendencies may not be entirely inborn. Thus, Woolson also appears to meditate on the degree to which gender and sexuality are inborn or socially constructed.

The story is also significant for its connection between sexual expression and art. Catherine is a mediocre painter at best, arguably because she has been forced to repress her erotic feelings for Christine and will not allow them to inspire her work. Woolson obviously feels a good deal of sympathy for both Felipa and Catherine, but in the end, the story presents a rather bleak picture for women who desire other women: either they must repress their desire to gain social acceptance, or express it at the risk of social ridicule and unhappiness.

The theme of lesbian sexuality and its connection to art in "Felipa" opens the possibility of reading "Miss Grief" as another lesbian artist story. Woolson's overt theme attacks the male-dominated publishing industry that refuses to take a woman writer's art seriously. But encoded in the story are hints that Aaronna Moncrief is a lesbian and that her writing contains homoerotic themes. The evidence lies primarily in Aaronna's appearance and behavior, both of which reflect the emerging discourse on sexual inversion, and in the frequent use of the term "perversity"--one of the most frequently used terms in association with sexual inversion--to describe her writing.

"Miss Grief" appears to reverse the situation of the lesbian artist as it appears in "Felipa." Catherine cannot produce great art because she has repressed her homoerotic desire and kept it from her painting; Aaronna Moncrief expresses her desire in writing that is filled with "earnestness, passion and power" only to face ridicule and rejection at the hands of male publishers and to die unknown in abject poverty.

Two of Woolson's novels, *Jupiter Lights* (1886) and *Horace Chase* (1894) are also notable for their lesbian themes. *Jupiter Lights* centers on an erotically-charged bond between Eve Bruce and the former wife of her dead brother, Cicely Morrison, who has married an abusive man less than six months after Jack Bruce's death.

In *Horace Chase*, Woolson's last novel, the sculptress Maude Muriel Mackintosh smokes a clay pipe and shows unusual fondness for her female companion, Miss Billy Breeze. The character Maude was likely influenced by the nineteenth-century sculptress, Harriet Hosmer, who lived in Charlotte Cushman's lesbian household in Rome between 1858 and 1865. She is certainly one of the earliest literary representations of the "New

Woman" figured as "mannish lesbian."

Outside of her fiction, evidence of Woolson's interest in homoerotic themes appears in her review of Alice Perry's novel *Esther Pennefather*, published in the October 1878 "Contributors Club" section of the *Atlantic Monthly*. She describes the novel as an "utterly ridiculous book" in which "there is not in the whole volume a single man worthy of the name; nothing but a chorus of women, chasing each madly along, doing the most extraordinary things for the most senseless reasons." Despite this ridiculousness, however, Woolson admires the novel's "originality" in theme, which she describes as "the singular power one woman sometimes has over another," and as "a woman's adoration of another woman." She asserts: "There is such a thing. I myself have seen the tears of joy, the uttermost faith, and deepest devotion, in mature, well-educated, and cultivated women, for some other woman whom they adored; have seen an absorption for months of every thought."

Woolson is significant to the study of emerging homosexual identities in America because "Felipa" and "Miss Grief" are two of the earliest stories to incorporate the new medical discourse of sexual inversion, "Felipa" preceding James's *The Bostonians* (1886) by a full decade. Moreover, her stories display a startlingly modern self-consciousness about lesbian desire and its effects on the female artist who chooses either to repress or to express it--a self-consciousness that anticipates the growing dilemma of lesbian writers during the early part of the twentieth century.

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