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## **“In my fiction I never say anything which is not absolutely true”: Reassessing Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Literary Realism**

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“In my fiction I never say anything which is not absolutely true”: Reassessing Constance  
Fenimore Woolson’s Literary Realism

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
English  
American Literature

by

Ashley Hemm  
B.A. University of New Orleans, 2012

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## Abstract

Despite her immense popularity in the nineteenth century, Constance Fenimore Woolson's reputation dwindled substantially in the decades which followed. While her works have been rediscovered over the past thirty years, they are often categorized as regionalist writing or, in the case of her penultimate novel, *Jupiter Lights*, melodrama. What many fail to consider, however, is that Woolson very much considered herself a realist author, and may have been remembered as such were it not for the influence of William Dean Howells and his peers, whose very narrow parameters for literary realism excluded Woolson, among others. Unfortunately, those parameters are still with us today, and exclude many authors whose realities do not conform to Howells's original scope. In this thesis, I examine the biographical and historical context for Woolson's lesser-known works, arguing that they demonstrate a type of empathetic realism which must not be ignored by current scholars of American literature.

Constance Fenimore Woolson; *Jupiter Lights*; *A Pink Villa*; *Neptune's Shore*; *Miss Grief*; realism; emotion

## 1. Introduction: Incorporating Emotion into Realism

Given the relatively small amount of scholarship dedicated to the life and works of Constance Fenimore Woolson, it is easy to presume that she, like many women writers of the nineteenth century, never received much attention from critics or the general public during her lifetime. Such an assumption, however, is woefully incorrect; Woolson was considered by many to be a preeminent American author, particularly after the release of her debut novel, *Anne*, in 1882. According to *The Literary World*'s review of *Anne*, "Some of the finest work done in America has been done by her hand" (Torsney, *Critical Essays*, 31). *Harper's* further proclaimed that Woolson's writing "stamps the impression of reality on incident and character, and invests the persons of her creations with genuine human qualities and attributes" (Torsney, *Critical Essays*, 32). During her lifetime, critics agreed that her strong, vivid writing perfectly captured both the setting and the people of the Great Lakes region as well as the postbellum South.

However, many of the American literary elite, including prominent editors William Dean Howells and Horace Scudder, began to question the realism of her writing as she focused less on regionalism and more on emotion—what Anne Boyd Rioux refers to, in her new biography *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, as "empathetic realism," tying Woolson's works in with those of George Eliot and George Sand, both of whom Woolson counted as influences (78).<sup>1</sup> Woolson's characters, particularly women, were routinely critiqued by William Dean Howells, editor with *The Atlantic Monthly* and Woolson's onetime supporter, as overly emotional and idealistic to the point of disbelief. This critique came to a head after Howells published his review of Woolson's third novel, *East Angels* (1886), in which he denounced Margaret, one of the novel's two female protagonists, as unnaturally self-sacrificing.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Anne Boyd Rioux for sharing with me an advance copy of her biography, which will be published in February 2016.

His argument was not met without contention: debate over the novel “raged for months in the American press,” but Woolson was largely unaware, as she lived in Europe and thus had little access to American newspapers and magazines (Rioux 202).

Howells’s critique, however, was hardly the last of its kind. Woolson’s penultimate novel, *Jupiter Lights*, published in 1889, received the severest criticism of any of her novels for what many critics read as an over-the-top depiction of men and women in love. While the novel certainly contains some sensational elements, Woolson’s portrayal of both romantic and familial love as unavoidable and toxic—and as woven together with mental illness, domestic abuse, and alcoholism—seems very real to a modern reader. Many of Woolson’s characters display behavior that twenty-first-century audiences would find quite familiar: Cicely Morrison deeply loves her husband, Ferdie, despite his abusive nature, and attempts to return to him, even after he tries to kill her and her son. Ferdie, Cicely’s second husband, is extremely charismatic yet given to black moods, often triggered by alcohol, in which he is capable of extreme violence. Eve Bruce, sister of Cicely’s first husband, falls desperately in love with Ferdie’s half-brother, Paul Tennant, to the point that she becomes unrecognizable to her friends and family. Paul refuses to accept Eve’s rejection of his love, despite her very sound reasoning for why their relationship cannot succeed, pursuing her until, at last, he simply overpowers her.

Woolson very much considered herself a realist, despite straying from the reserved, analytical style of Howells and his circle in her later work. In an 1889 letter to Edmund Clarence Stedman, with whom she frequently discussed literary style, she writes: “I am a realist. But that does not make me believe that only bad, or commonplace, characters, exist. I know to the contrary” (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 377). And yet, the scant twentieth-century Woolson scholarship which exists on *Jupiter Lights* unfortunately reinforces the opinions of Howells and

his ilk: the novel is brushed off as flawed. Alexander Cowie devotes a ten-page section of his overview of American literary history, *The Rise of the American Novel*, to Woolson, lavishly praising her regionalist and realist aesthetics, while slightly more than half a page is spent on *Jupiter Lights*, which Cowie dismisses as interesting primarily “as a local color story” and “a case study of a woman who interfered disastrously in the affairs of another” (574-75). Otherwise, he claims, “Miss Woolson can render setting and she can characterize quiet, well-bred people, but high tensions are likely to induce erratic fluctuations in the delicate instruments of her art” (Cowie 575). Such a dismissal is a disservice to the power of Woolson’s writing. Woolson dared to challenge the notion of what realistic portrayals of women—and, more importantly, realistic portrayals *written by women*—could look like. Her subversive assessment of love—both passionate and familial—as a double-edged force capable of both forging and breaking permanent bonds is powerful, disturbing, and unfortunately quite realistic, as evidenced by both current understanding of human behavior and Woolson’s own experiences.

Cowie’s aside is an accurate encapsulation of the dilemma Woolson faced: “quiet, well-bred people,” particularly women, were hardly a good representation of Victorian society, let alone humanity as a whole. Woolson, well aware of this limitation within realism, attempted to address it not only in her fiction but also in others’, including Henry James himself. In one of her first letters to James, Woolson implored him to incorporate a true-to-life woman in his next novel, unlike the women of *The American*, *Daisy Miller*, and *Portrait of a Lady*, whom Woolson found far too reserved:

[W]hy not give us a woman for whom we can feel a real love? There are such surely in the world. I am certain you have known some, for you bear the traces—among thicker traces of another sort.—I do not plead that she should be happy; or

even fortunate; but let her be distinctly lovable; perhaps, let some one love her very much; but, at any rate, let her love, and let us see that she does; do not leave it merely implied. In brief, let us care for her, & even greatly. (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 255)

James's novel was, and remains, a prime example of Howells's idea of American literary realism, but Woolson rightly called into question its lack of *emotional* realism. Woolson knew that it was impossible to create a text remotely resembling reality without including an emotional connection. She also knew that this connection *must* apply to both men and women. "You have described some men who really love," she told James in the same letter. "Now give us a woman who loves" (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 255). The problem was, as she explored in *Jupiter Lights*, women who really love do not always behave in a "well-bred" manner. For such intense emotions can create "high tensions" that threaten to, and sometimes do, erupt.

Woolson's literary career began at a relatively late age: she published her first short stories, "The Happy Valley" and "The Fairy Island" in 1870, at age twenty-nine. She continued to publish short stories as well as a handful of poems throughout the 1870s, writing primarily about the Great Lakes region of the United States. Upon her mother's death in 1879, Woolson left the United States permanently for Europe, where she focused her energies on writing novels. Woolson's first novel, *Anne*, was published serially in *Harper's*, then collected and published by Harper & Brothers in 1882. *For the Major* followed in 1883, then *East Angels* in 1886. Woolson took a forced hiatus from writing over the next few years due to health issues, including a particularly severe case of writer's cramp. Her final two novels, *Jupiter Lights* and *Horace Chase*, were not as well received as the others, although *Horace Chase* received a good deal of



attention as it was published posthumously in 1894 following Woolson's sudden death in Venice.

*Jupiter Lights* has received the least critical attention of all of Woolson's novels, quite possibly because of its abrupt departure in style from her previous works. Upon further inspection, however, this departure is not as abrupt as it first appears. Woolson's early short story, "Miss Grief" (1880), written before she departed for Europe but not published until 1880, offers insight not only into the plight of the woman writer, but Woolson herself. "Miss Grief" is one of Woolson's most popular short stories, particularly among scholars who focus on her relationship with Henry James; many choose to read it as an allegorical meeting between James and Woolson, as the story centers around a successful young, male author who is approached by an older woman for his help in publishing her work. However, "Miss Grief" also speaks to Woolson's own writing: both Woolson and Aarona Moncrief, the titular character, write with strong voices, but their style does not quite fit what is currently deemed appropriate.

Two of Woolson's other short stories, "Neptune's Shore" and "A Pink Villa," tie directly into themes that are more fully expressed in *Jupiter Lights*. First published in 1888 in *Harper's* along with "The Front Yard" as a means to reintroduce Woolson to her audience after a three-year hiatus from the magazine, which published all of her writing after 1880, they present a disturbing look at romantic and familial love. Neither "Neptune's Shore" nor "A Pink Villa" has received much critical attention, even during the recent the recovery of Woolson's reputation over the past thirty years. Rayburn S. Moore briefly acknowledges each story in *Constance Fenimore Woolson*, an overview of Woolson's life and work, noting that Woolson's characterizations are "a bit too melodramatic for twentieth-century tastes" (64). And yet, they provide a very clear context for the themes that Woolson would further explore in *Jupiter Lights*.

It is this exploration of the darker side of love, and the women who ultimately pay its price, that Woolson's peers largely could not accept as anything other than well-written, but ultimately melodramatic, storytelling. In a letter to Francis Boott, a close friend and neighbor during her years in Florence, Woolson directly addresses the view that her portrayal of women's emotions was unrealistic, particularly regarding Eve, the heroine of *Jupiter Lights*, and her unorthodox admission of love for Paul:

I daresay many people might maintain that Eve's betrayal of her love was unusual and extraordinary. Because many people maintain that only the proper, or the guarded, exists; we are all banded together to say so. . . . In my fiction I never say anything which is not absolutely true (it is only in real life that I resort to fiction); so you may divine that I know more than one Eve. (qtd. in Rioux 234)

By this stage in her career, Woolson no longer cared as much about the opinions of her reviewers, including Howells and his devotees. She had committed herself to writing what she *knew* to be realistic fiction, based upon her own experience and that of her friends and family, rather than the polished, quieter fiction which more easily earned the label of "realism." Clara Benedict, Woolson's sister and frequent travel companion, further noted Woolson's gift for empathizing and understanding others—a gift which added further veracity to her works: "She always helped people; knew, not only just what to say and do, *but just how they felt!*" (Benedict xiv). Woolson knew that realism need not be bloodless; while all of her fiction is emotionally charged, it is most notably in *Jupiter Lights* and the stories which lead up to it that she unleashes the raw, emotional power of her writing. Much like the works of Aarona Moncrief, *Jupiter Lights* is forceful, vivid, and difficult for her fellow literary realists to accept. Realism, as Howells and his peers dictated, insists that we, as readers, extrapolate the reality of Victorian

society from a glimpse into its sitting rooms and salons. Woolson's works rightly denounce this notion of Realism, and, in doing so, provide a glimpse into Victorian society which provides a far more honest, and needed, depiction of the emotional realities of Victorian women and men, and the frequent conflict between their passions and the propriety demanded of them. While it is understandable that some influential nineteenth-century critics were dismissive of Woolson's empathetic realism that pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable subject matter, particularly in the portrayal of women, it is long past time for current scholars to expand the boundaries of the genre beyond the "quiet, well-bred people" most associated with the genre. "Miss Grief," "Neptune's Shore," "A Pink Villa," and particularly *Jupiter Lights* belong within the canon of American literary realism, rather than occupying a nebulous space on the margins of late-nineteenth-century literature.

## 2. “Miss Grief”: Co-Opting Women’s Voices and the Literary Boys’ Club

Perhaps the clearest, and most damning, evidence of Woolson’s plight as a writer comes, not from absent or lackluster reviews, but from her 1880 short story “Miss Grief.” While most of Woolson’s works fell by the wayside throughout the twentieth century, “Miss Grief” resurfaced with the revision of the American literary canon. In recent years, it has emerged as a focal point of numerous feminist criticisms of the male-dominated process of creating and publishing art. In “Haunting the House of Print: The Circulation of Disembodied Texts in ‘Collected by a Valetudenarian’ and “Miss Grief,’” Paul Crumbley focuses on the link between the health and artistic output of “nonconforming” women, noting Aarona’s referring to her manuscripts as “dead children” as indicative of “her awareness that her flesh-and-blood existence is intimately linked to the successful circulation of her art” (96). Woolson, herself a nonconforming artist, Crumbley argues, was further “[t]rapped by the desire to produce honest accounts of female experience in an era that demanded standardized narratives of women’s lives” (101). Dean offers further historical context in *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Homeward Bound*, arguing that “Miss Grief” demonstrates “the tension for women trying to write in a marketplace that imposed strictures on them that it did not impose on males and that valued male writing over female even though for a large portion of the century nearly three-quarters of its writers were female” (186). Dean asserts that Woolson deliberately creates a feminist statement in the story, arguing that “[t]he female, especially if she is not young or attractive, has only her writing to validate herself; yet if she speaks in a different voice, she is not heard and her work is tampered with by the male critic” (188). Dean’s statement is powerful, particularly in the context of Woolson’s life. Woolson never considered herself attractive, despite others’ opinions to the contrary (Rioux 20-21). She felt that she had only her art, and her sincerity, to fall back upon.

Aarona's struggles are a very real manifestation of the problems Woolson and her contemporaries faced as nonconforming women writers.

First published in *Lippincott's* in May 1880, "Miss Grief" presents a scathing indictment of gender inequality in the late nineteenth-century literary community. Woolson's nameless narrator, a young, successful, male American writer, is approached by an older, impoverished woman (the titular "Miss Grief") in the hope that he may aid her in publishing her play. From the start, Woolson makes it painfully clear that the literary world into which "Miss Grief" offers a glimpse is one in which women have little or no voice: the narrator initially misidentifies his guest (her name is actually Miss Aarona *Moncrief*) but chooses to continue with the misnomer within the narrative as he "prefer[s] it that way" (439). Aged beyond her years, malnourished, and very close to death's door, Aarona herself knows that the narrator is her last chance at publication. Her writings are powerful, but power is not enough; he must lend his influence—that is, if he is willing.

After significant reticence, the narrator agrees to read Aarona's play. To his surprise, he discovers that Aarona is extraordinarily talented, admitting that she possesses "the divine spark of genius which I was by no means sure, in spite of my success, had been granted to me" (443). Despite this lavish praise, however, the narrator notes flaws within the play as well as the subsequent short story and poems that Aarona gives him. Each work suffers from a similar flaw: the "scattered rays of splendor" within her play cause him to "forget the dark spots . . . or, rather [make him] anxious to have the spots removed" (443). The poems display "radiance like the flash of a diamond" but are all "marred by some fault or lack which seemed willful perversity, like the work of an evil sprite" (446). Aarona's short story features a "monstrous" character, a "physician of tender heart and exquisite mercy, who practised murder as a fine art" and thus

disrupts the narrative (447). Each piece contains something the male writer cannot fully name or comprehend, and thus marks as “flaw” or “fault.”

The narrator addresses these flaws with Aarona, suggesting edits in order to make her works publishable, all of which Aarona politely refuses. “[T]o my surprise,” the narrator notes, “I found that she did not see the blemishes—that she appreciated nothing I had said, comprehended nothing. Such unaccountable obtuseness puzzled me” (444). Rather than argue, Aarona stands and recites her play from memory, forcing the narrator to listen to her words in her own voice. The narrator must admit that the play’s faults “were made by her earnestness to seem nothing to me, at least for that moment” (445). Aarona refuses to alter the play, “not so much as a comma,” and thus the matter rests (445).

What the narrator fails to comprehend is that Aarona does not want editorial assistance. She is confident enough in her manuscripts as they are and aware of their power. Her voice is dissonant to the narrator and his peers, but it is strong, and she knows its worth. Woolson further underscores the power of Aarona’s narrative voice by showing the strength of her recitation. In order to prove the strength of her play—and, more importantly, dismiss the perceived blemishes—Aarona insists upon reciting it to the narrator. And she succeeds. The narrator admits that “the strong passages were doubly strong . . . and the faults, which seemed nothing to her, were made by her earnestness to seem nothing to me, at least for that moment” (445). Unfortunately, the power of Aarona’s voice does not extend past the narrator’s study. Rather, Aarona craves the level of access to editors and publishers that the narrator possesses. To his credit, he acquiesces, and sends Aarona’s short story to “a friend, the editor of a monthly magazine, with a letter making a strong plea for its admittance,” and the play to a publisher, “also an acquaintance, a man with a taste for phantasms and a soul above mere common

popularity, as his own coffers knew to their cost” (448). Both men send letters of rejection, citing the same “flaws” as the narrator. Rioux connects this inability to penetrate the literary community directly to Woolson’s frustration with “close-knit literary fraternities,” particularly that of William Dean Howells, editor of *The Atlantic*, and his preferential treatment of certain authors, including Henry James. During the two years, from 1875 to 1877, between accepting and publishing her short story “Rodman the Keeper,” Howells published numerous serialized novels and short stories written by his preferred authors, leaving Woolson unable to submit further work (Rioux 125).

Woolson, like Aarona, received advice from multiple men within the literary community regarding the power of her writing as well as its dissonance with the reserved, Jamesian style that many in Howells’s circles admired. In an 1881 letter to Henry Mills Alden, a writer and editor at *Harper’s*, Woolson wrote,

If you knew the amount of advice I have had, both outspoken and hinted, to follow that sort of writing,—you would be surprised, I am sure. The tone is that it is much the most “refined,” “superior,” “cultivated” style. And that my own needs just what that style excels in.—I have been told,—not always of course openly, but implied-ly—that there should be next to no “plot”; that the “manner” should be more than the “matter”; and that the best “art” left a certain vagueness over all the details. I have been especially warned against anything that looked “dramatic.” (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 160)

Unlike Aarona, Woolson, at first, did attempt to adapt her literary style to current tastes<sup>2</sup>.

However, she never turned away entirely from the emotional aspects of Realism which she

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<sup>2</sup> The most notable example is “A Florentine Experiment,” published in November 1880 in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Deliberately written in a Jamesian style—as Rioux notes, “a slice of society life heavy on dialogue and light on

believed to be crucial to the genre. Woolson published multiple novels and short stories over the next thirteen years, some to critical acclaim. Even so, whenever she strayed beyond the constraints deemed appropriate for women writers, reviewers were quick to criticize the inappropriateness of her style—and Woolson felt each blow keenly. Most notably, as Rioux points out, she ceased publishing her poetry entirely upon reading reviews of her poem *Two Women* in the *New York Evening Post* and *Appletons' Journal* (which had also published the poem). “The faults with which [the poem] abounds—and some of them are serious ones—are emphasized in extracts, of necessity,” the anonymous *Post* writer asserts, “but there are hints enough here of dramatic strength and fine character drawing to tempt the reader to read the whole piece” (Torsney, *Critical Essays*, 19). The *Appletons'* reviewer (also anonymous but thought to be E.L. Burlingame, an editor with the *New York Tribune* and *Scribner's*) is far more positive, praising the “intense artistic instinct” which “has enabled her to put into the light and detached work that she has thus far done a strength such has not informed any woman's writing, that we remember in some years of American magazine literature” (Torsney, *Critical Essays*, 21). Yet the *Appletons'* reviewer couches this praise with fairly harsh criticism, noting the “exaggerated or uncontrolled use of the method to which this very instinct leads, that is the source of Miss Woolson's faults in this poem, as well as (in less degree) in the prose we have had from her before” (Torsney, *Critical Essays*, 23). It is impossible not to find a touch of these reviews in “Miss Grief,” as Rioux suggests, pointing particularly to the *Appleton's* review (128); Woolson's voice is strong, and each reviewer praises the poem to a point, but not without noting significant (albeit hazily defined) shortcomings.

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plot”—“A Florentine Experiment” immediately earned Howells's praise, but left Woolson artistically unsatisfied. (138).



Perhaps in response to such vague criticism, Woolson's narrator attempts to remove the flaws he perceives within Aarona's work himself, heavily revising both play and short story without her knowledge. As he does so, however, he realizes that he cannot alter Aarona's writing to fit into the proper mold without utterly destroying it: "my own powers were not equal to the task or else . . . her perversities were as essential a part of her work as her inspirations, and not to be separated from it" (448). Aarona's works defy alteration. Their perceived strengths and weaknesses are intertwined, which raises the unavoidable question: is the flaw in Aarona's work, or in the insular literary world that rejects her?

The end of "Miss Grief" bleakly reinforces the tone-deafness of these "literary men" who plague her life. Aarona succumbs to the effects of starvation and poor health, bequeathing her works to the narrator. Per her instructions, he is to publish the play and bury her other writings, her "poor dead children . . . unread, as I have been" alongside her (450). The narrator fulfills her second wish, but not the first. "I could have had it published at my own expense," he notes, "but I think that now she knows its faults herself, and would not like it" (451). The implication is plain, and extraordinarily arrogant: in death, Aarona must finally understand that she, not the men who have consistently rejected her works, is in the wrong. While Woolson does treat the narrator with some kindness, granting him the self-awareness to realize that "[s]he, with the greater power, failed—I, with the less, succeeded," this self-awareness is mitigated by his keeping her play, not as *memento mori*, "but rather . . . as a memento of my own good-fortune, for which I should continually give thanks" (451). The narrator is, of course, quite correct to feel the level of gratitude he does for his own success, although he is privileged enough to refrain from any deeper reflection upon the nature of his success versus Aarona's failure and ultimate

demise. Such gratitude, however, is cold comfort for other women who will follow in Aarona's footsteps—or for Woolson herself.

### 3. “Neptune’s Shore” and “A Pink Villa”: Motherhood, Mental Illness, and the Dangers of Love

The six years that followed the publication of “Miss Grief” were quite prolific.

Woolson published three novels, *Anne* (1882), *For the Major* (1883), and *East Angels* (1886), each of which was published serially in *Harper’s* magazine and then in book form with Harper & Brothers, with whom she had signed an exclusive contract. *Anne* was a popular and critical success, while *East Angels* and *For the Major* did not sell as well but were still relatively well received. Woolson herself was not as aware of reviews as she had been, as her continued presence in Europe sheltered her from the American literary community by sheer virtue of distance. Woolson mentions this in an 1886 letter to John Hay, a relation by marriage to her nephew, Sam Mather: “I must thank you especially for sending me the delightful ‘Tribune’ notice, & Harper Advt [for *East Angels*]. As a general thing I see nothing; no one ever sends—but you” (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 314).

Woolson’s comment is, however, a bit tongue-in-cheek, as she makes mention of William Dean Howells’s review of *East Angels* in *Harper’s* in the very same letter. Howells had given the novel a mixed review, noting—unsurprisingly, to Woolson—that Margaret, one of the novel’s protagonists, behaved in such a selfless manner as to be entirely unbelievable. “I could not expect Mr Howells to like ‘Margaret,’ for he does not believe in ‘Margarets,’—he has never perceived that they exist,” she writes to Hay. “But his writing as he has done . . . strikes me as unfriendly; for the ordinary reader will not discriminate,—will not notice that it is Howells in his own person who is speaking” (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 313). As one of the “literary men” to whom Woolson referred in “Miss Grief,” Howells wielded an enormous amount of power—power which was further amplified by his review appearing to come from “the literary chair of the magazine in which the story appeared” (313). Woolson was understandably concerned that

Howells's review would be perceived as the opinion of the *Harper's* editorial staff, as it appeared in his "Editor's Study" column. Woolson's argument is clear: she may have given up on convincing Howells and his ilk that her portrayal of women such as Margaret is realistic, but she was in no way willing to back down from unfair treatment, particularly from the publisher with whom she had signed an exclusive contract.

Unfortunately, Woolson's career—indeed, all forms of writing, including her letters—slowed down substantially between 1886 and 1888, due to her increasingly poor health. Like many of her peers, Woolson suffered from writer's cramp brought about by handwriting her manuscripts, rather than hiring someone to perform the work. Woolson's case was further exacerbated in April of 1886, as the revised manuscript of *East Angels* she sent to *Harper's* for publication was feared lost at sea; she "wrote nonstop for two weeks, fourteen hours a day" to replace the lost manuscript (Rioux 185). While impressive, this act took a noticeable toll on Woolson's overall health, both mental and physical. She began treatment with Dr. William Wilberforce Baldwin, who not only used electrotherapy to soothe her arm, but also provided a more holistic approach to medicine (Rioux 186). Woolson spent much of the next few years attempting to recover but with little success. This "tedious lameness, brought on by the seated position at a writing table . . . has thrown everything behind, and I am only just now beginning to take up the many broken threads of letters, visits, housekeeping duties,—to say nothing of literary engagements," Woolson wrote to Jane Carter, a close friend, in January 1888, after a months-long gap in writing of any sort (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 350). While Woolson had recovered from the worst of her ailments, the recovery was not complete, nor was it permanent.

Despite Woolson's partial recovery—and perhaps in part due to the two-year silence her publishers must have keenly noticed—she soon began work on her next novel, *Jupiter Lights*, to

which she devoted herself for the majority of the year. Probably because of Woolson's two-year hiatus, *Harper's* published three of her short stories in the months leading up to *Jupiter Lights's* serial run as a means of reintroducing her to her audience (Rioux 231). None received much attention upon publication, although they were all published in the posthumous collection *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* in 1895. Current Woolson scholarship offers very little criticism on these stories as well, although a notable exception is Annamaria Formichella Elsdon's "'A Modern and a Model Pioneer': Civilizing the Frontier in Woolson's 'A Pink Villa.'" Elsdon focuses primarily on David Rod, the American prospector who comes to Italy to find workers for his farm in Florida, and the cultural differences between the two locations, particularly after the Civil War. While both "A Pink Villa" and "Neptune's Shore" both feature Woolson's skillful descriptions of specific cultures and places, they also serve as precursors to the themes which Woolson would address more fully in *Jupiter Lights*—particularly the obsessive, all-consuming nature of love. These stories offers unorthodox yet invaluable insights into the common enough experiences of jilted lovers, marriage, and the intense bond between mother and child, as well as a larger argument against then-predominant cultural notions of love, marriage, femininity, and the propriety of intense emotion.

"Neptune's Shore," which appeared in the October 1888 issue of *Harper's*, presents a stark portrayal of mental illness and all-consuming romantic love. John Ash, an American attorney, has brought his mother with him on holiday to Salerno, Italy. While there, he meets and falls in love with Pauline Graham, a vivacious widow who enjoys his company but does not return his affection. While wealthy, John is clearly not of the same social station as Pauline, which leads to speculation that his presence as potential suitor may affect Pauline's own reputation as well as "the family connection," as her cousin, Octavia, gently chides (764).

However, her family's concern is misplaced; Pauline has no interest in remarrying and sees John as no more than a friend and riding partner. It is John—or, rather, John's rapidly shifting moods—which dominates the text, rather than carefree Pauline. Over the course of two weeks, he professes his love for Pauline, begs her not to “throw [him] over” for another man (768), threatens her when she declines his offer to ride with him in favor of visiting Naples with Griffith Carew, a friend of Pauline's whose social standing is akin to hers, and, finally, shoots Carew, severely wounding him, and uses the same gun to take his own life. While one may be tempted to write “Neptune's Shore” off as mere page-turning sensationalism, John's over-the-top behavior instead presents a sobering glimpse of the very real dangers of love, both through his obsession with Pauline and his mother's gentler, unwavering maternal love.

Woolson makes it clear from the story's outset that Pauline has no romantic interest in John whatsoever; it is equally clear that John does not recognize or accept Pauline's rejection. At first, she dances around the topic, politely refusing to sit with him by the sea and changing the subject of conversation whenever possible. John, however, is relentless. “You know I am your slave,” he interjects, forcing Pauline to acknowledge his attraction (766). Pauline repeatedly demurs, reminding him that they have only just met, and their time spent together is largely due to a lack of other companions rather than mutual attraction. Despite this, John insists that he is “deeply in love” with Pauline, and that she must know it. “I neither know it nor believe it,” Pauline baldly states; “it is with you simply as it is with me—there is no one else here” (767). And yet, even this outright rejection is not enough. John insists that Pauline is lying to herself, that “as you talk, coming straight from those divine lips, those sweet eyes: ‘I could love you. Be good and I will’” (767). Perhaps realizing that her words no longer matter, Pauline lets the matter rest, and they continue their ride. John is overbearing and uninterested in reality, but because his

insistence is painted as the earnestness of youth, he appears to Pauline as “boyishly young and trusting” (768). Unfortunately, Pauline has misread him.

At this point, Woolson brings our attention to John’s mother, Mrs. Ash. Through her thoughts on their European holiday, we are presented with a more thorough image of John—one which suggests not boorishness or boyish persistence but a deeper psychological disturbance. Mrs. Ash’s descriptions of her son’s moods, past and present, are very similar to episodes we now associate with bipolar disorder. Mrs. Ash is pleased that John appears “tranquil” throughout their journey, as “[t]here was an element sometimes in John’s high spirits that had made her tremble” (770). In other words, John appears to suffer from manic episodes at times. In the ten days following his encounter with Pauline, John has displayed neither mania nor tranquility; instead, he has sunk into a “dark mood” that has led Mrs. Ash back into “her old sleepless, restless life again” (770). Mrs. Ash correctly fears that John’s mood has shifted dangerously. Indeed, she watches as his expression shifts drastically into one which she can only call “her life’s long terror” (772).

The next day, Mrs. Ash accompanies John and his friends on a day trip to the ruins of Paestum, an ancient Greek-turned-Roman city just outside of Salerno. John’s black mood worsens throughout the day, as Pauline not only refuses to devote her time to him but decides to spend the next day with Griffith Carew. Spurred on by both fear and maternal love, Mrs. Ash attempts to attach herself to Pauline in an effort to shield her from a potential outburst from John. It works, to a point, but John does eventually find a way to separate Pauline from the rest of their group. Taking up the mantle of the jilted lover, John attempts to forbid Pauline from accompanying Carew to Naples the following day, then calls her reputation into question when she refuses. Most telling, however, is his apology: “I shouldn’t have said it, even if it were the

plain brutal truth . . . [b]ut you madden me, Pauline. I mean what I say—you really do drive me into a kind of madness” (775). While John’s overall mental stability must certainly be called into question, it is still crucial to note the role romantic love plays in his worsening state. Mrs. Ash attempts to quell their argument, but John transforms her effort into a display of his perceived power. “She does not dare to say to you what she longs to say: she would whisper it if she could; and that is ‘Don’t provoke him!’ She has some pretty bad memories—haven’t you, mother?—of times when I’ve—when I’ve gone a-hunting, as one may say. She’ll tell you about them if you like” (776). Mrs. Ash does share some of her memories by the story’s close, not as a warning—as John intended—but rather as an explanation, and perhaps an apology, after things have taken a very dark turn.

Mere hours after this confrontation, we learn that John has made good on his promise to Pauline and ensured that she will not spend the next day in Naples with Carew, after all. He has shot Carew on their way back from Paestum to Salerno, and the wound is very likely mortal. Carew’s friends and a crowd of villagers attempt to hunt John down to answer for his crime, but are unsuccessful—until Mrs. Ash arrives with the announcement that her son is dead, by his own hand. Her appearance has changed profoundly; her meek façade is “gone forever: she face[s] them with unconscious majesty” (777). Freed from the tyranny of her son—and of her overpowering love for him—Mrs. Ash stands taller, speaks clearly, and commands the room for the first time. She tells Carew’s friends where they may find John’s body in order to verify his death but refuses to let Pauline and her relatives come along so as not to cause further distress. Her compassion and selflessness, Pauline notes, “[make] all the women present . . . fade into nothingness beside her” (778). Mrs. Ash and Pauline are now free, but the cost is abysmally high. Woolson’s message is clear: there is no escape from love short of death. John, driven by his



love for Pauline as well as his own mental illness, takes his own life once he realizes he will never have her. By doing so, he also breaks the ties which bound his mother to him, often against her will. The uncomfortable implication flies in the face of sentimentalism: just as John cannot escape his madness, neither can he escape his love for Pauline. Worse yet, his mother suffers profoundly from his illness and her love for him. She may have lived in terror of her son's moods since his childhood, but she could not abandon him. Her love for John was an illness for which there was no cure. "A Pink Villa" and *Jupiter Lights* also build upon this fatalistic notion of love, but they also offer a positive counter, presenting us with the overwhelming joy of new love. "Neptune's Shore," without doubt one of Woolson's darkest stories, does no such thing, instead leaving us with a devastating assessment of love.

Published the following month, in November 1888, "A Pink Villa" appears at first to be a relatively simple story of love conquering familial and financial pressure. Fanny Churchill has used what little income she receives to raise her daughter, Eva, in Italy, in the hope that she will catch the eye of a wealthy suitor who will raise them both above their meager lifestyle. At the story's outset, Eva is very nearly engaged to Pierre, a Belgian nobleman who has fallen deeply in love with her. However, when Eva meets David Rod, a middle-class American who has come to Italy to find workers for his farm in Florida, she falls in love with him. Against her mother's wishes, the two marry and move to Florida. Summarized thusly, "A Pink Villa" could almost be seen as a rebuttal to Pansy Osmond in Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), which Woolson read very closely. Eva, unlike Pansy, defies her parent and insists upon marrying the man she loves, despite the material comforts she will forsake to do so. In presenting Eva thusly, Woolson has, perhaps, done that which she previously implored James to do—she has given readers a woman who loves deeply. While Fanny has strategically raised Eva to attract a well-to-do

husband—and while, as we see, she has set her sights very, very high—she has not done so maliciously. Fanny has made the best of a difficult situation, given the dearth of respectable means by which women could earn money. If Eva marries well, she will provide lasting financial security for herself and her mother.

It is key, too, to note that Fanny has experienced the danger of marrying poorly firsthand, and is attempting to keep her daughter from repeating her mistakes. Because Fanny's father did not approve of the man she married, the now-deceased Edward Churchill, her father "left his money tied up in such a way that neither Churchill nor any children whom he might have should be much benefited by it" (844). Instead, his inheritance goes straight to Fanny, who is "comfortable," but unable to will it to Eva. Further, Eva would gain a certain level of freedom once married to Pierre: "she can enter society—which is always so dangerous—safely," Fanny remarks to her friend Phillip Glass after he has questioned the need to marry Eva off at the age of seventeen. Fanny also specifically tells Phillip that, not only will Pierre's family "never tie Eva down in any small way," but that they will also "never wish to separate me from Eva" (839). These are not the words of an obsessive social climber but those of a mother who wants the best for her child with no illusions about how her goal may be achieved.

And yet, despite Fanny's devotion to Eva and Eva's clear love for her mother, a wedge is driven between them: Eva falls deeply, desperately in love with the wrong man. Unlike John Ash of "Neptune's Shore," Eva's love is neither dark nor obsessive, but it is, nonetheless, just as consuming. She calls off her engagement to Pierre, despite believing her love for David is unrequited. "Didn't I tell you [David] cares nothing for me?" she wails to Fanny. "I think he despises me—I am so useless!" (851). Well-bred, but certainly no longer quiet, Eva, whose

“existence had been arranged as though a large fortune certainly awaited her,” has been permanently changed by her love for David Rod (844).

Fanny recognizes the change, and it terrifies her. “[F]or the first time in her life she did not know her child. This person . . . was not Eva. Eva was docile; this person was not docile” (852). Eva casts protocol to the wind and accompanies David on an unchaperoned boat ride; when they return hours later, they are engaged to be married. Even Fanny’s outright refusal to consent to the engagement does not faze Eva. “I love you dearly,” she tells her mother. “But you must not try to separate me from David. I could not leave him—I never will” (855). Despite having fallen in love with a relatively uncouth man she hardly knows, despite the perceived hardship she has consigned herself to (while David’s farm should yield substantial profit, he has not yet established any material wealth), despite being separated from her mother for the first time in her life, Eva is so utterly happy that she is physically transformed. She has been swept away, as Horace Bartholomew, Fanny’s close friend, notes, by “one of those sudden, overwhelming loves that one sometimes sees. . . . [I]t is the sweetest thing life offers” (856).

Eva and David’s whirlwind romance reinforces not only the immense power of love to transform the self and break familial bonds, but also the precariousness of women’s positions of authority. David flouts convention by proposing marriage to Eva in private, without securing Fanny’s permission. “I have come . . . as soon as I possibly could, Mrs. Churchill (I had to take the boat back first, you know), to tell you that we are engaged” (854). The narrative reinforces his pleasant nature and love for Eva: David looks at her “smilingly, his eyes as happy as her own,” and he is filled with “good-natured tranquility” (854). Yet never once does he consider that Fanny, as Eva’s sole parent and guardian, should have been consulted before he asks for her hand in marriage. It is understandable that David has not “heard of the custom” of asking the

mother's permission for her daughter's hand in marriage, and has simply assumed that Eva, having grown up without a father, is his for the taking, but his assumption is troubling nonetheless. It certainly is so to Fanny, whose last words, and the last words of the story as a whole are, "And the mother?" (856). In an extraordinarily brief period of time, her plans have been upended, and the life she has cultivated for Eva and Pierre, which would have included a place for her as part of their family, is gone. Fanny has spent close to two decades trying to make the best of a poor situation, training Eva as a perfect lady in order to attract a wealthy husband who will secure a stable life for both of them. Because of the terms of her inheritance, Fanny can only provide so much for her daughter. Now she must watch as Eva leaves Europe behind for a fledgling farm in rural Florida. In a year, she will join them, but for now she is alone, quite possibly for the first time in her life. Gone is the future Fanny envisioned, in which she and Eva would remain together in relative comfort in Europe. Instead, her sole hope for remaining near Eva rests upon David's goodwill and financial stability. For better or for worse, Eva and Fanny's relationship has been permanently altered; the bond they share as mother and daughter is but a shadow compared to the all-consuming love which Eva and David share.

Unlike the tragic, deadly portrayal of love in "Neptune's Shore," "A Pink Villa" provides a glimpse of the overwhelming joy of new love. It is a glimpse only, however, as Woolson draws our attention to the repercussions of Eva and David's love, focusing on Fanny's reaction rather than Eva's new feelings. Fanny is just as devoted to Eva as Mrs. Ash is to Paul in "Neptune's Shore." As Eva pines for David, not realizing he is already hers, Fanny comforts her, stifling the "angry pity" and "non-comprehending, jealous, exasperated feeling" which have come over her. Indeed, her concern is for Eva alone, and that her child "should suffer so cruelly when she, Fanny, would have made any sacrifice to save her from it, would have died for her gladly, were

it not that she was the girl's only protector—oh, what fate had come over their happy life together!” (852). However, Woolson seems to question the propriety of Fanny's attachment to her daughter. Fanny's love for Eva is just as overwhelming as Eva's for David, as Mrs. Ash's for her son, and—most damning—as John Ash's for Pauline Graham. Fanny loves Eva wholly, but her love is a dominating one. She has carefully crafted her daughter's life so that they may both live well—and so that they may never be separated. There is no room for Eva to love anyone but Fanny; she may like Pierre well enough, but he is no threat, and he will never separate Fanny from her daughter. While David and Eva's love disrupts Fanny's plans, Woolson forces us to question whether they *should*—and, more importantly, whether this disruption is an unavoidable part of life. “A Pink Villa” may conclude with far less overt tragedy than “Neptune's Shore,” but its overarching message is largely the same: love is disruptive, and its consequences are permanent and unforgiving.

#### 4. *Jupiter Lights*: Passion, Conquest, and Abandonment of Self

*Jupiter Lights*, Woolson's penultimate novel, is markedly different in tone from her previous novels and earlier short stories. Woolson further separates herself from popular aspects of Realism by presenting a tense, action-driven story told primarily from the perspective of its protagonist, Eve Bruce, rather than an omniscient narrator. The effect is profound: we follow, breathlessly, as Eve negotiates the loss of her brother compounded by the shocking revelation that his widow, Cicely Abercrombie, has remarried mere months after his death, to the charismatic yet wildly unstable and abusive Ferdie Morrison. We follow Eve as she shoots Ferdie during a drunken episode in which he threatens Cicely and her child, Eve's nephew, allowing the three of them to escape with Cicely's grandfather from coastal Georgia to Port Aux Pins, Michigan, where they take refuge with Ferdie's half-brother, Paul Tennant. There she comes to terms with her own guilt while falling desperately in love with Paul. When related in this fashion, the events of the novel appear melodramatic; they are, however, firmly rooted in reality. Woolson knew that realistic writing could exclude neither moments of extreme passion nor irrational behavior, as both are essential aspects of human experience. *Jupiter Lights* features a good deal of both, which had a polarizing effect upon many of her readers.

Woolson acknowledged the stylistic shift in *Jupiter Lights* multiple times in her letters, and often with a tinge of uncertainty. "I set out to write a story which should be full of action, and without much else," she wrote in an 1889 letter to her nephew, Samuel Mather, just before the novel's publication in book form; "[t]his is what I tried to do; I do not know whether I have succeeded" (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 379). Woolson's gambit paid off. *The Book Buyer* praised the novel's energy and pacing in its December 1889 issue, proclaiming that Woolson "has written nothing so thoroughly good as 'Jupiter Lights' (Harper Brothers), a novel which evinces

much power, acute observation of humanity and of nature and a vigor of style most remarkable. This is essentially an American novel and is one of the strongest tales ever written by an American” (“Review of *Jupiter Lights*” 453). *The Independent* offered similar accolades, as well as a nod toward Woolson’s blending of drama and realism:

Here we have a vigorous and romantic composition, dramatic from the beginning and never flagging in its energy of movement, never lacking in intense interest to the melodramatic and yet frankly life-like ending. We deem it very high praise when we say that *Jupiter Lights* almost equals “Anne,” [sic] Miss Woolson’s best novel . . . [I]t is one of the strongest of recent novels and goes far to confirm the judgment, already pretty well made, that Miss Woolson is among the few greatest women who write fiction. (“Recent Fiction” 16)

Such lavish praise does not represent the majority of the novel’s reviews, however. Most were decidedly mixed, praising Woolson’s vivid prose but questioning the realism of the novel’s events. Annie R. Ramsey noted in *The Ladies’ Home Journal*’s “An Hour with New Books” column that, while the novel was “clever and strong,” it “cannot be said to be of the Realist school in any degree, for it deals with characters which never by any chance have felt a breath of common sense blow into their daily lives” (11). The *New York Times* offered similar commentary, launching into a detailed argument against the realism of the characters’ actions, stating that “they do not belong either to our century or to that artistic spirit which we have occasion to admire so often in the novels of this talented woman” (Torsney 53).

Many reviews did acknowledge Woolson’s immense talent, but often in less than flattering ways. “Miss Woolson cannot write a poor story,” *Lippincott’s* anonymous reviewer remarked, “but she has done better work than this” (“Current Notes” 293). *The Atlantic’s*

reviewer—believed to be Horace Scudder, who, in addition to publishing many anonymous reviews, served as the magazine’s editor—lambasted the novel, particularly the unbelievable nature of the behavior of Eve, Cicely, and Ferdie. And yet, he still conceded that “Miss Woolson’s ingenuity does not fail her in this book, but it is put, we must think, to extreme tests” (128). One review, published both in *The Nation* and the *New York Evening Post*, presented nothing but vitriol, asserting that “Miss Woolson must have been dominated by an evil spirit when she conceived of the central situation of ‘Jupiter Lights’ [sic]” (*The Nation* 224). While Woolson had long since learned to steel herself against such reviews, this one troubled her, as she told her nephew, Samuel Mather:

Somebody has taken the pains to send me, very carefully directed, a N.Y. Evening Post, ~~with~~ containing a savage attack upon Jupiter Lights. . . . I seldom see reviews of my books, friendly or unfriendly; & I do’nt much care about them—because they are not sincere. But this Post attack touched me a little, because I think it may come—in spirit—from Mr Howells, who, strange to say, has turned from a friend to an enemy. He is powerful; & he is on the spot; & he dislikes with a vengeance! When he does dislike. It is the one painful spot in my literary life, because I used to like him so much, & trust him. I usually try not to think of him; it is only when something occurs unexpectedly—like this arrival of the Post—that my mind goes back to the subject. (Dean, *Collected Letters*, 409)

Clearly, Woolson’s relationship with Howells had cooled even further since his critical review of *East Angels* in *Harper’s* four years prior. Whether or not Howells was the author of this particular review, his influence pervades most of the novel’s negative reviews. Much as Howells could not understand Margaret’s self-sacrificing nature in *East Angels*, many critics were



similarly incapable of perceiving the reality behind the dramatic action in *Jupiter Lights*. And yet, the characters of *Jupiter Lights* are rooted in reality. Woolson's complex feelings about love and marriage are on display throughout the narrative, and her experiences with the mental illness and suicide of both her brother Charlie and her close friend's husband Lawson Carter absolutely color her portrait of the charismatic Ferdie Morrison, as Rioux has argued (235-36). *Jupiter Lights* addresses difficult topics that nineteenth-century audiences were loath to engage with, such as domestic abuse, alcoholism, and the very real cost of passion to women who fall under its spell. It is little wonder, then, that critics chose to dismiss these subjects as outlandish rather than acknowledge their reality.

Recent criticism has not been much more welcoming of the novel. To date, *Jupiter Lights* has been the subject of but one scholarly article, published by Caroline Gebhard in 2001. While Gebhard certainly provides a more thorough look at the novel than prior scholars, she still falls into their footsteps: the opening sentence of her article states that *Jupiter Lights* "is a strange book" (83). In fact, Gebhard's criticism is uncomfortably familiar to one of Woolson's own characters—the narrator of "Miss Grief." Just as Aarona's works are praised as strong, yet flawed, Gebhard offers similar criticism of *Jupiter Lights*. Gebhard acknowledges that earlier critics of *Jupiter Lights* were not entirely wrong in faulting the novel, but insists that "[t]he problems with the book, however, are inseparable from its strengths: the brilliance of Woolson is to pour the disturbing content of violence against women into the plot of the conventional romance. Ultimately, however, this content cannot be successfully married to the romance genre" (83). Such an assessment of the novel is reductive, and ultimately damaging. Gebhard not only obscures Woolson's commitment to realism by prioritizing romance—she also inadvertently suggests that romance has no place within realism.

*Jupiter Lights* explores the insidious, obsessive, and unavoidable nature of passion by showing its effect upon Eve as she evolves from grieving sister to a woman consumed by romantic love. In the novel's first chapter, Eve reveals the love she felt for her deceased brother, Jack—and her desire to preserve her family by immediately attaching herself to Little Jack, her brother's son and, now, her last remaining relative. Eve's attachment is so strong, in fact, that she contemplates adopting her nephew within minutes of meeting him. "He is the image of Jack!" she tells Cicely's Aunt Sabrina. "Do you think she would give him to me?" she asked, hungrily" (9). Eve's love is singular, but, unfortunately, one-sided: Jack "had never comprehended the exclusiveness, the jealousy of her affection . . . In urging her, therefore, to join them, he did not in the least suspect that the chief obstacle lay in that very word 'them,' of which he was so proud. To join 'them,' to see some one else preferred; where she had been first, to take humbly a second place!" (13). Eve's predicament is reminiscent of Fanny's in "A Pink Villa." Both women have created and maintained lives for their loved ones, and both women have been set aside in favor of romantic love. Jack, much like Fanny's daughter, Eva, attempts to make room for his sister in his new life, but Eve rejects any place in Jack's life that is not at his side. Thus, Eve's grieving begins not upon her brother's death but his marriage. His death and his widow's callous remarriage merely stoke the flames. Small wonder, then, that Eve decides, "with all the intensity of her strong will, of her burning, jealous sorrow, that [Little Jack] should be hers alone" (14).

Eve's determination to preserve her family at any cost is notable, but well within the scope of acceptable female behavior; while she may not be the perfectly submissive "angel in the house," her devotion to brother and nephew would have been quite understandable to Woolson's readers. It is Cicely, her sister-in-law, who drew more ire by far than any other character within

the novel. *The Nation*, incapable of understanding her unyielding attachment to Ferdie, wrote her off as “exasperating” (225). *Lippincott’s* refrained from mentioning Cicely by name, instead referring to her as “the capricious Southern heroine with any amount of sensibilities but no soul to speak of” (293). Critics like Scudder of *The Atlantic* found the “little devil of a Southern girl” to be incomprehensible: “[Eve] could not understand Cicely,—nobody can” (126). While Cicely certainly plays the part of antagonist throughout the novel, one must remember that she married Jack Bruce, at his insistence, at the age of sixteen, and is barely twenty by the time she meets Eve. Cicely is quite the opposite of soulless: she is a young woman, twice married by the age of twenty, who has found herself in the thrall of a charismatic, abusive husband. Her actions are often surprising, but they are perfectly in keeping with Woolson’s portrayal of love as all-consuming and potentially leading to self-destructive behavior.

And yet, was Cicely really so inscrutable to Woolson’s critics, or was she instead such a transgressive figure that none of them *wished* to understand her? After all, Woolson provides the perfect means to both understand Cicely’s motives and empathize with her behavior—Eve herself. Despite Scudder’s insistence, Eve *can* eventually understand Cicely, but first she must fall in love herself. Until that moment, Eve treats Cicely in much the same way as Woolson’s critics, particularly the *Nation* reviewer, who took particular umbrage with Cicely’s decision to remain with Ferdie, railing against “the stupid and obstinate attachment of a silly woman for a man who, every few months, became insanely drunk, beat her, turned her out of doors, and tried to kill both her and her child” (“Recent Fiction” 224). The reviewer found it inconceivable that Ferdie could be both charismatic and abusive, that he could woo both Cicely and her family:

In real life we occasionally hear of such instances of infatuation, but never that the fascination which men of Mr. Morrison’s unpleasant habits exercise over their

wives extends to other people, particularly to the wife's relations. In real life, the wife's relations are generally coarse enough to combat the clinging affections, and, when possible, to deliver the husband over to the police. Such matter-of-fact behavior would, however, never do for high-flown romance. (224)

The reviewer's vitriol is doubly unwarranted; in his haste to denounce Ferdie and Cicely's behavior, he has neglected a very important part of the narrative: Cicely has kept Ferdie's alcoholism and abuse a secret from her family. She confides only in Eve, whose reaction rapidly shifts from sympathy to horror: "to love any man so submissively was weakness, but to love as Cicely loved, that was degradation!" (60). It is only after Cicely flees with her grandfather, Eve, and Jack to Michigan that her secret comes out. By this point, it is far too late for anyone to "combat [her] clinging affections." Cicely's love for Ferdie is unwavering, and dangerously past the point of reason and self-preservation.

Rather than show us "high-flown romance," Woolson uses Cicely and Ferdie as a powerful example of the very real, devastating nature of passionate love, particularly for women. Cicely knows that Ferdie's behavior is unacceptable, but she cannot help but rationalize it. After all, Ferdie is only abusive when drunk. "[H]e broke poor baby's little arm," she confesses to Eve, "of course when he did not know what he was doing. When he gets that way he does not know us; he thinks we are enemies, and he thinks it is his duty to attack us . . . Baby was so young that the bone was easily set. Nobody ever knew about it, I never told. But—but it must not happen again" (53). Eve is horrified to learn that Cicely loves Ferdie despite these abuses—that is, until Ferdie unexpectedly returns from South America, breezing back into his wife's and in-laws' lives without a care in the world, regaling them with tales and songs from South America. Eve cannot reconcile this charismatic, handsome man with the abuser she has envisioned: "was that

the hand which had struck a woman? A little child? . . . She almost began to believe that Cicely had invented the whole of her damning tale” (59). While Ferdie’s Janus-faced behavior is far more familiar to twenty-first century audiences, domestic abuse in the nineteenth century was neither as rare nor as easily solved as the *Nation* reviewer asserted. Gebhard notes that James himself creates a similarly toxic relationship in *The Portrait of a Lady*: “[w]hat is Isabel Archer, after all, if not the victim of her husband’s cruelty?” (87). While one must acknowledge that James provides no examples of physical violence within the novel, Osmond’s treatment of Isabel is, without doubt, abusive. Gebhard further dismantles the *Nation* reviewer’s argument by providing numerous examples of domestic abuse in both nineteenth-century British and American literature and culture, specifically highlighting the link between alcoholism and abuse forged by the temperance reform movement (86-87).

Ferdie is not, however, simply an alcoholic. As the novel progresses, we learn that he has always been predisposed to erratic, sometimes violent, behavior. In Michigan, Paul, Ferdie’s half-brother, reveals much of Ferdie’s history. “The trouble with Ferdie,” he tells them, “is that he is sure that he can stop at any moment, and, being so sure, he has never really tried. The thing has been on him almost from a boy, he inherits it from his father. But he has such a will, he is so brilliant . . . [t]hat he has never considered himself in danger, in spite of these lapses” (87). Woolson uses much the same language to describe Ferdie’s behavior as she does John Ash’s in “Neptune’s Shore.” At that story’s close, Mrs. Ash explains that “[John’s] will was stronger than mine. And he was always very clever . . . much cleverer than me” (778). It is not just intelligence and willpower, however, which tie the two men together. Ferdie, like John, has struggled since birth with “inherited tendencies which kept him down” (Woolson, *Jupiter Lights* 214). It is these

tendencies, Paul insists, which ultimately cause Ferdie's death, rather than any external circumstances.

Counter to Scudder's insistence, Ferdie's character is no mere plot device, consigned to "disappear to the convenient remoteness of Valparaiso, to wait till the novelist wanted him for dark and dreadful purposes" (Scudder 126). His erratic behavior was quite familiar to Woolson. She had observed it in her younger brother Charlie all his life, particularly in the years leading up to his suicide in 1883. Charlie very likely suffered from bipolar disorder, "as suggested by his migraines and erratic moves from one location to another. He frequently tried new ventures when he was up, then abandoned them when he was down, emotionally and economically. When his family reached out to him, he accepted their money but not their closeness" (Rioux 107). Rioux's description applies almost seamlessly to Ferdie. When pressed by Eve, Paul admits to supporting his brother's ventures through similar hardships, although it appears that both love and, now, grief have colored his perception of his brother. Either unwilling or unable to admit his position as enabler, Paul insists that Ferdie's brilliance would have saved him in the end: "if he had lived, all his investments would have turned out finely, he was sure of a fortune some time. . . . I advanced him money now and then when he happened to be short, but it was always for the time being only; he would have paid me back if he had lived" (150). Unlike Charlie Woolson, Ferdie does not actively take his own life. It is, however, heavily implied that his actions directly cause his death. He enters into a manic state upon recovering from his wounds, which swiftly leads to his demise. The circumstances surrounding Ferdie's death have been withheld from Eve and Cicely, however. Only Paul learns of them, much later, from the doctor:

He slipped off to Savannah, not letting me know a gleam of it, and there he was joined by—I don't know whether you have heard that there was a woman in the

case? . . . And she wasn't the only one, though she supposed she was. From the first, the drink got hold of him again. And this time it killed him,—he led an awful life of it there for days. (222)

Ferdie's last manic episode may be outlandish and deplorable, but it is very much part of a larger behavioral pattern with which Woolson was intimately familiar.

Ferdie's erratic behavior may have puzzled critics, but it was Eve, and her complete transformation upon falling in love with Paul, who received the bulk of their ire. Woolson provides significant context within the narrative to anchor Eve's abrupt shift, including a heavy dose of ironic foreshadowing. After declaring her unwavering love for Ferdie, Cicely wished that Eve herself would experience the same sort of love one day. However, Eve clings to her belief that such love is "degradation," mistrusting Cicely and Ferdie as well as the entire concept of romantic love until, inevitably, she falls under its spell. Woolson places the reader directly into Eve's mind, following along with her through her discovery that she has fallen in love with Paul, brother to the man she has shot, and possibly killed. Even if he does return her feelings—and she vacillates between knowing he does not and hoping that he will—Eve knows that Ferdie would forever come between the two of them. Eve is very much aware of what is happening to her, and she is overcome by a horrified surprise: "[t]hat she, no longer a girl, after all these years untouched by such feelings—that she, with her clear vision and strong will (she had always been so proud of her will), should be led captive in this way by a stranger who cared nothing for her, who did not even wish to capture—it was a sort of insanity" (107). Eve resolves to "overcome this feeling that had taken possession of her and changed her so that she did not know herself," but her resolution is a hollow one (108). It is too late. Like Eva Churchill of "A Pink Villa," whose name resembles her own, Eve Bruce has fallen hopelessly in love.

Eve's realization of love and its consequences drive the action of the novel. Throughout the text, Eve struggles to balance her feelings of love and guilt. Only she and Cicely know that she has shot Ferdie, but Cicely is trapped in a sort of fugue state, overwhelmed by the trauma of abandoning her abusive husband and fleeing across the country. Eve's resignation to a life of unrequited love is upset by Paul's realization that he loves her just as deeply. Unfortunately, their budding romance is cut short by news of Ferdie's death; because the circumstances are not yet mentioned, Eve assumes that he has died of the wound she has inflicted upon him, and thus, privately, names herself his murderer. Her hopes of a future with Paul dashed, as she assumes that Paul will one day find out and will never forgive her, Eve struggles to keep her distance. Miserable because of her unconsummated love, and incapable of telling Paul why, Eve goes so far as to contemplate suicide. Ultimately, Eve fails to keep away from Paul. He presses his suit, and she allows herself to give in: "[h]e drew her towards him. She did not resist. In her heart rose the cry, "For one day, for one hour, let me have it, have it all! Then—" (169). These abrupt lines, with which Woolson concludes the chapter, imply quite strongly that Eve has given herself fully to Paul, physically consummating their love, as Rioux suggests (234). Eve's passion has, at last, triumphed over her reason.

This brief, scandalous, bliss is interrupted by Cicely, who has finally regained her senses. Although Cicely promises not to tell Ferdie the truth of their escape, Eve knows that she cannot ever truly be with Paul; devastated, she confronts him, chokes out a confession of guilt, then flees Michigan with Cicely and her family, returning to the Abercrombie family home. Now, Eve not only understands Cicely's "degrading" love—she has been consumed by it as well. Cicely drags the confession out of her, clearly enjoying Eve's fall: "Now you won't be so lofty. *Now* you understand, perhaps, how I felt about Ferdie, and why I didn't mind, no matter



what he did?" (192). Hopeless, despondent, Eve affirms Cicely's suspicion. She *does* understand Cicely, which is why she chooses to return to the last vestige of family she has left rather than face Paul once more. Paul, however, refuses to accept Eve's rejection, pursuing her first to Georgia, then—after she has fled the country out of desperation—to the Italian convent where Eve has chosen to live the rest of her days, assaulting members of the cloth in his determination to get to her, and, at the very close of the novel, take Eve into his arms (227).

Such a level of emotional, action-driven writing is very far removed from not only genteel late-nineteenth-century Realism but also Woolson's previous novels, none of which allowed their protagonists to fully experience passion without repression. Despite the natural progression of Eve's feelings and actions, the force with which they are presented caused many critics to react quite negatively. *The Nation* complained that Eve "seems to lose every atom of her intelligence and self-control" upon falling in love with Paul (226). *Lippincott's* complained that "the more or less exemplary Northern heroine with a tormentingly exigent and morbid conscience" is also "more irritating than attractive . . . insist[ing] on self-maceration to the extent of having to be pursued across an ocean and two continents" (293). As Rioux notes, Scudder perhaps comes closest to the truth, declaring that "[t]he real theme of the book may be stated succinctly as an aphorism: Woman's love is absolute abandonment of self" (242). However, Scudder found the "endless variations on the theme" to be both distracting and disturbing, serving less as plot points than as "a network of emotional torture which may be exact enough for psychological purposes, but is very confusing to the reader of a piece of fiction" (127). Of all the novel's reviewers, only Scudder acknowledged Woolson's psychological approach, placing the reader in Eve's mind as she discovers the full nature of passion. Yet, Scudder couched this assessment by accusing Woolson of playing a psychological "what if?" game with her readers,

questioning whether “Miss Woolson’s interest in casuistry and her ingenuity of invention are leading her farther and farther away from large pictures of human life into the windings and turnings of fictitious pathology” (128). Scudder’s implication is clear, and disturbing: women’s passion was not only unrealistic but abnormal, and had no place in the “larger picture” of human life. As such, *Jupiter Lights* remained little more than a well-reasoned, if perverse, mind game.

Even the scant twentieth- and twenty-first-century analyses of *Jupiter Lights* seem unsure of how to treat the novel. Moore agrees that it is “too melodramatic; it does contain some improbable action . . . and there is some ‘authorial manipulation,’ especially in the matter of a contrived ending” (107). However, he also praises the novel, noting that it “offers an excellent picture of a part of the South during Reconstruction; some characters of real vitality; and an examination of psychological matters that is still relevant and of interest today” (107-08). Fifty years later, both Caroline Gebhard and Sharon Dean zero in on the nature of domestic abuse in *Jupiter Lights* in a manner which is uncomfortably close to Scudder’s. In “Romantic Love and Wife-Battering in Constance Fenimore Woolson’s *Jupiter Lights*,” Gebhard argues that, by featuring Ferdie and Cicely’s relationship so prominently—and by Eve’s eventual understanding of their love—Woolson considers American culture itself pathological, “call[ing] into question the parameters of ‘normal’ heterosexual relationships, suggesting that American culture inculcates masochism in women as a cultural norm” (92). While Gebhard’s analysis provides invaluable insight, particularly into Eve and Cicely’s tense relationship, her overall assessment, however inadvertently, adds to a pathological analysis of the novel which diminishes its larger, realistic aspects. Dean’s argument is part of a larger assessment of marriage within Woolson’s novels; while her position that *Jupiter Lights* shows Woolson struggling to come to grips with the issues of how women damage themselves when they remain in abusive relationships” is

correct, it also narrows the scope of Woolson's larger argument (Dean 128). By narrowing her assessment to abusive relationships, Dean ignores a much larger, and much darker truth: that Woolson may have considered *all* relationships to be damaging to some extent, as the insidious nature of passion, when combined with devotion, created a willing subservience. While Eve Bruce stands as a shining example, threads of this darker, subservient love are woven throughout *Jupiter Lights*, "A Pink Villa," and "Neptune's Shore." No one in Woolson's fiction who loves with any depth is immune to this permanent, and dangerous bonding. This larger reality of passion and its inevitable danger must be acknowledged not as part of abuse, but as part of human nature.

Dismissing *Jupiter Lights* as melodrama or pathology is short-sighted; while the novel is, at times, emotionally wrenching, it provides a devastating look into the reality of passion, and women's inability to escape its effects. We are left with a very bleak impression of love, and the institution of marriage as a whole: internally, Eve cannot overcome her passion, and externally, she cannot overcome Paul. She has done all she can to escape, short of taking her own life, which she has also contemplated, and nothing has succeeded. Despite her assertion early on that she will never love as Cicely does, despite her internal revolt "against the injustice of all the ages, past, present, and to come, towards women," Eve, at last, is absorbed into the fold (Woolson, *Jupiter Lights*, 60). Paul has finally overpowered her—and, perhaps most disturbingly, his conquest appears to be what Eve craves. From the beginning of their relationship, Eve has delighted in his complete domination:

[Not] for a moment did she bend her opinions, her decisions, to his, of her own accord; each time it was simply that she was conquered; after contesting the point as strongly as she could, how she gloried in feeling herself overridden at last! She

would look at Paul with delighted eyes, and laugh in triumph. To have yielded because she loved him, would have had a certain sweetness; but to be conquered unyielding, that was a satisfaction whose intensity could go no further. (169-70).

When one considers the novel's close in the context of this passage, it is difficult to conclude anything other than that Eve has gotten precisely what she wanted. Eve is, at last, "conquered unyielding," forcing the reader to acknowledge the disturbing triumph of passion over will.

Through *Jupiter Lights*, Woolson presents a much more fully-fleshed, and disturbing, glimpse of love than that which is, in "A Pink Villa," described as "the sweetest thing life offers" (856).

Now, love is both abandonment of self and the most intense satisfaction that *anyone* can experience. Cicely and Eve are two very different women—Cicely is young, capricious, and pampered by her family, while Eve is headstrong, independent, and rational to a fault—yet they are finally able to understand one another not through the love they share for Little Jack but through their all-consuming love for Ferdie and Paul, respectively. If a woman as independent as Eve may fall headlong into the madness of passion, reveling in her complete subordination to Paul, what hope is there for any woman? Contrary to Scudder's assertion, Woolson's portrayal of passion in *Jupiter Lights* is not an exploration of pathological behavior but, rather, how Woolson had come to perceive the dangerous reality of love itself.

## 5. Conclusion: Reassessing Literary Realism

At the time of her death in 1894, Woolson was one of America's better-known authors. *Horace Chase*, her final novel, received perhaps kinder reviews than it might otherwise have, as it was published just after her death and thus was reviewed not on its own but rather as the capstone to an impressive, albeit far too brief, literary career. And yet, Woolson's popularity waned significantly in the following decades. Torsney connects the disappearance of Woolson's works with the establishment of American literary canon:

Woolson and others like her, labeled regionalists or local colorists, suffered an identity crisis that manifested itself in diminished fictional forms, like the short story and the domestic sketch. Their work has been perceived as a short, secret passage between the great, echoing halls of romance and realism. And because the passage is secret and few use it, no one else misses it. (153-54)

Indeed, the brief overviews of Woolson's life and career which appeared in the twentieth century reinforce this outlook. Edward Wagenknecht wrote in his 1952 anthology, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, that Woolson's "changes of mood are too frequent and not adequately prepared for; her emotional effects are too much 'on again, off again.' She was too fond of using demented women—and, in one instance, at least, a demented man" (Torsney, *Critical Essays* 120). Despite praising Woolson's writing, Alexander Cowie writes her off as a member of "the familiar category of the superior minor writer who is periodically 'rediscovered' by a sensitive critic or a zealous historian" and a writer who "undoubtedly won many readers by the sensational, even melodramatic materials which she sometimes ineptly introduced into her work" (Cowie 568). Cowie's assessment not only insults Woolson, but also the very large following she cultivated as a writer, including a significant reading public, multiple critics such as Edmund

Clarence Stedman, and Henry James himself. Woolson's success was not accidental, nor were her publications the result of anything less than obsessive writing and rewriting to the point of physical pain. While it is undoubtedly true that Woolson's writings, particularly her later works, do not fit neatly into the established parameters of American literary Realism, one must question whether, as with Aarona's work in "Miss Grief," it is Woolson who is at fault or the narrow scope of those who established the boundaries of the canon in the first place.

Almost fifty years after Woolson's death, Moore posited that the decline in Woolson's popularity was caused by a few factors, one being the simple fact that her novels had long since gone out of print. Moore is far kinder to Woolson than Cowie, but his reasoning for Woolson's decline is at times similar: "the technique of fiction has improved in such important ways that Miss Woolson's work often appears dated in treatment of themes, characters, and in technical matters" (137). More importantly, he highlights the curious paradox of Woolson's treatment of love, noting her "inability to deal frankly and forthrightly with love and sex" as perhaps part of the reason for her decline, yet fully acknowledging that this "inability" clearly did not hinder "James, Howells, Twain, and others of her period . . . and they treat love hardly more forthrightly than Miss Woolson" (137-38). Despite noting this discrepancy, Moore falls into the same trap as Cowie—a trap first laid by Scudder, Howells, and others who rejected the notion that Woolson's conception of love and passion could be realistic. Cowie asserts, and Moore agrees, that Woolson's writings could not achieve "that subtle process of artistic enlargement by which a work passes out of the specific into the universal" (576). Moore may be kinder to Woolson than Cowie, but even he cannot acknowledge her concepts of love and passion as universal.

Woolson's later works are transgressive—even today, the conclusion of *Jupiter Lights* would be controversial. And yet, she forces readers to confront the reality of passion as a far

uglier aspect of human nature than many would care to admit. Passion robs of us our agency, Woolson argues, turning us into willing slaves. Its effect upon women is particularly devastating, as they are already afforded so much less agency than men. Woolson's contemporary critics, such as Howells and Scudder, refused to recognize the reality of women's passion, dismissing her characters as unbelievable or—worse yet—pathological. Woolson, however, had no desire to write that which she had not herself observed. Woolson never ceased her efforts to accurately portray human behavior. Rather, her insistence that realistic writing must, at times, incorporate extreme emotion, in women as well as men, pushed her beyond the fringe of canonical Realism.

Moore closes his study of Woolson with the observation that “a careful reading of her novels and stories will inform those who wish to know something about the development of fiction in the late nineteenth century has already been demonstrated . . . That her work still retains intrinsic literary values of its own remains for a new generation of American readers to discover” (142). It is, in fact, past time to recognize Constance Fenimore Woolson's works as making a strong contribution to late-nineteenth-century American literary Realism, rather than continuing to marginalize her work as regionalism or melodrama. We may forgive her nineteenth-century peers for refusing to accept that ordinary women could be pushed beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior by their passions, and for refusing to acknowledge the implicit critique in her portrayal of romantic love as well as maternal love. However, there is no need to continue to diminish her portraits as “peculiar” assessments of domestic abuse, as both Gebhard and Dean argue in the context of *Jupiter Lights*. Constance Fenimore Woolson never ceased her attempt to accurately portray the human condition. Rather, she tried to impress upon her audiences not only the reality but the importance of the darker aspects of love and passion, and their often devastating effects upon women. While it is understandable that Victorian audiences

would not approve of such strong portrayals of love, Woolson's fiction provides current readers with invaluable insight into the very real struggles of nineteenth-century women. Rather than categorize Woolson as a regionalist, or a woman writer, or any other such label which undermines her tremendous gift for both observing and recounting human nature, current scholars of American literary Realism would do well to acknowledge the stifling boundaries of the established canon, and accept Woolson's empathetic realism as integral to the genre.



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## Vita

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