

Literature and Psychology:

Writing, Trauma and the Self

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CHAPTER SEVEN

AGENCY IN COMPLICITY: THE AESTHETICS OF TRAUMA IN CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON'S 'MISS GRIEF'

THEODORA TSIMPOUKI

In 1879, at the age of thirty-nine, James Fenimore Cooper's grandniece Constance Fenimore Woolson set foot in Europe, where she remained until her suicide in 1894. Although she had acquired a taste for travelling at an early age, it was only after her mother's death that Woolson crossed the Atlantic for the first time. Moreover, having suffered more than her share in "life's inevitable misfortunes,"¹ she abandoned the idea of a permanent home, opting instead for a nomadic way of life.² Woolson soon became an acute observer of the cultural upheavals of late nineteenth-century Europe, and particularly of the tensions surrounding sexuality and gender inequality. An ambitious writer, she was repeatedly frustrated by what Elaine Showalter describes as the era's "trivialization of women

¹ Anne Boyd Rioux, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 27.

² As we shall see, Constance had many reasons to leave the USA, although at the time her decision was not considered permanent. Her family moved from Claremont, New Hampshire to Cleveland, Ohio after the death of three of her older sisters when Constance was a baby. Moving as a response to grief, says Rioux in *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, became "ingrained" in the Woolson children, most of all Constance, who would spend the majority of her adult life on the move" (5). Besides, travelling was considered an appropriate way to fight sadness and depression, at the time. Even today, "moving as a palliative for stuckness, a lifesaving response to the psychic and bodily immobility that is constitutive of chronic depression," argues Jani Scandura in "Sad Effects," *Cultural Critique* 92 (2016): 155.

writers and bias against female ambition.”³ Such trivialization endured after her death: for despite the popularity of her novels during her lifetime,⁴ the pioneering nature and originality of her local colour fiction⁵ and travel writing,⁶ and her success in securing an exclusive contract with prestigious publisher Harper & Brothers, her reputation steadily declined in the century and a quarter since her death.⁷ Today, she is known less for her work than for her intimate relationship with Henry James (whom she met a year after her first arrival in Florence). Indeed, until very recently, both her travels to Europe and her deadly fall from a third-story window in Venice were interpreted as driven by her unrequited love for his rejection of her—most famously, in Leon Edel’s biography of James, in which Woolson is portrayed as a lovesick, “somewhat deaf spinster.”⁸

Since the publication of Edel’s text, a wealth of feminist scholarship has sought to refute this condescending portrait of Woolson and to recover her importance for American literature and history, emphasizing the challenge that her feminine aesthetic posed to the patriarchal values of the

³ The quotation comes from the blurb of the back cover of Anne Boyd Rioux’s recently published biography on *Constance Fenimore Woolson*. See also, Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁴ She wrote five novels all set in the United States. *Anne* (1882) was one of Harper’s best-sellers. The remaining four are *For the Major* (1883), *East Angels* (1886), *Jupiter Lights* (1889), and *Horace Chase* (1894).

⁵ She wrote stories of life on a vanishing Midwestern frontier, Michigan in *Castle Nowhere: Lake Country Sketches* (1875), but also the post-Civil War South, particularly North Carolina and Florida in *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches* (1877). She was the first post-civil war northerner to capture the poignancy and exotic sensuality of the South.

⁶ A selection of her travel writings can be found in *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Selected Stories and Travel Narratives*, eds., Victoria Brehm and Sharon L. Dean (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2004). According to Dennis Berthold, Woolson dared to challenge the gender constraints of travel writing that overwhelmingly belonged to men. Additionally, in adopting a female perspective she managed “to extend the narrative possibilities of travel writing with social satire comic dialogue, mock-romance plots [and] ironic characterization” (112).

⁷ Anne Boyd, “What! Has she got into the ‘Atlantic?’” *Women Writers, the Atlantic Monthly, and the Formation of the American Canon*, *American Studies* 39.3 (1998): 5-36.

⁸ *Henry James Letters*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), xvi. This view is repeated recently in Carl Rollyson’s critical survey of fictional and non-fictional biographies on Henry James in *Lives of the Novelists* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005), 8.

fin-de-siècle culture.⁹ Without wishing to dismiss this vital work of recovery, my aim in this essay is to provide an alternative to the assessment that this body of scholarship provides of Woolson's depression, where it is largely seen to stem from bereavement, declining health, economic distress, or personal loss.¹⁰ Instead, I extend existing critical interpretations of Woolson as a proto-feminist critic of male exploitation to conceptualise Woolson's depression as itself stemming from women's socially imposed inferiority—a reading that builds on Ann Cvetkovich's conceptualization of depression as the “product of a sick culture.”¹¹ To this extent, I am also interested in exploring the complicated ways that gender-related limitations inflected (and were inflected by) depressive symptoms in the nineteenth century. Woolson's suicide, I argue, cannot be read as an admission of defeat—nor does her artistic contribution end with the accusation of “gendered exclusion from the literary field.”¹² Rather, both her life and oeuvre open up space for a radical reconfiguration of female subjectivity through thinking and working through individual and historical/social trauma. If we endorse a view of trauma that is not event-centered but interwoven into the fabric of

⁹ Contemporary feminist critics, like Lyndall Gordon, Cheryl B. Torsney (1989), Sharon L. Dean (2002) and Anne Boyd Rioux (2016) have set out to challenge Edel's portrait. See, also, Fred Kaplan's biography of Henry James, where Woolson appears as a much more favorable figure. Woolson's innovative fables of artists preceded those of Henry James, Kaplan notes in *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* (New York: William Morrow, 1992). More generally, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues, “[I]t is the project of twentieth-century women writers to...replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy from nineteenth-century life and letters by offering a different set of choices.” In Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 4.

¹⁰ Joan Myers Weimer “Women Artists as Exiles in the Fiction of Constance Fenimore Woolson,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 3. 2 (Fall 1986), 3-15. Cheryl B. Torsney and more recently Anne Boyd Rioux also agree that her death was caused by a combination of factors and was probably a rational decision. For Rioux, Woolson's depression was likely hereditary. Not just her father but her brother—who eventually committed suicide in 1883—too, “suffered from manic depression” (*Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist* 6; 101-102). Depression was compounded by failing physical health, near-deafness and financial worries that threatened to jeopardize her independence.

¹¹ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹² Dorri Beam, “Henry James, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and the Figure in the Carpet,” in *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions*, ed. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 137.

nineteenth-century patriarchal society and related to gender discrimination, then we can concur that Woolson's life and writing involved constant manoeuvring inside or around the impasse of a culture-specific mental health condition. Her creativity enabled her to acknowledge female disappointments and failures in a way that were for the most part productive and guaranteed woman's self-expression in her own terms. Woolson did this by depicting female resistance as inevitably oscillating between agency and complicity with heteronormative discourse. Instead of portraying her heroines as a coherent, silenced and subsidiary group, and homogenizing their experiences, Woolson conveys the trauma of her personal and lived female experience by rendering visible the overlapping, contradicting desires of the gendered self, and giving space for moments of the distinctly heterogeneous agency. Linking trauma to gender politics, then,¹³ I see Woolson's writings as an attempt to narratively work through female powerlessness and vulnerability, unfolding new space between subversiveness and submissiveness in which her heroines can exist, while coming to terms with their disappointments and failures. Lastly, although it would be a mistake to define Woolson by her death, I also attempt to understand her suicide as a woman's act of will, the ultimate assertion of freedom of choice,¹⁴ which she however never granted to the heroines of her novels and short fiction. To the extent that the very act of writing represents an exploration of her female self, Woolson's literary activity can be regarded as a form of agency, as seeking therapeutic reformulations of the trauma of her lived female experience. Her death thus exposes her depression as not only an individual problem but a cultural one as well.

The merits of such a reading are arguably born out by Woolson's own figuration of her depression, in her personal correspondence, as a male demon with masculine traits: vivid depictions of herself join her myriad references to symptoms now associated with depression (lack of appetite,

¹³ *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), co-authored by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), edited by Cathy Caruth, and Caruth's own monograph, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), are usually cited as the seminal books on trauma theory. Building on this vital body of research, I also make use of Dominick LaCapra's important analysis in this context.

¹⁴ In "Reading Woolson's Suicide," *The Bluestocking Bulletin*, Jun 8, 2013 (<https://anneboydrioux.com/2013/06/08/reading-woolsons-suicide>) Rioux attempts to explain Woolson's death by invoking an interesting parallel with Carolyn Heilbrun's suicide in 2003. "Rational suicide" and "the right to choose death" in the context of feminism were two of the attempted explanations of Heilbrun's violent death.

distraction, low self-worth) as a “kind of warrior battling with dark spirits.”¹⁵ Her depression is “this deadly enemy of mine.”¹⁶ Having crept his way into her, “*he* is master”—and she admonishes a friend to “not let *him* conquer you.”¹⁷ Starkly at odds with prevailing nineteenth-century figurations of women weakened by and ultimately victim to neurasthenia, Woolson’s self-representations here also appear to imbue her mental illness with the features of a stifling, smothering patriarchal tradition—an embodiment of the social constraints with which her fiction battles.

In what follows, I focus on Woolson’s most anthologized story, “Miss Grief” (first published in *Lippincott’s* in 1880), which can be considered as a full manifestation of her self-reflection in the figure of her homonymous heroine. The story is ostensibly about a male author attempting to rewrite female experience in order to domesticate its otherness and restore traditional literary order. We will see, however, how despite the narrator having pronounced her “mad,” “dejected” and exhibiting depressive traits, the heroine’s continuing oscillation between subordination and resistance to hegemonic masculinity throughout the story constitutes a guard against her depression and, what is most, ultimately forces him to acknowledge her difference rather than deny it altogether. It is precisely the heroine’s acceptance of the gendering of mental health and her concessive relation to social norms that gives her access to this privileged position and eventually results in the narrator’s change of perspective and acknowledgement of his gender bias. Rather than internalizing society’s unjust gender treatment, Woolson’s protagonist holds an ambivalent position in the process of historical othering and displacement from self-representation which, as I contend, outlines a tentative strategy of agential female subjectivity, creating new and transformative possibilities for anti-oppressive social change. I argue that Woolson’s account of female depression offers a valuable alternative to come to terms with the effects of gender discrimination so that they will be “reconfigured in ways that make them not entirely disabling.”¹⁸

Set in Rome, “Miss Grief” is narrated by a “smug, expatriated American writer,”¹⁹ who is confounded by the visits of a strange middle-aged woman whose name, Miss Aaronna Crief, he misreads as “Grief,” an

¹⁵ Rioux, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102, 101 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press 2001), 180.

¹⁹ Torsney, ““Miss Grief” by Constance Fenimore Woolson: Introduction,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 4.1 (1987): 11.

appellation that hints at her having likely been laid low by depression. When, after seven abortive visits, she is finally admitted to his home, “Miss Grief” explains she needs his assistance to get her play, “Armor,” published. In her manuscript, he discovers “the divine spark of genius” that he himself lacks, although he also detects “numerous and disfiguring” “dark spots,” which she stubbornly refuses to correct and which eventually form the basis of rejection from prospective publishers.²⁰ As Sigrid Anderson Cordell succinctly puts it, when the narrator attempts to “alter and improve” the manuscript himself in order to transform it into a marketable piece of work, he discovers it to be completely unrevisable.²¹ After some time has elapsed without his hearing any news from her, the narrator visits Grief’s abode only to find her on her deathbed. He thus lies to her, feigning that “Armor” is soon to be published. After her death, he keeps the story himself, burying the rest of her manuscripts with her as per her final instructions.

This marvellous tale, customarily considered, to quote Boyd, an “indictment of the male establishment for suppressing the voices of women writers,” presents a female author in stark juxtaposition to her male counterpart.²² She seems miserably forlorn and unhappy; she looks “shabby, unattractive and more than middle-aged” (273) while he is young and handsome, and, having acquired both social prominence and literary success, he has become self-satisfied and vain. She has nothing; he has everything. In her own words: “You were young—strong—rich—praised—loved—successful: all that I was not” (290). As for the narrator, he feels entitled to deride her appearance and sneer at her lack of social skills. He

²⁰ Constance Fenimore Woolson, “Miss Grief,” 279. All parenthetical references to the text come from Constance Fenimore Woolson, in *Scribbling Women. Short Stories by 19th-century American Women*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996): 271-91.

²¹ Sigrid Anderson Cordell, *Fictions of Dissent: Reclaiming Authority in Transatlantic Women’s Writing of the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 41.

²² Boyd, “Anticipating James, Anticipating Grief: Constance Fenimore Woolson’s “Miss Grief,”” in *Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Nineteenth Century: Essays*, ed. Victoria Brehm (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 191. In her biography on Woolson, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist* Rioux repeats the same critical opinion. She argues that “[N]o other story by a nineteenth-century American woman so powerfully dramatizes the yearning for literary recognition and the insurmountable obstacles women faced in pursuit of it” (124), adding that the surprise of the story is not so much “the woman writer’s failure and death” but “the male writer’s acknowledgement of her unconventional genius” (125).

calls her “eccentric and unconventional” (272) and reckons her having “sacrificed her womanly claims by her persistent attacks upon my door” (273). Likewise, he condescendingly refers to her as an “authoress” (276) and patronizes her by attempting to change, via the “sieve of [his] own good taste,” what he views to be the “barbarous shortcomings” in her work (279). As the story concludes, he admits to himself: she had “the greater power” of the two and that “the want of one grain made all her work void, and that one grain was given to me” (291). Nevertheless, despite this acknowledgment, his arrogant self-assurance and bias against women writers lead him to bury her manuscripts with her, condemning her legacy to total oblivion. The fact that the story is told through the eyes of the unnamed, unreliable narrator indicates that he has usurped not just her legacy but her voice too, her right to personally articulate her experience as a woman. Mediated by the male author, then, Miss Grief’s story seems one of “betrayal and exclusion.”²³ Moreover, accentuated by the narrator’s ironically insightful recognition of her state of low-level chronic grief, issues of gender discrimination are combined with culturally sanctioned symptoms, which allow the heroine’s distress to be positioned as a female malady.²⁴ Yet, as I contend, to the extent that, like her creator, Miss Grief does suffer from depression, her state should be viewed “as a social and cultural phenomenon,” and not as exclusively an “a biological or medical one.”²⁵ More importantly, like Miss Woolson’s, Miss Grief’s art is also an exercise in self-healing, a means to combat her depression.²⁶ Being an “authoress” in what was a male-dominated literary world and not being accepted in the highest rank of authors threatened Woolson (and Miss Grief) with a profound sense of powerlessness and vulnerability which emerges in her writing as the ambivalent exchange of complicity and resistance between the female self and an exclusionary patriarchal

²³ Boyd, “Anticipating James, Anticipating Grief,” 194.

²⁴ “She was a very depressing object to me” (276) the narrator says on their first encounter. He consistently misinterprets her name, “A. Crief” to “A. Grief” (278) adding more symptoms to her depressive state: “she has the evil eye” (278), “fragile, nerveless” (278), “thin,” “dejected” (279), “tearful” (283), exhibiting “alternations in manner” (283). Another misunderstanding that derives from her admittedly ambiguous in terms of gender first name is when she explains that her “father was much disappointed that I was not a boy, and gave me as nearly as possible the name he had prepared—Aaron” (283).

²⁵ Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 90.

²⁶ Again, unaware of his insightfulness, the narrator suggests the connection between Aaronna’s depressive state and her need to fight it, when he reads on the cover of her manuscript her name “A. Crief” and the title of the play “Armor” and comments “Grief certainly needs armor” (278).

society.²⁷ Woolson's constant negotiating between unveiling the social construction of ideas about gender inequality and collaboration in its maintenance must have produced a systemic, chronic pain associated with her depression. At the same time, the act of recreating imaginatively that which is not acceptable by conventional standards constitutes for her a survival strategy.

"Miss Grief" is not Woolson's only story depicting frustrated women artists forced to face the male literary world's deep-seated prejudices. Upon her arrival in Europe, she wrote two more stories involving American women artists in Europe who are silenced by a successful male writer or critic (who resembles Henry James). Moreover, unlike Aaronna Crief, who sacrifices marital life and, ultimately, her life to pursue her calling as a writer, both Katharine Winthrop in "At the Château of Corinne" (1880) and Ettie Macks, the heroine of "The Street of the Hyacinth" (1882) decide to marry their male mentors—whose proposals, in turn, hinge on their renouncing their artistic ambitions. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to critique these two stories in full, a passage from each merits our scrutiny. In these, we find a highly developed sense of male prejudice toward female creativity that both extends and complicates the discussions above.

In "At the Château of Corinne,"²⁸ Katharine Winthrop's male mentor and future husband, John Ford, seeks to dissuade his paramour from assuming her achievements might equal those of a male writer, arguing:

We do not expect great poems from women any more than we expect great pictures; we do not expect strong logic any more than we expect brawny muscle... For a woman should not dare in that way. Thinking to soar, she invariably descends.²⁹

Later in the story he further underscores women's inferiority:

²⁷ Linda Grasso, "Thwarted Life, Mighty Hunger, Unfinished Work: The Legacy of Nineteenth-Century Women Writing in America," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 8.2 (1994):97-118. "Many 'new women' writers...found that their newly-defined artistic endeavours were thwarted by two related sources: male colleagues who resented the threat of encroachment on their exclusive preserve, and male-dominated publishing industry."

²⁸ As the title suggests, the story is inspired by Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne* (1807), an early nineteenth-century female *Künstlerroman* in which the heroine sacrifices love in order to keep her independence and faith in creative power.

²⁹ Woolson, "At the Château of Corinne," in *Dorothy and Other Italian Stories* (New York: Harper, 1896), 267.

A woman of genius! And what is the very term but a stigma? No woman is so proclaimed by the great brazen tongue of the Public unless she has thrown away her birthright of womanly seclusion for the miserable mess of pottage called 'fame.'³⁰

A similar perspective emerges in "The Street of the Hyacinth," in which a male mentor persuades protagonist Ettie Macks, an aspiring visual artist, that she would be better off abandoning her artistic ambitions and marrying him instead. By way of consolation for her sacrifice, her husband remarks: "But the heights upon which you had placed yourself, my dear, were too superhuman."³¹

While "At the Château of Corinne" and "The Street of the Hyacinth" appear, at first glance, to indulge the social and aesthetic ideals of Woolson's late nineteenth-century audience and lay bare the gender biases that govern society, closer attention to these texts show them to be sophisticated critiques of misogynistic attitudes towards women's creative abilities. Doubtless, the critique is difficult to detect at the level of plot, as both female artists renounce their art and succumb to male expectations of womanly conduct.³² Accepting to marry these powerful men who support them financially provided that they agree to submit to the orthodoxies of the period, relinquishing the public world of the marketplace for the private world of domesticity can indeed be interpreted as a voluntary self-surrender, a form of internalized gendered oppression. Like Miss Aaronna Crief, these characters appear to comply with societal standards and eventually accept that the roles of woman and writer/artist are incompatible.³³ These outcomes, however, neither reflect Woolson's own doubts about women's capacity for creative genius nor do they imply what Cordell terms "act[s] of self-censorship that conforms to contemporary

³⁰ Ibid., 263.

³¹ In *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (New York: Harper, 1895), 193. All the stories comprising the volume, including "The Street of the Hyacinth," had been published previously.

³² For example, in her *Roman Fever: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), Annamaria Formichella Elsdén argues that in these three stories male artists and critics "seek to exorcize or subdue" Woolson's artistic characters (111).

³³ Max Nelson sees this cluster of stories as "worried stories, fantasies of judgment and rejection. They could only have been written by an author afraid of suffering the same verdicts their heroines receive." "Betrayed by Henry James," in *The New Republic*, March 1, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/130647/betrayed-henry-james>.

norms and expectations.”³⁴ These female artists are neither victims of exclusion from the artistic map nor evidence of Woolson’s own submission to the prevailing prejudice against literary women. They constitute efforts to represent female literary identity as the “site” of “dialogic aspiration,” which “not only works by realizing the subject roles...women were made to fulfil; it likewise rewrites these *allotted* subject positions as *elected* subject positions, resulting from the *coalition*.”³⁵

These statements, however, challenge much of the established scholarship around Woolson’s life and work. As Boyd has noted in *Writing for Immortality*, literary scholars tended to associate Woolson with the term “pioneer,” a designation that implicitly dismisses her “in a back-handed way”³⁶ “as an author who broke ground as a post-war realist but never achieved her full potential.”³⁷ Meanwhile, early biographers of the writer such as Rayburn S. Moore, conflated the views of Woolson’s male characters with those of the writer herself, arguing that she shared their “entire disbelief in the possibility of true and fiery genius in women” and was thus unable, herself, “to overcome the frailties of her sex.”³⁸ To a great extent, this dismissal by contemporary critics of Woolson’s creative abilities, and downplaying of her accomplishments, is merely an extension of Henry James’s own lack of encouragement during her lifetime.³⁹ James’s disparagement of her work is encapsulated by the views expressed in “Miss Woolson,” an essay first published in *The Atlantic* in 1886 and

³⁴ Cordell, *Fictions of Dissent: Reclaiming Authority in Transatlantic Women’s Writing*, 39.

³⁵ Qtd in María José Chivite de León’s *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities: Rewriting Alterity in J. M. Coetzee’s Foe and Marina Warner’s Indigo*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 32, 33.

³⁶ Boyd, *Writing for Immortality* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 238.

³⁷ Kevin E. O’Donnell, “Pioneers of Spoliation,” in *Witness to Reconstruction: Constance Fenimore Woolson and the Postbellum South, 1873-1894*, ed. Kathleen Diffley (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011): 277. O’Donnell argues, however, that Boyd does not take into account that the term “pioneer” might be connected with Woolson by association with her famous great-uncle, James Fenimore Cooper, whose best-known work is *The Pioneers*.

³⁸ Rayburn S. Moore, *Constance Fenimore Woolson* (New York: Twayne, 1963), n35 157, 74.

³⁹ Boyd claims that in “Miss Grief” Woolson sends her heroine to Europe and to James as “a partial representative of herself, ahead to encounter the derision she anticipated she herself might also face for being forward and unconventional.” In “Anticipating James, Anticipating Grief,” 200.

subsequently revised for inclusion in *Partial Portraits* two years later. Most likely out of concern for their friendship, James avoided any straightforward conclusion about Woolson's books in this essay.⁴⁰ Remarking that her work "breathes a spirit singularly and essentially conservative" (640) which he links with Woolson's belief in "personal renunciation" and a "predilection for cases of heroic sacrifice," James takes her fictional heroines' tendency for self-abnegation and sacrifice as Woolson's unstated conviction that women had "been by their very nature already too much exposed."⁴¹ This provides enough proof for James that "it would never occur to [Woolson] to lend her voice for the plea for further exposure—for a revolution which should place her sex in the thick of the struggle for power" (640), the implication being that Woolson was always narrowing her female subject positions in the roles prescribed to them. James's condescension becomes even more pronounced as he portrays Woolson as "merely a woman writer,"⁴² admitted "into the world of literature...in force" (639). He goes on to highlight those thematic concerns and stylistic options which he considers as typical of her gender and concludes by describing her fiction "as characteristic of the feminine, as distinguished from the masculine hand" (646).⁴³ Despite his "enigmatic doublespeak"⁴⁴ Woolson was perceptive enough to understand her friend's gender bias, realizing that "the only way she could make the

⁴⁰ Max Nelson, for example, in his article "Betrayed by Henry James" states: "Possibly worried about preserving their intimacy, James buried his doubts about [Woolson's] books behind layers of politeness and tact." Lyndall Gordon, on the other hand, insists that the article was "a betrayal" (234) "insidiously concealed in afterthoughts" (233) and gentle qualifications.

⁴¹ Henry James "Miss Woolson," 640, 641. Subsequent parenthetical references to James's essay come from "Miss Woolson," *Partial Portraits. Literary Criticism*, ed. Leon Edel. Vol. 1 (New York: The Library of America, 1984).

⁴² Rioux, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, 219.

⁴³ James had repeatedly expressed his disdain for women writers in his reviews of George Eliot and George Sand, which he now extended to include Woolson. In his notebook in 1886, he wrote contemptuously about the "scribbling, publishing, indiscreet, newspaperized American girl" whose desire for publicity was "one of the most striking signs of our times" (*Henry James, The Complete Notebooks*, 40, qtd in Rioux, 209). Their main "defect" was, according to James, their gender. As Alfred Habegger writes in *Henry James and the "Woman Business,"* James's "views of American women writers had a tone ranging from condescension to outrage" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

⁴⁴ Rioux, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, 211.

assertiveness of her bid for recognition palatable was to hide it behind the image of a private, traditional woman.”⁴⁵

However while this critical view of Woolson’s writing in James’s essay reflects, to an extent, his own prejudiced opinion of female literary ambitions,⁴⁶ it also reveals Woolson’s painful awareness that women’s self-assertion entails high costs. Against James’s contemptuous remarks of women’s entry into the literary profession, Woolson responds to the imperatives of gender stratification by “identitarian negotiation.”⁴⁷ For, Woolson’s depiction of women who exhibit at once dependency and self-determination, self-restraint and egotistic indulgence, prudence and boldness, and both a steadfast adherence to and defiance of the convention may ostensibly present conflicting attitudes towards women’s place in society. In fact, these portrayals suggest woman being in an endless process of self-formation, having to resort to subjectivities “whose

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ In highlighting the importance of the James-Woolson relationship to both writers, Gordon has analysed Woolson’s possible reaction to James’s essay on her work insisting that it must have been received as “a calculated betrayal,” it “carried an armoury of stings in its velvet glove,” in *A Private Life of Henry James*, 231. Gordon goes one step further accusing the male novelist of masking his own complicity in Woolson’s suicide first, by distancing her, and then, by widely spreading misleading accounts of her “suicidal mania, her diseased brain, her perversity,” not depression, but “*dementia*” (emphasis in the original, 306). “She was not, she was never, wholly sane,” James wrote one of their close mutual friends, the composer Francis Boott, after Woolson’s death: “I mean her liability to suffering was the *doom* of mental disease,” in *Henry James Letters*, vol. 3, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 463. On the other hand, in her biography of Woolson, Rioux examines more carefully the two versions of James’s piece, arguing that while the earlier version comes “close to the heart of her work” (211), the revised version is a “real betrayal” as he bluntly describes Woolson as a woman writer, “who is incapable of writing to the same standard as men” (219). The latter piece fulfilled her fear that “underneath the polite criticism lingered a deep-seated distaste for women acting on their literary ambitions” (220).

⁴⁷ Chivite de León, *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities*, 34. According to Dorothy J. Hale, James’s “dedication to developing the novel into a high art form is understood as part of a more general effort by nineteenth-century white male writers to make up in cultural capital what they were losing in sales.” She then quotes Michael Gilmore who claims that the ideological production of the aesthetic as a “discrete entity” was the “creation of white male fiction writers reacting against the commercial triumphs of the feminine novel.” Dorothy J. Hale, “Aesthetics and New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century,” *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions*, eds. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 315.

fragmentariness and alterity precondition their identitarian status.”⁴⁸ Following perhaps what was called the “evidence of felt intuition,”⁴⁹ Woolson must have sensed the cultural components of depression and used imaginative fiction to unfold new spaces for female existence (and ultimately survival).

Equally problematic may seem at first sight Woolson’s views as they are articulated in her correspondence. In a letter to James, for example, she writes that “A woman, after all, can never be a complete artist.”⁵⁰ Yet, as argued above, her female literary depictions do not unwittingly reproduce social hierarchies and power structures. My contention is that by revealing the unavoidable uncertainties arising from the conflicting demands of personal aspiration and social expectation, Woolson engages in a systematic destabilization of female identity that ultimately enables her to improvise a “plural” feminine self that exceeds societal expectations for women. To the extent that they recognize the disparity between individual longings and social actuality, her heroines seem capable of handling complex situations and make ethical choices that go beyond the simple choice between a life of emotional and financial independence and the more conventional options of marriage and motherhood. Katharine Winthrop, for example, in “At the Château of Corinne” is aware of the complexities of gender performance when she taunts John Ford, telling him that she “had only to pretend a little, to pretend to be the acquiescent creature you admire, and I could have turned you round my little finger” (270). Her terrible silence at the end of the story reveals the burden of her promise not to write again, to be an obedient “true woman” in exchange for Ford’s hand. Her decision, however, is based on having already been recognized as an accomplished poet who has published a highly acclaimed poem, anonymously. From this angle, the acknowledgment of her own differential paradoxes acquires extra value and agency. Similarly, Ettie Macks, the heroine of “The Street of the Hyacinth” derives a sense of self-empowerment in accepting her mentor’s marriage proposal in her own terms and time. Her ironic acknowledgement of differentiability gives her the power to become the weaver of her own story. In their own way, both heroines move beyond the confines of self and social world and also triumphantly in control of their emotional togetherness.

According to Rioux, in the case of “Miss Grief” Woolson “channelled her grief over her mother’s loss and her anxieties about fully embracing

⁴⁸ Chivite de León, *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities*, 33.

⁴⁹ Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 122.

⁵⁰ Woolson, Feb. 12, 1882, in *The Complete Letters of Constance Fenimore Woolson*, ed. Sharon L. Dean (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 188.

the identity of an ambitious author” (123). In addition to being a semi-autobiographical account of Woolson’s own internal unrest and emotional turmoil, the novella conveys the author’s creative resistance to male institutions and aesthetic standards. Read in this light, the text uncovers Woolson’s effort to cope with prescribed cultural scripts that emotionally entrap her productively. Rather than promoting an aggressive disruption of gender categories, “Miss Grief” offers a more nuanced, more complex representation of female identity, one that is plural and polyvalent, open to difference and ambiguity. For example, both the author and her heroine do not appear as threats toward their literary male counterparts but assume a very subtle attitude, one that projects a female identity fully conscious of its pluralities, ambiguities but also contradictions. Compare the two cases, one biographical, and the other fictional: In her February 12, 1882, letter to Henry James, Woolson uses the phrase “admiring aunt” to describe her intimate relationship with the Master. She writes, “But you do not want to know the little literary women. Only the great ones—like George Eliot. I am not barring myself out here, because I do not come in as a literary woman at all, but as a sort of *admiring aunt*. I think that expresses it.”⁵¹ Almost entirely, Woolson’s letters to James cleverly hide her literary ambition, while references to her work constantly describe it as “small” or “little.”⁵² Woolson, almost uncannily reiterates the same attitude, using the same term in the novella, when the unnamed narrator of “Miss Grief” positions her as an “aunt,” given their age difference and her admiration of his work. Tellingly, like her heroine, she is ready to diminish herself out of fear of generating feelings of rivalry, suspicion, and antagonism. Finally, at the heart of the novella must have been the female author’s fear that her lack of access to the narrator’s education, resources, and social status has indeed damned her to artistic inferiority. Simultaneously “othered and agent of [her] own identitarian negotiations within the symbolic order,”⁵³ coping with social discourses and submitting to them Miss Aaronna Crief engages in constant negotiation with dominant representation. Lacking stable female substance, she embodies a paradoxical identity. As Dorri Beam succinctly points out, quoting Woolson’s text, “We might as well

⁵¹ *Henry James Letters*, 528 (emphasis added). In her biography of James, *A Private Life of Henry James*, Gordon points out that Woolson “was only three years older than James, yet she pretended to be aged, fat, and unapproachable” (184-85).

⁵² Rioux, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, 159.

⁵³ Chivite de León, *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities*, 34.

ask, with the wondering narrator, what is the nature of Grief's 'little pantomime. Comedy? Or was it a tragedy?'"⁵⁴

Moreover, it is worth retracing Miss Grief's intrusion into the bachelor narrator's life, her guileless demands on his time and aggressive insistence on recognition. Such an attitude clearly suggests Aaronna's effort to cultivate hopefulness and self-worth given the limited scope of her choices. In each of these four encounters with her mentor, Woolson's heroine exhibits a mixture of self-assurance and uncertainty, vulnerability and diffidence, an awareness but also earnest indifference towards her artistic power that make it impossible for the reader to categorize her experience either as an expression of female victimization or articulation of female difference. Moreover, in spite of Grief's mediated voice and subjectivity throughout the narrative, the impact of her ambiguous personality and manuscripts on the narrator remains strong, influencing the power relations between the two. This ambiguity and resistance to coherent interpretation has broader ramifications in its testing of clear gender roles and delineated boundaries. For example, when he first meets Grief, the narrator is confounded by her fragile appearance and selfless modesty, which contrasts starkly with her confidence in her writing abilities. After reading her play, he is startled by her simultaneous need for his approval and obstinate refusal to revise the manuscript. "There shall not be so much as a comma altered," she says "softly and still smiling" (282). His inability to pin down the nature of her indeterminate identity as it slips from humility to determination unsettles his established notions of gender roles. While he considers her lack of social skills unwomanly, her artistic superiority, in turn, renders him unable to feel altogether manly. Thus, her writing competence, in fact unsettles both characters' ability to comfortably inhabit their assigned gender roles—as attested by his foppish blustering: "I did not know what to do, but, putting myself in her place, I decided to praise the drama; and praise I did. I do not know when I have used so many adjectives" (280). Ironically, while he claims to assert himself as "an anti-hysteric," he responds to her dignified and self-controlled manner with a "cataract of language," a "verbal Niagara" (280). Miss Grief's brilliant text thus undermines his authority and results in a curious inversion of roles. Clearly, this destabilizing process of established sexual and literary codes and mores—what Beam calls "queering of

⁵⁴ Beam, "Henry James, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and the Figure in the Carpet," 140.

categories”—opens up room for the transformation of subordination into resistance through the refusal of reduction to the place of victimization.⁵⁵

This role inversion is repeated in the contrasting gender mobility of the two protagonists: it is the narrator who receives Aaronna Crief’s calls, and it is she who visits his domestic space. “I prefer to come to you,” Miss Crief firmly repeats twice in the course of the narrative (278, 282). Not only her physical comings and goings irrespective of weather conditions or social decorum help Aaronna fight her feeling frustrated about her failure to achieve personal success, but they implicitly undermine the notion of domestic privacy and women’s confinement within the home and disrupt established ideas of male mobility and independence.⁵⁶

Moreover, after his initial efforts to impose canonical aesthetic judgments of the male literary elite on her manuscripts (“for writers are...apt to make much of the ‘how,’ rather than the ‘what’” 279), the narrator is obliged to admit that they are above such criticism. Thus he remarks that “the papers before me” are “Kubla Khan, only more so” (284). Indeed, “they [are] simply unrestrained, large, vast, like the skies or the wind” (287). Aaronna Crief’s uncanny vacillation between obstinacy and compliance, agency and complicity, results in the narrator’s own gradual recognition of the self as both permeable and open to change. Woolson dramatizes this transformation of power relations between her two protagonists in the tale’s conclusion, when their positions have been totally reversed. In this final scene, Miss Crief receives for her work “the appreciative and full, almost overfull, recognition” she has given him in their first encounter (275). She is fulfilled and satisfied. “I have never known what it was...to be so fully happy until now,” she claims (289). She may not yet achieved commercial success, but she has gained the narrator’s ardent admiration and uncompromising approval. Thus, instead of subordinating differences and conflicts into a homogenized self, Aaronna Crief is able to live with her contradictions. In doing so, she does

⁵⁵ Beam argues that critical readings of Woolson’s “Miss Grief” as a “lesbian story” lie in her “queering of categories” rather than in the tale’s lesbian subtext (148).

⁵⁶ In her article “Teacups and Love Letters: Constance Fenimore Woolson and Henry James,” Victoria Coulson makes a detailed analysis of the pattern established in the mobility of tea-makers and guests. The tea ceremonies, albeit different in symbolism in Woolson and James, enact a mute heterosexual exchange: “the hostess is capable only of an immobile appeal from her position at the table, but her guest controls his arrivals and disappearances” (89). This heterosexual ceremony is interrupted in “Miss Grief,” with the heroine assuming the role of her mobile guest.

not accept the established social and gender conventions of her period, which ascribe her an inferior position as a woman and a writer. Rather, her peculiar practice of agency involves implicitly refusing male value systems and institutions and sets into motion an effective resistance for the disruption of gender norms. Woolson's emphasis on the heroines' negotiations of gender inequality and social desire registers the history of depression implicitly, capturing simultaneously how depression feels and providing an analysis of why and how its feelings are produced by social forces. Woolson's stories about writers and artists ought to be read not as narratives of feminine submission or resignation but as pluralistic narrative spaces that make resistant agency possible and provide an escape from culture-bound depression.

Having enjoyed a "bitter" triumph, Woolson allows Aaronna Crief to die of natural causes. Yet, she reserves for herself the choice of voluntary death. Indeed, Woolson's suicide poses a "hermeneutic problem,"⁵⁷ too elusive and confrontational to interpret indisputably. For one, Woolson's decision to will her own death seemed paradoxical to Henry James. James misinterpreted her act attributing it to "sudden *dementia*" "some misery of insomnia pushed to nervous momentary frenzy" explaining to his brother, William, that his friend had a "disposition which sprang in its turn from a constitutional, an essentially, tragic and latently insane *difficulty in living*."⁵⁸ James's sense of propriety would forbid such an "irresponsible" act, especially coming from a woman expected to endure the numbing effects of normative white middle-class life. Surely, at the time of her death, she suffered from headaches, anxiety, insomnia, she felt vulnerable and economically insecure, but to underestimate her woman's plight in bourgeois society is to deny the voluntary nature of such a radical act, her urge to become the protagonist of her own life story. Her death constitutes a performative utterance producing the effects that it names, a volitional and singular act which "enables the formation of a subject," to use Judith Butler's words. Obviously, in spite of his perceptive imagination and sensitivity, James had fallen victim of Victorian stereotypes about the feminine propensity to madness and suicide.⁵⁹ "Indeed, it is startling, says

⁵⁷ Higonet, "Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century," *Poetics Today* 6. 1 (1985), 116. Elsewhere she notes, "To embrace death is at the same time to read one's own life" (104).

⁵⁸ Rioux, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, 310-11 (emphasis in the original). See also footnote 46.

⁵⁹ See Rioux, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, 313 for Alice James's illness. James must have projected to Woolson his understanding of his sister's illness. But the two women only have superficial likenesses.

Margaret Higonnet, “to realize the extent to which the nineteenth century feminized suicide.”⁶⁰

Today, however, with a growing number of cultural critics and experts emphasizing the complex etiology of depression, it is worth exploring the interconnectedness of gender discrimination with depression, to evaluate the effects of gender-related limitations to female wellbeing and happiness. Whether the language of trauma is used or not, Woolson’s tormented and anguished self is encoded in the content of her texts but also in the reality of her death. As Cvetkovich has put it, depression does not allow one to engage fully with the scenes of one’s own desire until it is too often—for this question, that opportunity—too late.⁶¹

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⁶⁰ Margaret Higonnet “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,” 105.

⁶¹ Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 18.

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