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"The Windings and Turnings of Fictitious Pathology" Reading *Jupiter Lights* as a Proto-Lesbian Novel

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Though the work of Constance Fenimore Woolson was generally well received during her lifetime, the publication of her novel *Jupiter Lights* provoked some scathing criticism. Perhaps the most vehement review by Horace Scudder complained that Woolson had depicted "a conspiracy against a sane, wholesome experience of life" and that she had fallen "farther and farther away from the larger pictures of life into the windings and turnings of fictitious pathology."¹ In fairness to Scudder and the other negative reviewers, they are no doubt responding at least in part to the novel's undeniable penchant for over-the-top melodrama. However, their discomfort with the book clearly goes far deeper than simple annoyance at what another critic called "third-rate" writing.² Scudder's accusations of "wearisomeness," "irrationality," and especially "pathology" seem directed more at the novel's unconventionality than at its sensationalism, and this is not surprising given that *Jupiter Lights* challenges so many of the norms by which nineteenth-century standards of a "wholesome experience of life" were constituted.

In her essay "Romantic Love and Wife-Battering in Constance Fenimore Woolson's *Jupiter Lights*," Caroline Gebhard discusses some of these challenges, demonstrating that the novel is a "strange" book in part because of the ways it borrows from and then violates two popular literary traditions, the temperance novel and the "female gothic." But she also points to two other peculiar features to explain the novel's aesthetic "problems": its ultimately unsuccessful attempt to incorporate the theme of wife-battering into the "romance genre" and the "disquieting...love-hate relationship between [Eve and Cicely]." Gebhard identifies the "triangulation of desire" that exists between Eve and Cicely through various male figures in the text, noting that this structure inverts Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's paradigm of male homosocial desire.³ She observes that Eve "symbolically take[s] the place of her brother, caus[ing] the death of the male who has taken possession of the woman" and that the gun represents her "usurpation of phallic power." Drawing on theory by Judith Butler, Gebhard explains this triangulation of desire as Eve's need to achieve heterosexual love through a narcissistic attraction to beautiful women; in other words, Eve's homoerotic attraction to Cicely is as much a desire to *be* her as it is a desire *for* her. However, the text ultimately "repudiates" the lesbian desire between women—both through Cicely's own figurative battering of Eve and Eve's heterosexual union with Paul—in order to "shore up the normative heterosexual identity of the hero" and perhaps even "her creator."⁴

I think Gebhard's observations are very much on the mark – but I would like to add to them by suggesting that these "windings and turnings" of desire may seem less peculiar in light of recent lesbian narrative theory, and that the narrative's repudiation of female homoerotic desire may result more from Woolson's need to conform to the heterosexual romance plot than from her own homophobic anxieties regarding the homoeroticism between Eve and Cicely. Embedded in the "failed" heterosexual romance plot of *Jupiter Lights* is a "proto-lesbian" narrative structure that accounts for many of the story's inconsistencies and adds yet another reason why Woolson's mostly male critics rejected the novel so vehemently.

Lesbian narrative theorists have all in various ways looked at the relationship between lesbian novels and the conventional heterosexual plot in their attempts to identify and define what constitutes a "lesbian narrative." While disagreement exists as to what types of narrative we can or should call "lesbian," all seem to agree that early lesbian writers found the heterosexual plot a difficult, if not impossible, one to get around because of its strong ideological hold. As Rachel Duplessis has suggested, "narrative structure and subjects

are like working apparatuses of ideology," dictating "what is felt to be narratable by both literary and social conventions."⁵ Julie Abraham argues that because of these conventions late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century lesbian plots "were consistently constructed out of—through, around, against—heterosexual plots." According to Abraham, this happens in one of two ways: either through "'triangulation,' in which two women become sexually connected through a man, who may or may not be a lover of one (or both) of them," or by mimicking heterosexual plots by forcing a "masculine" woman to take the male role. Either way, "after the connection between two women is established, the formula of the lesbian novel is completed by some punishment, because heterosexual plots produce heterosexual endings," and the punishment is usually marriage or death for one of the women involved."⁶

The relationship between Eve and Cicely is not explicitly sexual, which is why I have chosen to call *Jupiter Lights* a "proto-lesbian" rather than a "lesbian" novel; however, with the exception of explicit sex, Woolson's narrative delivers all the elements of early lesbian narrative that Abraham and others have identified: Eve and Cicely develop a very homoerotic relationship through their connection to Eve's brother Jack, and also baby "Jacky," and that relationship in turn mimics heterosexuality as Eve assumes a "masculine" and protective role toward Cicely. Both women are then "punished" in the end – Eve through guilt over shooting Ferdie and her impending marriage to Paul, and Cicely through her debilitating grief and widowhood. Still, for a short time, the novel clearly flirts with the possibility of a lesbian "marriage" between Eve and Cicely.

Eve initially dislikes Cicely immensely, but their relationship soon takes on an unmistakably erotic charge as it gradually turns into a love-hate attraction that is alternately tender and masochistic. As Gebhard and Joan Weimer have noted, these mixed feelings seem to be tied very closely to Eve's feelings for her brother. Though Jack Bruce is already dead as the narrative opens, we are given enough information to understand that the relationship between Eve and her brother surpassed ordinary sibling affection, at least on Eve's part.⁷ Eve had even gone so far as to set up house with Jack in England in an arrangement she expected to be permanent; therefore, meeting Cicely is like meeting a rival for her brother's affection. But Eve's masculine identification suggests that her attraction to her brother is more than just repressed incestuous desire and adds yet another level of complexity to the homoerotic dynamic Gebhard identifies in Eve and Cicely's relationship. Eve doesn't just desire Jack, she desires to *be* Jack, which explains why she frequently displays so many "masculine" qualities throughout the narrative. She is strong, cool and rational in contrast to Cicely's feminine weakness and dependence. Thus, the part of Eve that desired her brother jealously rejects Cicely, but the part that desires to *be* her brother is curiously drawn to the woman who was his wife and lover. As Gebhard observes, Eve's complex feelings for her brother get transferred onto Cicely and the narrative imagines – at least temporarily – the possibility of Eve's taking her brother's place as "husband" to Cicely and "father" to Jacky.

Eve's initial dislike for Cicely begins to change on Christmas night, after a scene between the two women that can only be read as one of seduction. Cicely comes to Eve late that evening, and says to her "you haven't touched your hair, nor unbuttoned a button...I should love to see you with your hair down; I should love to see you run and shriek!" (88).⁸ She leads Eve to an old moonlit ballroom and then disappears momentarily. When she returns, she is wearing a seductive "old-fashioned ball dress made of lace interwoven with silver threads and decked with little silvery stars." Apparition-like, Cicely begins to dance, "moving over the moonlit floor" with a piece of white gauze "blowing out in front of her, now waving behind her as she flew along." Then:

Suddenly she let it drop, and coming to Eve, put her arms around her waist and forced her forward. Eve resisted. But Cicely's hands were strong, her hold tenacious; she drew her sister-in-law down the room in a wild gallopade. In the midst of it, giving a little jump, she seized Eve's comb. Eve's hair, already loosened, fell down on her shoulders. (40).

Many elements of this strange scene have obvious sexual implications, especially Cicely's invitation to Eve to "let her hair down." Cicely's homoerotic seduction marks the beginning of Eve's sexual awakening, the success of which becomes apparent the next morning. Eve is "puzzled...[because] she had thought [Cicely]...a passionless, practical little creature...whose miniature beauty led poor Jack astray" (41). The implication is that Eve has changed her mind about Cicely: she now understands what attracted Jack to Cicely because she herself has been erotically seduced by the same woman.

Eve's feelings for Cicely grow stronger when Cicely tells her of Ferdie's abuse. Not long after the ballroom scene, Cicely comes to Eve and confesses that she has "changed her mind" about telling her secret. She

lets a shawl fall from her shoulder, revealing “a long purple scar, and a second one over her delicate shoulder.” Cicely’s eyes are “proud and brilliant,” indicating a hint of sadomasochism; her scar, though a symbol of violence, remains a concrete manifestation of her connection to Ferdie. But it also serves to further her seduction of Eve. The shawl falling from Cicely’s shoulder recalls the white gauze falling from her hand during the ballroom scene, but this time it reveals her “white breast.” Like the ballroom scene, this too is filled with erotic suggestion. Cicely is now undressed and in effect submits herself to Eve by exposing the secret of her abusive marriage. Eve is horrified by the sight of the scar, and “take[s] [Cicely] in her arms protectingly” [sic](78).

At this point, Cicely’s seduction of Eve is complete, and Eve assumes the “masculine” role of her protector, which is played out most obviously the night Ferdie gets drunk and threatens Cicely and the baby with a knife. Eve’s calm, cool handling of the situation, her physical strength, and of course the phallic pistol that subdues Ferdie’s knife, all emphasize the masculine role she plays in her relationship with Cicely, which is later confirmed by Paul’s praise of her “manly” handling of the escape. Their newly configured “lesbian” family is also symbolically suggested by Eve’s placement of little Jack in Cicely’s arms once they reach the other side of the lake. Prior to this, she had been very possessive of the child, keeping him from Cicely whenever possible, and had noticed that Cicely never took the baby directly from her. However, at this point she gives him up willingly, as if it is the natural thing to do. Her role as Jack’s replacement becomes manifest in the physical connection created between Cicely, the baby and herself.

Eve and Cicely grow more distant as Eve’s relationship with Paul develops and the lesbian narrative gives way to the more conventional heterosexual plot. The triangle of desire with female homoeroticism at its base is subverted by the conventional male homosocial structure when Eve is figuratively placed between Hollis and Paul – a close male relationship that has its own tinge of homoeroticism. Eve’s tormenting guilt over shooting Ferdie and her capitulation to Paul, which Gebhard suggests “is symbolically figured as a rape,” serve as the “punishment” for her “lesbian” desire; Cicely’s mental breakdown and widowhood serve as the punishment for hers. Thus, the possibility of a “lesbian” family is extinguished and the novel’s reflection of early twentieth-century lesbian narratives is complete.

What is the significance of recognizing this lesbian narrative pattern in Woolson?

Two years ago in *St. Augustine*, I suggested that Woolson’s short stories “Felipa” and “Miss Grief” contain strong evidence of her interest in lesbian themes and that acknowledging this interest goes a long way in explaining many of the perceived “flaws” or “impossibilities” in her other writing.⁹ *Jupiter Lights* was the most obvious example I had in mind. Identifying the proto-lesbian narrative at the novel’s core adds further evidence to the idea that Woolson wrote with what some critics have called a “lesbian sensibility.” According to Lillian Faderman, such a sensibility often includes, “a jaundiced look at heterosexual institutions such as marriage, a yearning for agency and independence – coupled with a determined flexibility in the conception of gender roles...[a] gaze that falls lovingly on the female image and [a] blurred presentation of the male image.”¹⁰ Of course, this idea must be used cautiously – especially with a writer like Woolson for whom we have no unequivocal evidence of a lesbian sexual orientation or relationship.¹¹ One might also argue that many of these characteristics associated with a “lesbian sensibility” are generally feminist and not necessarily lesbian as they often appear in the writing of heterosexually-identified women. However, I think that when all of them are combined in the case of a woman writer for whom no heterosexual romantic tie can be established – as is the case with Woolson – then we must give the possibility that she wrote with a “lesbian sensibility” serious consideration.

I am not suggesting that in conceiving *Jupiter Lights* Woolson set out deliberately to write a disguised lesbian romance, but that the heterosexual romance novel was a genre she was deeply uncomfortable writing – and a “lesbian sensibility” might explain the reason. If the real stories Woolson wanted to tell were those of “a woman’s adoration for another woman” – to use her own phrase to describe the theme of Alice Perry’s *Esther Pennefather* – she knew that such stories were not taken seriously during her era.¹² One contemporary reviewer of *Esther Pennefather* complained that the book “is hardly strong enough to carry the abnormal characters which abound in it.”¹³ Yet, my sense is that despite Woolson’s awareness that such a theme would never garner commercial or critical success, she was unable to suppress it completely in many of her novels, and in *Jupiter Lights* especially – so the theme of “a woman’s adoration of another woman” pushes against the surface, against the conventions of the nineteenth-century heterosexual romance plot—thus helping to explain the relative aesthetic “failure” of Woolson’s novels in relation to her short stories since the short story as a genre does not rely upon the heterosexual romance plot in the way that the novel does.

I would like to suggest that applying lesbian criticism and theory to Woolson – as I’ve done with *Jupiter Lights* – could continue to prove useful in explaining many of Woolson’s texts, and that we might begin to think about Woolson in relation to lesbian and bisexual women writers, not just of her own generation but of successive generations as well. Woolson scholars have discussed Woolson’s relationship to nineteenth-century women writers and feminist concerns at length¹⁴; however, Woolson’s connections to other “queer” writers (with the exception of James) remains a largely unexplored territory that could prove a critical boon for Woolson studies. I see striking parallels between Woolson and Willa Cather—for example, *Jupiter Lights* shares much in common with Cather’s *O Pioneers!*—specifically, a strong, masculine-identified female protagonist, who vicariously lives through her brother and develops a homoerotic attraction to his lover, only to reject that attraction and end up in a contrived marriage at the novel’s conclusion.¹⁵ And a more recent lesbian novel with fascinating parallels to *Jupiter Lights* is Fanny Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1988). The same brother-sister dynamic and lesbian narrative structure operates in this book, too, except that the “punishment” at the end is not marriage but death for one of the “lesbian” protagonists.¹⁶ These are just two examples that come immediately to mind – but I am sure there are more to be discovered.

The most obvious potential pay-off of such comparisons for Woolson scholars is that they might give us more insight into Woolson and her writing, but I think there is potential gain for scholars more generally interested in issues related to gender and sexuality as well. Woolson’s life-span makes her a pivotal figure in the history of modern sexuality and the formation of sexual identities, and as such she can tell us something about how American cultural perspectives regarding gender and sexuality evolved, and also about the relationship of these elements to genre and literary aesthetics.

Notes

- ¹ {Review of *Jupiter Lights*}. *Atlantic Monthly* 65 (January 1890): 126-128. Excerpted and reprinted in *Critical Essays on Constance Fenimore Woolson*, Cheryl B. Torsney, ed. (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992), 52.
- ² {Anonymous Review of *Jupiter Lights*}. *Nation* (March 1890): 225. Rpt. in Torsney, *Critical Essays on Constance Fenimore Woolson*, 54.
- ³ Sedgwick’s theory appears in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- ⁴ Gebhard’s essay is forthcoming in *Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Nineteenth Century: Essays*, Victoria Brehm, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2001). She was kind enough to send me a copy of the unpublished manuscript and to provide me with helpful constructive criticism on this essay.
- ⁵ *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 3.
- ⁶ *Are Girls Necessary? Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 5-6. Other discussions of the relationship between lesbian narrative and the heterosexual plot appear in Marilyn R. Farwell’s *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), and Terry Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), chapter 4.
- ⁷ Joan Myers Weimer suggests that Eve is “tormented by her incestuous passion for her father, her brother, and her brother’s son.” See her Introduction to *Women Artists, Women Exiles: “Miss Grief” and Other Stories* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988), xli, n.9.
- ⁸ Page numbers cited parenthetically are from *Jupiter Lights*. 1889. (New York: AMS Press, 1971).
- ⁹ This paper, in expanded form and titled “The Lesbian ‘Impossibilities’ of Miss Grief’s ‘Armor,’” is forthcoming in *Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Nineteenth Century: Essays*, Victoria Brehm, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001).
- ¹⁰ Lillian Faderman, *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 443-444.
- ¹¹ While there is no unequivocal evidence that Woolson had a lesbian sexual orientation, there is considerable circumstantial evidence, which I outline in “The Lesbian ‘Impossibilities’ of Miss Grief’s ‘Armor.’” Woolson’s connection with John Addington Symonds and other homosexuals in Europe suggests that Woolson had both knowledge of and comfort with homosexuality, if not necessarily in herself, then certainly in others. She was also close to Alice James and Katharine Loring, whose relationship was suspected of being lesbian by the James family. Her review of *Esther Pennefather*, discussed below, adds strong textual evidence for her interest in women’s “adoration” of other women, as does her short story “Felipa.” Thus, I suggest that the “strange

intimacy” between Woolson and James may have resulted in part because of an empathetic understanding of each other’s homosexual inclinations.

¹² Woolson’s review of *Esther Pennefather* appeared anonymously in the “Contributor’s Club” section of the *Atlantic Monthly* (October 1878), 502-503. Though she found some aspects of the book “utterly ridiculous,” she defended the theme of “a woman’s adoration of another woman.”

¹³ *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 57 (1878), 468.

¹⁴ See, for example, Weimer’s Introduction, Cheryl Torsney’s *Constance Fenimore Woolson: The Grief of Artistry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), and Sharon Dean’s *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Homeward Bound* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

¹⁵ I have also found several lesbian critical perspectives of Cather easily transferable to much of Woolson’s writing, especially Judith Fetterley’s essay, “*My Antonia*, Jim Burden, and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer,” in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow, eds. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1990), 145-163, and Marilee Lindemann’s *Willa Cather: Queering America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Their approaches are different (Lindemann’s is culturally/historically based), but both argue that Cather’s lesbianism influenced her writing in profound ways and accounts for various oddities and inconsistencies in her work.

¹⁶ Time prevents me from elaborating more fully on the comparisons between Woolson, Cather and Flagg. Obviously, there are differences among these novels as well, but I see the same basic structure inherent in all three.