CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON AND THE NEXT COUNTRY

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Mark Twain wrote:

The eight years in America from 1860-1868 uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations. (in Pattee 6)

Now, three or four generations later perhaps we can begin to look at the changes that Mark Twain was talking about. Twain is one of the few who can be called regionalists to survive in the American canon after World War II. Constance Fenimore Woolson on the other hand, although acclaimed in her own time, is now little known outside select academic circles. However, scholars of her own native Western Reserve may want to begin to know more about her and her work as it receives more national attention in the scholarly re-evaluation of the canon, especially as the place of women authors and of so-called marginal genres like local color become central concerns.

Therefore, one productive way to approach Mark Twain’s suggestion and consider some of the effects of the Civil War as felt in the literature of America is to study the writings of Constance Fenimore Woolson, the most prominent of regional authors writing between 1830 and 1880 who hailed from the Western Reserve, specifically to study her two short stories set in Zoar, Ohio, "Solomon" and "Wilhelmina." I will examine her treatment of two of the literary and political/historical issues of importance in the post-war years, the issues of multiplicity and unity, and authority and freedom.

In the first two decades after the Civil War, America was essentially a new country struggling to create unity between its divided parts. This push toward unity was aided by the rise of industrialism and moves to the city. While rapid travel and communication made it possible to know about all the diverse areas of the United States, they simultaneously threatened that diversity. The tensions of this age were felt nowhere more deeply than in what is now called the Midwest. Howard Mumford Jones writes:

The striking and in a sense quintessentially "American" fact about the Middle West was the unparalleled rapidity with which in three generations it passed from being a wilderness into a predominantly agrarian culture . . . and then into becoming the industrial heartland of the United States. (70)

This period of rapid change encouraged nostalgia in the country too, for how was someone who was raised in the first half of the century supposed to live in this second half? Regional fiction, including local color, served to indulge this nostalgia and to preserve this diversity. Hugh Holman in A Handbook to Literature defines local color as:

Writing which exploits the speech, dress, mannerisms, habits of thought, and topography peculiar to a certain region . . . local color writing exists primarily for the portrayal of the people and life of a geographical setting. (249)
Some of the more familiar writers and works of local color include Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871), Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1868), and Mary Wilkins Freeman's *A New England Nun* (1891). Many of these works of local color idealized the pastoral and the rural, memorialized a vanishing kind of American life and recorded the regional accents that were melding together as people jammed and jammered next to each other on urban factory lines.

On the surface, Woolson's "Solomon" and "Wilhelmina" seem to adhere to Holman's definition. One might term them realistic as a result of their concern with versimilitude of detail, but criticize them as bordering on the romantic because of their nostalgic and even anachronistic portrayal of rural life. But, as in so many of her works, Woolson in "Solomon" and "Wilhelmina" uses her chosen forms to show irony. The genre of local color in Woolson's expert hands offers realism of a minute kind that manages never to lose its focus on larger issues. Her settings and characters never become so localized that they fail to represent larger communities and universal aspects of human nature.

In the two stories here discussed, the unified, idealistic, pastoral community of Zoar not only offers shelter from the bustle of growing cities like Cleveland, but also threatens to crush the lives it is responsible for. While it may be unified by a central authority, that unity can itself be dangerous, since it stifles creativity and individuality. In fact at the end of these two stories we see that Zoar is not a Happy Valley where one can escape into an imagined past, but is, in fact, a microcosm where all of the stresses of the larger world are only magnified.

The Zoarites of both history and Woolson's fiction fled Germany in 1817 to find religious freedom in America. They stopped first in Pennsylvania, then after purchasing land on the banks of the Tuscarawas River, walked much of the way to found their town, where they created a highly successful example of communal living. Families lived together but wealth, work, and care for children and the elderly were divided equally until internal discord caused the community to disband in 1898, four years after Woolson's death.

Growing up in a prominent businessman's family in Cleveland from 1840-1870, apparently Woolson found in Zoar a retreat for the body and the imagination. In a letter to her nephew Samuel Mather, Woolson once wrote:

I see now it was the romantic side of my father's nature that was pleased with the little Tuscarawas community--father had so much romance. It had so little to feed upon in Ohio. (Benedict 48)·

This quality of isolation from the city and commerce would make Zoar appear to be the natural setting for a local colorist of the 1870s, for here was a community unified by a central religious authority in a country now divided and driven more by materialism than spirituality.

The first piece Woolson ever published uses the Zoar setting very much in this way. "The Happy Valley" published in *Harper's*, July 1870 is a sketch, rather than a short story, which describes the beauty, simplicity and peace of the area as enjoyed by the author, her father and her sister. In "Solomon" and "Wilhelmina," however, she puts the setting to much more complex and even ironic use.

The story "Solomon" first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* October, 1873, considers the visit of cousins Dora and Erminia, sophisticated city women, to the Zoarite community and their acquaintance with the coalminer-artist Solomon and his once-beautiful wife Dorcas.
women consider the community a retreat, a place where they can, as they put it, "play at shepherdesses and pastorallas." (239) They go to Solomon's house in search of the sulfur water they hear can be obtained there. They meet his wife and discover her love of finery through her keen interest in the styles of their clothing. But up in a loft of the house is something more beautiful, the rough but promising art of Solomon. All of the works depict his wife in the costumes of Biblical or historical women. She tells them that she was the beauty of a small town when Solomon, "a Lake County man, born near Painesville" (248), who lived for a time with the separatists, rode in to sell wood. When he saw her, he fell in love immediately. He tried at first to make a living by selling his art but had to return to the community and coal mining.

A few days after this initial introduction, the women return to the house, are detained by a rainstorm, and spend the night with the artist and his wife. While Dorcas prepares the best dinner she can, Emminia, who has taken years of art instruction but has no innate talent, teaches Solomon the rudiments of perspective and shading. A day or two later the women hear that Solomon has been killed in a mining accident. They quickly go to his house where he has been carried and find him not dead but unconscious in his loft with his wife attending him. There with him is an unfinished sketch he began after Emminia's lesson, a sketch which shows the full promise of the artist he might have been. Dorcas dies shortly after her husband and leaves instructions for Solomon's final sketch to be sent to Emminia.

Fifteen months after the publication of "Solomon" followed the second story set in Zoar, "Wilhelmina." The narrator calls herself a "romantic wife" who has come to Zoar during the Civil War for the solitude and finds a local romance that forms the subject of her narrative. Wilhelmina, a young woman of the community, is in love with Gustav who has defied the elders and enlisted in the Union army. When he returns, having seen the world, he no longer shares Wilhelmina's feelings. He is in love with a woman from one of the cities; he still refuses to sign the articles of the community, and soon leaves again. Wilhelmina marries the man her father prefers for her, Jacob the baker, a widower with several children for whom he desires a mother. After returning to Cleveland, the narrator learns of the marriage. When she retreats to Zoar again the next summer she finds that Wilhelmina, who wanted something more from marriage than a utilitarian relationship has, as her informer puts it, "gone to the next country," and that Jacob has married a third time. The narrator visits the grave of the gardener's daughter, distinguished from the barrenness of the others in the burial ground by its ornament of a rosebush.

These two stories defy conventions of the period through their refusal to indulge in nostalgia, in their refusal to be simple. Ostensibly, the Zoar that Woolson paints is an idyllic rural town where the people live in harmony with nature and with each other, a town with a strong central authority which initially seems to be responsible for the enviable harmony. Such places were hard to find in most of the United States. This sense of forced unity is apparent in Woolson's opening description of Zoar:

> the Community . . . held no intercourse with the surrounding townships . . .; each tiled roof covered a home with a thrifty mother and a train of grave little children, the girls in short-waisted gowns, kerchiefs, and frilled caps, and the boys in tailed coats, long-flapped vests, and trousers, as soon as they were able to toddle. (Solomon 238-9)

This is the portrait of a group of people who share religious beliefs, styles of clothing, and architecture, the same schedules and duties, eat the same foods five times a day every day, and
have all signed articles of faith and membership stating that they will continue to work in exchange for food, clothing and shelter and never ask anything further of the community. Given the turbulent economic and social conditions of the day, such a place and unity seem desirable to the reader and narrators, at first. The narrator of "Solomon" continues,

... we liked the life; we liked the mountain-high beds, the coarse, snowy linen, and the remarkable counterpanes; we liked the cream-stewed chicken, the kase-lab, and fresh butter, but best of all, the hot pretzels for breakfast... flanked by little pats of fresh, unsalted butter, and a deep-blue cup wherein the coffee was hot, the cream yellow, and the sugar broken lumps from the old-fashioned loaf. (Solomon 239)

Audiences of local color read the stories and sketches for escape from the perturbation of their daily lives to the quaintness and charm of not-so-distant times and places. The narrators of these two tales come to Zoar for the same reasons: Dora and Emilia call it their "favorite retreat, our little hiding-place in the hill-country" (238); and the romantic wife of "Wilhelmina" comes to escape the harshness of the climate of the lakeshore area of Ohio, a harshness that may include more than simply the weather. Even the name Zoar expresses the characterization of this town as a retreat, for Zoar was the town to which Lot fled after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Similarly after the destruction wrought by the Civil War, city people and readers of regional fiction fled to Zoar, Ohio.

But the central interest of these two stories is not the Separatist community, but the characters of Solomon and Wilhelmina, and the way each of these title characters defies the unity of the Zoarites. In fact, as quickly as Woolson establishes the homogeneity of the life at Zoar, she sets her title characters apart from that unity. This concept of the variation from uniformity, completely absent from the "Happy Valley" sketch, is important to Woolson, and bears the burden of her investigation.

Solomon lives apart from the community members; even his house is different from those of the other Zoarites. His proud, frustrated wife is not like the no-nonsense women of the village, who would be shocked to learn that she is glad that she and Sol have no children; "no brats and glad of it," she says. Her husband is further separated by his art, which even his wife has learned to disdain as a deterrent to more productive labor. The visiting women feel sure they have gotten the "popular verdict" on Sol and his wife when Fritz the carpenter tells them that Sol is good for nothing, touched in the head, and that Dorcas talks too much. (252-3). Furthermore, Solomon is not an official member of the community, merely an accepted outsider who does his share of work. He does and yet does not belong to the group.

Our first glimpse of Wilhelmina has her physically disassociated from the others as she rows the narrator's boat, while the rest of the town walks about according to their Sunday afternoon ritual. Wilhelmina even looks different than the other daughters of the community:

I liked the little daughter’s dreamy face, but she was pale and underdeveloped, like a Southern flower growing in Northern soil; the rosy-cheeked, flaxen-haired Rosines, Salomes, and Dorotheys, with their broad shoulders and ponderous tread, thought this brown changeling ugly, and pitied her in their slow, good-natured way. (Wilhelmina 272)

This difference leads the narrator to suspect that her little friend may be adopted, because it seems so unnatural for there to be such diversity in this place. Wilhelmina stands in further
contrast to her peers too in the depth of her emotion, the existence of her passion for Gustav. As she does in other works, Woolson here uses the southern quality of her heroine as a symbol of her passionate, romantic nature. When Gustav and his friend Karl leave Zoar, Karl's fiancée is already contentedly engaged to another man, but Wilhelmina throws herself in Gustav's path in a desperate attempt to detain him. She cannot submit herself to the stoicism of the community. This southern flower growing in northern soil cannot deny her essential nature.

The authority which vainly tries to enforce uniformity is represented in the stories by the trustees of the town. They are depicted as combining the worst elements of the community: sternness, pride, and inflexibility. The only sympathy they extend to Solomon is a simple burial without a service and permission for his wife to work for her keep after his death. Since Wilhelmina and Gustav are both more strictly under their charge, the trustees are more prominent in the second story. The return of the prodigal soldiers tests the strength of their control. They fear that these bright young men who have seen the world and whose families consider them heroes will corrupt the town, disturb its seclusion. How would they maintain order when the world from which they had escaped suddenly invaded:

Several times during the day we saw the three trustees conferring apart with anxious faces . . . . the very existence of the runaways had become a far-off problem to the wise men of the community, . . . . when now, suddenly, it forced itself upon them face to face, and they were required to solve it in the twinkling of an eye . . . . almost every house would hold one, [returning soldier], and the bands of law and order would be broken. Before this prospect the trustees quailed. (289)

Woolson describes the three trustees on the night of the soldiers' return as sinister almost supernatural beings who threaten families and deny any right to privacy. The families greet their sons in an unusual display of emotion and spontaneity, "and through it all silently stood the three trustees on the dark porch in front of the store, looking down upon their wild flock, their sober faces visible in the glare of the torches and lanterns below." (292) Like some evil angels (or the governor of Salem in *The Scarlet Letter*), the trustees stand in darkness above the unruly, but as the metaphor "flock" implies, helpless citizens. Later that night the narrator sees them again "stealing along in the shadow from house to house, like anxious spectres in broad-brimmed hats." (293) These specters, once in control, now worry that they may be exorcised unless they do something quickly. This town that once seemed so peaceful now seems to be established and ruled by evil.

Both stories end with the deaths of the main characters. As the Zoarites say, they have gone to the next country. Solomon dies a frustrated artist whose arduous life in the community has left little time for creativity and no chance for instruction. There are other craftsmen in these stories, and to this day Zoar is known and admired for its skillfully fabricated blankets, furniture, stoves, musical instruments, and gardens, but their products, though beautiful, were to benefit the community. Even the flower garden served a purpose: its allegorical design reminded the people of the heavenly New Jerusalem. Solomon's portraits, however, could do little that would be admired by the community; he couldn't even sell them for a profit. Ironically he dies, killed by the more productive work of mining, just when he finds someone who values his real talent.

As Solomon's artistic passion is smothered by the demands of communal life, so is Wilhelmina's emotional/sexual ardor smothered. When the narrator first met Wilhelmina she noted her "far-off dreamy expression which even the steady, monotonous toil of Community life had not been able to efface" (Wilhelmina 271). But the loss of Gustav and marriage to Jacob are able to efface Wilhelmina.
The loss of these two characters is sharply felt by the narrators who had come for the unity but loved the diversity. Even in death the love of beauty and the narrators' hopes that they have found fulfillment in the next country set Solomon and Wilhelmina apart. Dora and Erminia erect a granite marker on Solomon's grave bearing the inscription: "He will finish his work in Heaven" (267), and Wilhelmina's grave is distinguished from the others in the plain cemetery by its rosebush that serves as a headstone, despite the community custom that all the graves be unmarked, keeping the people as homogeneous in death as in life.

The romantic wife, who had come to Zoar to escape, returns to mourn Wilhelmina and questions such an authority that refuses to recognize the rights of beauty and love: "Why should this great wealth of love have been allowed to waste itself? Why is it that the greatest power, unquestionably, of this mortal life would so often seem a useless gift?" Though she now sees some of the danger of retreat from the world, she creates a second kind of retreat:

"I fully believe," I said, as though repeating a creed, "that this poor, loving heart, whose earthly body lies under this mound, is happy now in its own loving way. It has not been changed, but the happiness it longed for has come. How, we know not; but the God who made Wilhelmina understands her. He has given unto her not rest, not peace, but an active, living joy." (303)

Here rest, which she has earlier said "refers more especially to their quiet seclusion away from the turmoil of the wicked world outside," is replaced by a full, diverse, and active life imagined as occurring in heaven. This vision of what heaven must really be like serves as a damning judgment on the Zoarite community's claims to divinity. Though there is still a longing for the kind of simplicity that motivated the narrators and readers to retreat, there is also a full recognition of the dangers inherent in such a retreat, that submission to absolute authority, while it may preserve unity can produce as much tragedy as can the chaos of freedom.

Woolson has taken the post-Civil War expectations of local color and has turned them inside out. Instead of giving the reader a peaceful retreat or nostalgic joyride, she ends up questioning the validity of the authority that makes such retreat possible and asserts the superiority of multiplicity, diversity and freedom. She insists that a chaotic search for identity is better than the relative stability of traditional authorities. In efforts to both create and empower, Woolson's two narrators both love to make up stories; their only real power is that of the imagination and its ability to create and control people within the text.

Woolson, too, usurps power by writing. Nineteenth-century women writers, Gilbert and Gubar have demonstrated in The Madwoman in the Attic, had to imaginatively overthrow patriarchal authority which assumed women could not create, especially with the pen. In these two stories we see Woolson very early in her career questioning male authority with her bold indictment of the religious/civic authority of Zoar. Her ironic handling of literary conventions of local color sets her above the ordinary magazine local colorist. As her characters and narrators had to find a next country in which to find full artistic and human expression, so Woolson charts the next country in literature where a woman's writing could be something more than conventional and sentimental.
WORKS CITED


