The Work of Mourning in Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Fiction: A Kleinian Approach

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Introduction

It has long been recognized that grieving, or in psychoanalytic terms, the work of mourning, forms a central theme in both the life and fiction of Constance Fenimore Woolson. Yet no one to date in print has attempted to apply a psychoanalytic model based on Melanie Klein to understand how this work of grieving shapes her fiction. Today, looking at “Neptune’s Shore,” first published in 1888, but included in the posthumous collection of her short fiction, The Front Yard and Other Stories (1895), I will try to sketch out is how Klein’s theories may illumine Woolson’s transformation of her own mourning into fiction. This story, I will argue, is Woolson’s fictional working through of her grief over her brother’s recent death as well as the grief it reawakened over her mother’s death. The work of mourning the story performs, I will argue, helps explain the sketchy presentation of the romantic triangle in it as well as the peculiar doubling of sibling- and mother-figures which people the landscape of this story. It also helps account for the story’s desire to ennoble the American mother whose disturbed son has made her life one long misery. If the story is not wholly an artistic success from the point of view of realism, in the light of another aesthetic, Woolson gets at something very deep: murderous sibling rivalry, agonizing guilt, and grief, and finally, the working through to a resolution, which as in normal mourning, allows for the restoration of the lost love object in the inner world.

The Death of a Brother

Significantly, Woolson sets this story in one of the most beautiful places she had ever seen, the so-called “ruins” at Paestum, among the most important sites for the ancient Greek civilization in which she was deeply interested: “I was not in the least disappointed in my first sight of the Greek columns,” she wrote in a letter dated March 2, 1882, on her visit to the site in Southern Italy, going on to add, “indeed, the Temple of Neptune seemed to me the most perfect building I have ever seen. . . . I mean, in pure simple beauty.” I will return to these “ruins” which Woolson found to be not ruins at all, but “perfectly preserved,” as a key symbol in the story’s work of mourning; for the moment, it is important that her first encounter with them occurred three years after her mother’s death had freed her to go to Europe, and only a year before she received the dreadful news of the death of her younger brother, Charly, in California. The little that is known of him suggests he suffered terribly and met a violent death—possibly suicide, and likely he was alcohol- or drug-addicted.

According to letters Joan Weimer unearthed, the shock of that death, Woolson wrote, “made me suffer more than I have ever suffered in my life.” The news of his death together with the diary of his preceding suffering sent Woolson into a deep depression, and although it is impossible to know the exact date of composition, it appears that “Neptune’s Shore” was composed in the wake of Woolson’s mourning for her only brother. Moreover, it seems clear that her brother’s death—as Klein says all great griefs do—reactivated not only ancient emotions that belong to early childhood, but also stirred feelings anew about the loss of her mother.

Indeed, her brother and mother were already powerfully linked in Woolson’s consciousness; Weimer speculates that her extreme—and given the fact that she hadn’t seen him in 15 years—somewhat surprising—reaction to Charly’s death is owing to her intense guilt over jealousy of her brother’s place in her mother’s affections. She quotes Woolson’s letter about how this “prodigal” son seems always to have overshadowed his sister’s efforts to support their widowed mother; in Woolson’s own words, her mother’s “whole happiness—even her life, I might almost say, depends and always has depended upon how Charly is, and how he feels. I spend my whole time trying to keep her well and comfortable; but it is of no use if she thinks Charly is in trouble.” Weimer believes Woolson confronted in herself the most violent form of sibling rivalry: she wanted her brother dead, but when he really did, she felt like a murderer.

Although I think Weimer’s insight into Woolson’s destructive guilt over such feelings is exactly right, I do not agree that it was likely that she consciously acknowledged them. Klein’s theory of the “infant depressive position” holds that one of the earliest emotions humans feel is the fear of losing one’s mother; these fears
early on then take the form of extremely aggressive phantasies not only directed against her, but also against one's siblings—rivals for the mother's affections. According to Klein, "The circle of loved objects who are attacked in phantasy and whose loss is therefore feared widens owing to the child's ambivalent relations to his brothers and sisters. ... The sorrow and concern about the feared loss of the 'good' objects, that is to say, the depressive position, is ... the deepest source of the painful conflicts in the Oedipus situation, as well as in the child's relations to people in general" (148). "Neptune's Shore" may be read as a representation of Woolson's unconscious rivalry with her troubled brother. What is even more striking here, though, is that the story also may be read as an act of reparation: an attempt to restore the mourned lost objects, both her brother and her mother. In her effort to represent and understand the tragic bond between the tortured mother and her disgraced son, Woolson achieves a kind of loving distance essential both to normal mourning and successful fiction-making. At the same time, the blame and anger associated with the daughter-figures in the story suggest that the writer could not fully reconcile her own part in the family tragedy, and so felt angry that she held herself responsible for what was not rationally her fault, yet still felt agonizing guilt for what she could not change. The result is a story of brilliant strokes that does not entirely cohere.

Of Siblings and Mothers

The figure who most closely resembles Charly Woolson is John Ash, the dissipated son at the center of the action in "Neptune's Shore." Not yet 35, he is almost exactly Woolson's own brother's age at death. There is both cynicism and boyishness in the character she creates:

"His face was beardless, thin, with a bold eagle-like outline, and strong warm, blue eyes .... The mouth, the worst feature, had a cynical droop; the jaw conveyed suggestions that were not agreeable. The expression of the whole countenance was that of recklessness and cleverness, both of no common order. Of late the recklessness had often change into a more happy merriment when he was with Pauline, the careless merriment of a boy; one could see then plainly how handsome he must have been before the lines, and the heaviness, and alas! The evil, had come to darken his youth, and to sadden (for so it must have been) his silent, frightened-looking mother."

To sum up the story briefly: Two American families meet sojourning in Italy. One household, dominated by the matriarchal Mrs. Preston, contains an attractive, flirtatious 30-year-old widow, Pauline Graham. The other family is composed solely of a mother, Mrs. Ash, and her unstable son, John, who is paying court to Pauline. When a rival for her attentions comes to visit, Griffith Carew, a likeable and talented American architect, Ash loses control, shoots his rival, and then commits suicide. Rayburn Moore finds Ash "melodramatic" and the other members of this romantic triangle not "adequately developed." However, the "romantic triangle" is not the real focus of the story—"Griff," as Ash's rival is known, is, indeed, as Moore complains, "a sketchy figure." More an idealized presence than an actual character, he cannot even be fairly called a serious rival: he's just a nice young man with whom Pauline happens to be flirting at the moment.

Part of the story's incoherence arises from the fact that the most significant triangles are not romantic, but Oedipal—composed of mothers and sons, sisters and brothers. This explains why there are so many mother and sibling figures, but this doubling, and sometimes even tripling and quadrupling of these figures, also creates another kind of incoherence: these figures are given as much, if not more development than the supposed "romantic" rival, and their multiplication creates a complex set of relationships. All of the Oedipal figures in the story are at least doubled. Besides Ash, the "bad son," who shoots Griff, the "good son," there are still other son-figures: Arthur Abercrombie, being raised by Mrs. Preston, his aunt, and his three schoolmates, who are devastated when their hero is shot. Similarly, there are two mothers: Octavia Preston and Azubah Ash. Acting like the Roman matron her name suggests, Octavia Preston is at one point described as seated "with the air and manner of Neptune's only lawful wife" (75). A proud, handsome, aristocratic, and overbearing woman who openly favors boys over girls, she complains about being saddled with her three orphaned nieces who seem spineless specimens to her, but indulges her nephew whom she believes "may really do something" (50). In any case, she much prefers male company: "too much lady talk dries my brain," she declares.

The other mother figure, Azubah Ash (whose first name recalls that of Woolson's mother, Hannah) comes from a very different social stratum than Mrs. Preston. Although we are given to understand that she,
too, is wealthy, she speaks the dialect of a humbler, mid-western farming class, and cares nothing for books, paintings, or European architecture: her whole world is her son. Superficially, then, Mrs. Preston has more in common with Woolson’s own upper-class, cultured mother, but the emotional bond depicted between mother and son echoes Woolson’s complaint that all her mother cared about was her brother and his happiness: nothing else mattered. Significantly, however, both mother-figures give out the message that in the competition of boys and girls for mother-love, girls are doomed to lose.

But even mothers do not fare so well in this tale whose pathos arises from Mrs. Ash’s ineffectual attempts to prevent her son, whom she knows to be violent, from harming anyone. At least she tries to intervene, but Mrs. Preston, who enjoys watching Pauline’s romantic escapades—“to have her in the house is like going to the play all the time” (54), helps set the stage for tragedy. During the excursion to Paestum, things come to a head when Pauline, who had earlier distressed her spinster cousin, Isabella, by going alone on long rides with Ash, announces her plan to go off for a whole day with Griff to Naples. Mrs. Ash pleads with her to be nice to her son, who is furious over this plan, and to “talk ter him a little longer,” and her son adds, “Poor mother! She does not dare to say to you what she longs to say. . . . that is, ‘Don’t provoke him!’ She has some pretty bad memories—haven’t you, mother?—of times when I’ve—when I’ve gone a-hunting, as one may say” (81). First angry at his presumptuous interference, then troubled and disconcerted by his manner, Pauline tries to distance herself from “the strangeness of this strange pair” (81). But her effort to separate herself from mother and son by attaching herself to Griff only triggers Ash’s not-so-veiled threat of murder. He tells her he would rather see her “dead. . . . than go with that man tomorrow” (82). However, at the end he turns his rage upon his rival, striking him down “with a well-aimed bullet from an American revolver” during a violent storm before killing himself.

Although the events may appear as a conventional romantic rivalry of two men in a deadly duel over the same woman (and that is the way the Italians, Woolson tells us, are already telling the story), this is not what happens at all. Griff, more hapless bystander than rival, is simply the object of Ash’s jealous rage. Yet Ash, as he admits, has no real claim upon Pauline, but nevertheless he compares her to his mother who would “never have tarnished herself” by going off alone with a man. Beneath the all too common double standard (he expects the “good women” in his life to overlook his need for “pretty peasant girls,” yet cannot tolerate the idea of a “good woman” with erotic desires of her own), is a frighteningly obsessive need to control women rooted in an infantile phantasy of omnipotence. Ash’s connecting Pauline in his mind with his mother points to the arrested Oedipal nature of the intimacy between mother and son, which is unhealthily close—she blushes when he compliments her, enjoys “nothing save the going about on her son’s arm” (66). And he expects Pauline to behave like his mother—make him the center of her universe, a demand appropriate in infancy, but terrible in an emotionally disturbed, grown man.

There are also signs of sibling Oedipal rivalry. Pauline is not the only daughter-figure; the three, lank Abercrombie nieces with their “curiously white, milk-white” skin are Woolson’s most surprising and spiteful touch. Although their aunt bullies them, dragging them to see statues and pictures and forcing them to “eat raw meat, take sea baths and practise calisthenics” (51), they prove they are not so docile after all. Once alone in the carriage with their “astonished” cousin, Isabella, the girls “glare suddenly and sullenly,” declaring they have no interest at all in what she is telling them about Neptune’s temple. “We have decided not to pretend any more before you, Worm!” (73) one of the girls tells the shocked Isabella, and the contrast between the content and what these girlish “weak, soft voices” are saying is almost too much for her. They continue their covert rebellion: when Mrs. Preston orders Isabella to read from her guide-book, the girls make horrible faces at her behind their aunt’s back. Through these girls, Woolson expresses the anger and the resentment of daughters in a world where boys always matter more, especially to mothers. Yet the girls, like Isabella, cannot finally do much about this state of affairs—treat ing men as if they don’t matter is a dangerous option to try, as Pauline discovers.

Daughters are simply not allowed to take center stage—they are consigned to a place outside the mothers’ overwhelming grief. Our last sight of Isabella and the Abercrombie girls is of them watching the procession of Mrs. Ash, followed by the three boys, then Mrs. Preston, leaning on her nephew’s arm and walking with a cane, leaving to view John Ash’s corpse: significantly, they are described as like “four unimportant, unnoticed ghosts” (88). It’s hard not to see Isabella (roughly Woolson’s age at the time of writing and like her, never married) and the ghostly girls as evoking Woolson herself and her own dead sisters; in any event, they seem to function as a kind of chorus for Pauline, the daughter-figure who bears the guilt of John Ash’s death. The
reparative moment, however, comes with Mrs. Ash’s finest hour. She tells Pauline: “Don’t come, my dear; I really can’t let you; you’d think of it all the rest of your life if you were to see him now, and ‘twould make you feel so bad. I know you didn’t mean no harm” (87). In turn, Pauline “held there by the compassion of this mother—this mother whose nobler nature, and large glance quiet in the majesty of sorrow, made her, made all the women present, fade into nothingness beside her” (88). Mrs. Ash even graciously prays for Griff’s recovery, “God is kind—sometimes; perhaps he will live…Dear heart, live!” (86).

Mourning and Reparation

Klein tells us that the mourner needs to “reinstate” the “actually lost loved object” and at the same time to reestablish “inside himself his first loved objects—ultimately the ‘good’ parents,” since any mourning will provoke that primal fear, that of losing one’s parents. She concludes, “it is by reinstating inside himself the ‘good’ parents as well as the recently lost person, and by rebuilding his inner world, which was disintegrated and in danger, that he overcomes his grief, regains security, and achieves true harmony and peace.” In the image of the mother ennobled in grief, absolving the daughter of responsibility for the son’s death, Woolson “reinstates” an image of the good parent, the mother who, despite her obsessive love for her only son, sees the truth about him and feels compassion for the daughter’s pain and guilt. She also recreates her reckless brother, in whom the good could not overcome the evil of his life. The story does not blame the mother for the way her son turned out; his character is seen as somehow wrong from the start. Sharon Dean also sees the story as expressing Woolson’s belief that “heredity can account for some kinds of behavior”; however, she concludes that the story absolves the son of responsibility for his violent acts because it was in his make-up. I think that the story does not absolve him—his guilt is not an issue—but instead proves the difficult problem of how much responsibility of those around him also bear for his destructive acts.

Finally, though, loss and mourning are the true subject of “Neptune’s Shore,” for even the climactic events—Ash’s attempted murder of Griff and then his own self-slaughter—are viewed from the perspective of loss, since the reader does not witness these events, but only their aftermath. Most of the characters are survivors of major losses. Mrs. Ash, Mrs. Preston, and Pauline are all widows; the girls and boys have lost their parents, and even Isabella, “owing to the singularly incessant death of relatives, was always in mourning” (72). Ash, too, is a well-chosen name to signify grief. And the magnificent temples by sea evoke a landscape of mourning. Looming into view “in all their beauty on the barren waste,” their “perfect Doric architecture” made “the loneliness surrounding them even more lonely, made the sound of the sea breaking near by on the lifeless shore a melancholy dirge” (74). Woolson further associates them with loss and lamentation. Isabella’s guidebook tells how the far flung-colony of Greeks, grieving the loss of their home country and now under Roman rule, established a yearly festival of mourning at the temples “to call to remembrance the old days and the old customs, and to weep upon each other’s necks, and to lament drearily” (75).

In the end, however, the writer, who was herself a mourner for kin and country, leaves us not with an image of lives shattered, of barren loss: the temples that still stand, “majestic, uninjured, extraordinary,” are finally a symbol of continuity, of hope, of faith that loss can be survived, and life taken up again. The storm has cleared, and the doctors have said that Griff might live. In a landscape flooded with golden morning light, a woman rides in a cart carrying a coffin over the same plain where the beautiful temples of Paestum have gazed for more than two thousand years (90). In this closing scene, Woolson has created a picture of grief held by peace and beauty, an image that suggests she was able to envision and perhaps even undertake for herself the healing work of mourning.

Endnotes


2 However, two presenters at the Third Biennial Meeting of the Constance Fenimore Woolson Society in October 1998 in St. Augustine, Florida, did give psychoanalytic interpretations of her work: Cheryl Torsney, “Fern Leaves from Connie’s Portfolio,” and myself, “The Politics and Fantasies of Loss: Constance Fenimore Woolson’s ‘In the Cotton Country.’”

3 For the letter to Katharine Livingston Mather from which these descriptions are taken, see Constance Fenimore Woolson, ed. Clare Benedict, vol. 2 of Five Generations (1785-1923), (London: Ellis, 1930), 265. Woolson
writes she started "on our grand day's excursion to Paestum, to see the Greek-Temples—the one thing in Italy, south of Rome, in which I have felt the deepest interest" (264).

4 Joan Weimer, *Back Talk: Teaching Lost Selves To Speak* (New York: Random House, 1994), 259-61. She tells the story of how she found the letters about Charly; unfortunately, there is still no edition of Woolson's letters available to scholars. Weimer concludes that Woolson was "braver than I am," because she faced her "terrible secret" that she wanted to kill her brother and attributes Woolson's difficulties with intimacy to this "secret." However, if she had truly "faced" this knowledge, according to most psychoanalytic thought, she would have been able to resolve these feelings and to open herself to greater intimacy.

5 Melanie Klein, "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States (1940)," in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 146-174, 148. For more on Klein's complex and sometimes misunderstood concept, the depressive position, see R. D. Hinshelwood, *Clinical Klein* (London: Free Association Books, 1994), ch. 6, "The Depression Position." Klein saw the "depressive" position as part of normal growth and development and distinguished it from clinical depression. As the infant moves from being occupied with fears from attacks from the outside, it begins to feel guilt over its own attacks upon its internal objects (which stand for parents, siblings, and their inter-relations) being in phantasy damaged or destroyed and therefore to experience concern and love for them. In this way, the infant begins to experience a more complex, realistic inner world: objects are no longer all good or all bad.

6 Weimer calculates he was 36, *Back Talk*, 260; according to the chronology compiled by Sharon Dean with the help of Gary W. Woolson, he was 37, The Constance Fenimore Woolson's Society's web site, <www.gsvu.edu/Woolson>.

7 Constance Fenimore Woolson, "Neptune's Shore," *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (1895 rpt; Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 50-90, 61. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are cited by page number in the body of the paper.


9 For Hannah Woolson's clear preference for her only son, see Weimer, "Introduction," xii. Weimer also points out that mothers may not be as prevalent in Woolson's fiction, but their surrogates are everywhere (xi). I read Mrs. Preson as another one of her displacements: although she makes her an "aunt" rather than the actual mother, she has the sole care of the Abercrombie children and in every respect functions as a mother. Also, both mother-figures represent Hannah Woolson—Mrs. Ash is more the "good parent" and Mrs. Preston more the bad one. Her judgment proves disastrous: she enjoys watching Pauline flirt with Ash whom she mistakenly sees up as the "clever" rather than the "brutal" sort, and worse, the reason she enjoys watching Pauline as if she is a "play" is that she correctly recognizes that Pauline is in deep conflict with herself and therefore does not fully grasp the significance of her actions. This turns out to make for a much more exciting drama than Mrs. Preston bargains for. But neither woman is wholly good or bad, a sign perhaps of Woolson's ability to reinstate a more balanced internal parent in herself.

10 Woolson's actual wording is a bit confusing: "I should rather see you dead before me than go with that man tomorrow" (82). Does "before me" mean "before my eyes" or "before I die." Is the second meaning a Freudian slip that refers to Woolson's unconscious desire for her brother to die before she did?

11 Woolson tells us that the "village version of the story was that the two forestieri had sprung at each other's throats, maddened by jealousy, "Neptune's Shore," 85.

12 Woolson throughout the story stresses the little boy in the man. For example, when he pleads with Pauline earlier not to "throw him over," an expression comes over his face that is "boilyshly young and trusting" (62). Also, Mrs. Ash remembers him as a boy of two and three even then difficult to control (86-87).

13 If the mother figures represent split aspects of Hannah Woolson, in the same way, the daughter figures in the story represent aspects of Woolson and her relation to her mother. The surprisingly strong and vindictive anger of the Abercrombie girls toward female authority figures thus stands for Woolson's rage at her mother; however, it is significant that this anger cannot be directly expressed toward the maternal figure but instead at the daughter-figure who most stands for the writer herself. Like Woolson, Isabella soaks up guidebooks about the Greek temples that fascinate her and also pursues plants as a hobby. Like her, too, she is an unmarried, middle-aged woman who experienced an inordinate amount of death among her family. She also more accu-
rately sees Pauline’s danger in encouraging Ash’s attentions. But Isabella is not portrayed sympathetically, suggesting Woolson’s capacity for self-wounding and self-criticism. Isabella is pathetic, ineffectual, and a snob.

15 Sharon L. Dean, Constance Fenimore Woolson: Homeward Bound (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 150.
16 I have not been able to see a copy of Baedeker’s guide from the 1880s, the most likely guidebook Woolson refers to in the story. However, the legend of the Greek festival to remember their old country after the Romans became the rulers of Paestum was not invented by Woolson. The Italy Online website (www.initaly.com/regions/compania/paestum.htm) tells of the same legend.