The inhabitants of Happy Valley, ignorant of the value of money, and living in the simplest manner, are yet a rich community, owing to their industrious habits and systematic labor. ... Happy little Valley; our ways are not as thy ways, but who can say that thou hast not chosen the better part? (Harpers 285).

The Ideal Tarnished: From “The Happy Valley” to Sulphurous Mines and Shipwrecked Souls

Patti Capel Swartz

From “bretzels” and cream for breakfast to outdoor summer concerts to patriarchal hats and quaint costumes, Constance Fenimore Woolson’s first publication about the communal settlement at Zoor, Ohio, “The Happy Valley,” glories in the European atmosphere of the self-contained, isolated community that yet made a part of its living through tourism. Woolson finds much to commend and little to condemn in the imagistic prose that she uses to provide to readers the color and flavor of Germany in Ohio. The residents, she writes, are hard working, honest, pious. There is no trouble, no crime, in this village except that caused by the over-exuberance of some visitors. In short, Woolson’s “The Happy Valley” portrays an almost utopian society unsullied by the commerce and capitalism of the world outside. In her stories “Solomon” and “Wilhelmina,” however, Woolson examines problems of that “ideal” society, depicting a closed culture that smothers those members or workers in the community who are artists and dreamers: a culture in which character and circumstance clash so strongly that neither Solomon nor Wilhelmina who cannot conform to the mores of Zoor die because of them.

Early Zoor was an isolated community founded by a German Pietist sect. Zoor’s location in the rolling hills of Eastern Ohio allowed the settlement to remain isolated enough from the outside world to allow the Separatists to practice their beliefs. Like the Puritans and other similar groups fleeing from religious persecution in Europe, members of the society were intolerant of any transgression of doctrine relating either to the world of the spirit or to the world of work. The Separatists lived spare lives in which the individual was not important. Life became a vehicle to reach God, and all work was for the glory of God and the good of the community in which communism was practiced. To use life in this way required that individual hopes and dreams be dismissed. The only love that was important was love for God: the only good, the good of the community. Obedience and contentment were valued; desire, sinful.

The communism practiced at Zoor was accidental, practiced because of fear of freezing or starving or as a result of the difficult first winters there. Initially, each family had land, but it became apparent to the settlers, led by their “king,” Joseph Bimeler, that they would survive only through joint effort, and so the articles of the Zoor Society were created (Randall 1-52). This system had little tolerance for or understanding of characters like Woolson’s Solomon or Wilhelmina. Solomon is a man devoted to art; Wilhelmina, a woman who is a dreamer. Both are so concerned with inner life or with love that they are outsiders within Zoor.

The communistic setting of “Solomon” and “Wilhelmina” is crucial to these stories. The nature of creativity, the nature of the soul, the writer or painter who must create art against all obstacles is a recurring theme in Woolson’s work, and in her writing about Zoor she examines that theme in a setting as isolated because of the “thousands of outlying acres” surrounding a community that “held no intercourse with the surrounding townships” (238) as that of her stories set in Mackinac or the lakes area in which the isolation occurs because of water. In both worlds, one wild, the other cultivated, artists must create.

In Zoor, that bountiful realm where bread and cream abound, Woolson infers, one should be able to do one’s best work—that work to which one is suited: to live a life of the spirit, creating more than is necessary for living day to day. Certainly the abundance apparent to visitors to Zoor indicates that none should want in this community. In an atmosphere where basic needs are more than well met, artistic creation should be possible. Zoor, however, was not begun with such aspirations. Piety was the goal of the founders. Communism developed because independent establishments did not work in that wilderness, and the importance of the spiritual was linked not only to living a simple life to please God, but also to the work for the good of the community. Only the “productive” were valued. To fit the community definition of productivity, both Solomon and Wilhelmina must give up their dreams and desires, which neither is able to do.
Both "Solomon" and "Wilhelmina" are stories of artists. Wilhelmina, though she is not portrayed as a painter, has what was so often considered in the nineteenth century an "artistic temperament." She is exotic and dreamy, romantic, in tune with nature, a child of nature. Her artistry is realized through her work in the community garden. Solomon must draw and paint. This story details two artists—Solomon and Erminia. Although Erminia, a woman who is privileged to have many advantages, including training in art that befits her station as an upper middle class woman, is a copyist only, "the merely mechanical hand" can and does explain "its art to the ignorant fingers of genius" (262). Erminia recognizes the great talent this Solomon has, though undeveloped and crushed by lack of appreciation, time for development, and lack of exposure to techniques of art. The brutal irony of this story is that the very employment that Solomon hates, that work that keeps him from that art which he would make his true work if only circumstances would allow that, kills him. Solomon is overcome by the "sulphurous" gas of the coal mine where he spends his days in darkness.

Solomon is an artist condemned, like the artist in Rebecca Harding Davis's Life in the Iron Mills, to industry. He is a wraith, a shadow, an artist deprived of his light, working in a sulphurous hell below ground. In the opening of his story, Woolson describes the country and condition of Solomon's work:

Midway in the eastern part of Ohio lies the coal country . . . . The roads lie along the slow-moving streams, and the farmers ride slowly over them in their broad-wheeled wagons, now and then passing dark holes in the bank from whence come little carts into the sunshine, and men, like silhouettes, working behind them, with glow worm lamps fastened in their hat bands (236).

Solomon lives in darkness. His sunlight hours are spent working by the light of the carbide lamp. His nights are spent in his "studio," working by candlelight because he cannot pursue his art by day.

For Erminia and Dora, Solomon is always a creature wrapped in darkness. They meet him in darkness. He comes into the house where he lives with the "sulphur woman" where they are visiting, trapped by a fierce storm. Accompanied by his dog, the two seem shadows in the darkness (258). Solomon is not the crude country workman we might expect, however. His speech is old-fashioned but cultured. He can see art in simple things, for example, in the autumn leaves he arranges for the visitors (254).

Solomon, who was from the lake country near Painesville, Ohio came to the community when quite young. He labored within the community for his keep, sometimes for pay, and he experimented with his art. When he delivered a load of firewood to the nearby town of Sandy, a community of "outlanders," Solomon saw his wife—the woman whom Dora, the story's narrator, and her cousin Erminia call the "sulphur-woman," a name that links her to the hell of Solomon's life and his death—for the first time. Struck by her beauty, he married her. She became and continues to be the model for his paintings, crude representations which present his raw talent, but lack perspective, shading, and the nuances that create a work of art.

Erminia asks the "sulfur woman" who shows the two women his paintings, "Does Mr. Solomon devote much time to his art?" The wife answers:

No, not now. He couldn't make a cent out of it, so he's took to digging coal. He painted all them when we was first married, and he went a journey all the way to Cincinnati to sell 'em. First he was going to buy me a silk dress and some ear-rings, and, after that, a farm. But pretty soon home he come on a canal boat, without a shilling, and a bringing all the pictures back with him! Well, then he tried most everything, but he never could keep to any one trade, for he'd just as lief quit work in the middle of the forenoon and go to painting; no boss'll stand that, you know . . . . so, when the Community offered to take Sol back as a coal-digger, I just said, 'Go,' and we come (246, 247).

Woolson is very direct about the effects of Solomon's inability to practice his art. He is a shadow (258) or a silhouette (236) who comes to life only while in his attic studio (259, 260). When Erminia tells him she and Dora will see his pictures "[a] great flush rose in the painter's thin cheeks. 'Will you,' he said eagerly,—'will you? Come!'" (258, 259). Dora tells us that the pictures are crude and highly colored, and all representing the same face,—the sulphur-woman in her youth, the poor artist's only ideal. He showed us these one by one, handling them tenderly, and telling us, in his quaint language, all they symbolized . . . . The light shone on his pale face, and we noticed the far-off look in his eyes, and the long, tapering fingers coming out from the hard-worked, broad palm (260, 261).
In that attic, working by candlelight, Erminia teaches Solomon something of perspective, and days later, when he is on his death bed and the cousins again travel to the isolated house that Woolson describes as more like a hut in the Black Forest than a house in central Ohio, Solomon's wish is for them to see his new picture, one on which he had worked all during the night before the accident in the mine that will kill him, and with him, his promise as an artist. Dora narrates:

I lighted all the candles, and Erminia brought forward the easel; upon it stood a sketch in charcoal wonderful to behold,—the same face, the face of the faded wife, but so noble in its idealized beauty that it might have been a portrait of her glorified face in Paradise. It was a profile, with the eyes upturned,—a mere outline, but grand in conception and expression. I gazed in astonishment.

Erminia said, 'Yes, I knew you could do it, Solomon. It is perfect of its kind.' The shadow of a smile stole over the pallid face . . . (265).

While Solomon's ability to create fine work is coincident with his death, Wilhelmina's death comes from the loss of love and the loss of the art of work in the community garden. The garden at Zoar, famous for its beauty, was and is now maintained as a celebration of Pietist thought, each path and the central arbor creating a symbolic representation of the New Jerusalem as described in the Revelation of John (Zoar 37). Wilhelmina toiled in the most exquisite landscape of Zoar. It was her job, with her work hardened hands, to maintain the beauty of that symbol. While in the patriarchal society in which she lived, she would not have been permitted any choice about the plantings, nor could she change the rigid structure of the design any more than she could change the rigid social structures of Zoar, she responded to the beauty of the garden and the outdoor work. Had she been able to make other choices or changes than those prescribed by the community, if she had not had to leave the garden for marriage, Mina's story might have ended differently, but her desires must be subsumed to the communal good.

Unlike much of the work at Zoar, work in the garden was functional, spiritual, and artistic. The folk art of the village, the brightly colored window-frames, walls and doors, the canned fruit, or “the gaily colored counterpane...woven with the figures of strange birds” (Happy Valley 283) was utilitarian, both useful and designed to raise the spirit. To members in this community, any art that was not utilitarian had no value. The exception was the garden, an outward manifestation and representation of the spirituality and piety toward which one should hope and aspire: the promise of life to come, possible because of dedication to community, to remaining free from “worldly” pleasures and from desire. Wilhelmina, however, must love, desire, and hold dreams.

The unnamed narrator of Woolson's “Wilhelmina” is certain that Mina was not of Zoar stock. She was dark haired with a “creamy skin” and “a far off dreamy expression” (271). "From the first we felt she was grafted, and not a shoot from the community stalk" (271). This wild being does not fit the plodding, structured life of the Separatist community in which every action had to be for the community's benefit, or, like the music of the town, devoted to the proscribed spirituality of the religion. Mina "was a mixture of the wild, shy creature of the woods and the deep-loving woman of the tropics" (301). Given her nature, it is little wonder that Mina falls in love with Gustav, the "ne'er do well" nonconformist of the village who leads the other boys into enlistment in the Grand Army of the Republic against the wishes of the patriarchs—a man who will not sign the articles that would admit him to membership in the Zoar Society (279-280).

Mina loves Gustav with all her being. Before he went to war, it did not matter to him that she did not share the blonde conformity of the maidens of Zoar, or their plodding character, even though any difference is not only devalued by the community but is discouraged. The part of her that is different responds to the nonconformist in him. Mina's whole being is engaged in a struggle to be with this man she loves, first in opposition to her father and the other trustees of the village, then in a struggle with herself when Gustav, on his return from service in the Civil War, rejects her. When Gustav leaves the village for the outside world and the “outlander” woman that he loves, Mina escapes for a time to the forested hills, as caught in her dream of sadness there as she had been in her ecstasy of joy when she had earlier learned he was returning. The narrator goes to the hills in search of her, hoping to offer comfort:

all the afternoon I sat under the trees with the stricken girl... Her little rough hands were cold, a film had gathered over her eyes; she did not weep, but moaned to herself, and all her senses seemed blunted. At nightfall I took her home, and the leathery mother received her with a frown; but the child was beyond caring, and crept away, dumbly, to her room (300).
Unable to find her for some days, "[w]hen at last I did see her," the narrator says, "she was apathetic and dull; her feelings, her senses and her intelligence seemed to have gone within, as if preying on her heart. She scarcely listened to my proposal to take her with me; for, in my pity, I had suggested it, in spite of its difficulties."

The narrator's earlier plan had been to rescue both Mina and Gustav from the life of the community to which she was certain Gustav would not want to return, once having gone into the world. She planned to take them with her to Cleveland where she would arrange an industrial job for Gustav and educate Mina in the ways of the outside world to which the narrator feels she would be more attuned than to the life of the community (297, 298). But, Gustav gone, Mina refuses her offer. "'No,' she said, mechanically; 'It's better here'; and fell into silence again' (300, 301).

The narrator coaxed, "'But you can see the great world, Mina. You need not work, I will take care of you. You shall have pretty dresses; would n't you like that?' I asked, curious to discover the secret of the Separatist indifference to everything outside." Mina answers with what she had been taught so fully that she did not even realize that the words were false. "'Nein,' answered the little maiden, tranquilly; 'nein, fraulein. Ich bin zufrieden.'" The narrator notes, "Those three words were the key. 'I am contented.' So were they taught from childhood, and—I was about to say—they know no better; but, after all, is there anything better to know?" (277). Woolson's narrator answers her own question. Mina is horribly trapped by this training. Because the community insists on it, she believes she has no choice but to marry the widowed baker, leaving the garden, the woods and fields to care for the children of a man she does not love. She becomes closed in the confines of house and the clinging arms of children. Her family is delighted with the marriage, as are all of the villagers. In this sect that had, for a time, required celibacy so that the women could work in the fields (Zoar 33) and which had placed the old and children in dormitories to free women for labor, love had little meaning. Romantic love was not essential to survival, not really even desirable. Marriage to Gustav, marriage to the baker—it is all the same. When they learn that Gustav is leaving, both Mina's mother and the server in the restaurant echo the same words: "Das macht nichts," "It's just the same" (294, 295). It is good that Mina will now be free to marry the baker. Even Gustav feels so. He says of the marriage, "'Why not? He's a good fellow enough. She'll like him in time. It's all the same'" (297) even though for himself, it was not all the same. But Mina's dreams die, and, eventually, within a year, Mina dies with them. Mina has only one escape from being "all cramped up with these rules and bells" (296) that govern the lives of the Zoarites, the escape of death.

During a visit during the summer after Mina's death, the narrator visits her grave. She tells us: I ... sat there alone in the sunset, thinking of many things, but chiefly of this: '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 should so often seem a useless gift?'

No answer came from the sunset clouds, and as twilight sank down on the earth I rose to go (303).

The narrators of "Solomon" and "Wilhelmina" are free to go, questions unanswered about the irony and sometimes hopelessness of life not only in Zoar, but also in the world to which they return where neither art nor love is greatly valued. Like Zoar (an example that, because of its structure, makes the work and desires of the artists in these stories more telling), the world from which the narrator comes does not value art or love. Just as sympathy does not exist for the woman who loves deeply, sympathy for visual artists (or writers) could hardly be inferred from the existing remnants of the community Zoar or the history of art for working classes and/or women in the nineteenth century. The beauty of the garden was dedicated to the patriarchal church of the fathers, to whom "love was all the same." The colors of the ceiling borders, the patterns of the spreads at Zoar gave joy to visitors and, no doubt, raised the spirits of community members, but these borders could hardly be called works of art. They were craft work, the result of skill with a stencil rather than original brush work. The attitude of the community members, and of the greater world, toward art and artists, that attitude which was and often is a death knell for artists who could not or cannot escape is shown through what the narrator tells us of Dora's and Erminia's conversation with the village carpenter in "Solomon":

'Do you know Solomon the coal miner?' asked Ermine... 'What kind of man is he?'
'Good for nothing,' [the carpenter] replied.
'Why?'
'Wrong here'; tapping his forehead.
Works Cited


