

THE CONTINUITY OF LOSS: CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON'S

*RODMAN THE KEEPER: SOUTHERN SKETCHES*

by

KATHERINE BROWN

(Under the Direction of James Nagel)

ABSTRACT

Constance Fenimore Woolson's unusual vantage point earns her a distinct place in the canon of American literature. She was a northern author, but she lived in the Reconstruction South from 1874 to 1880 and wrote fiction that depicted the impoverished region. The genre of her work is as significant as her outsider's perspective. *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches*, which she composed while living in St. Augustine, Florida, is a short-story cycle. Simply put, the narratives are connected by recurring locales, characters, and themes. Amidst the humid tropics of Florida and the postbellum environs of Georgia and the Carolinas, Southerners collide with visitors from New England who are portrayed as stoic peacemakers. A marginalized African-American or Minorcan presence and a pervading sense of defeat linger in the shadows of the action. In effect, *Rodman the Keeper* captures the disorientation of a frontier in transition, and as each story echoes irretrievable loss, the continuous cycle develops.

INDEX WORDS: Constance Fenimore Woolson, Short-Story Cycle, Civil War, Local Color, Regionalism, Nineteenth-Century Women Writers

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my father, Milburn Brown III, whose support and love I will always remember.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: AN AMERICAN STORY IN TRANSITION

Constance Fenimore Woolson's entrance into the literary marketplace coincided with the nation's interest in regional fiction. On the tails of Mark Twain and Bret Harte, both of whom ignited the local-color movement, she followed suit, offering candid glimpses into her characters' lives. Her unusual vantage point, however, deserves a distinct place in the canon of American literature. She was a northern author, reared in Cleveland, Ohio, who moved to the South in the wake of the Civil War and wrote about the devastated region. Specifically, from 1874 to 1880, she spent her winters in St. Augustine, Florida. During the summer months, she, along with her widowed mother and sister, took extended trips through Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas. These tours gave Woolson glimpses of southern people and places. She transposed what she saw into fiction, and her depiction of the former Confederacy is tinged with nostalgic remove, often wavering between contempt and empathy.

Of the three novels, one novella, and numerous travel-sketches and poems that she published during this period, *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches* (1880), a collection of ten short-stories, remains her greatest achievement.<sup>1</sup> Wrought with regional and racial complexities, it captures a nation in transition. Amidst the humid tropics of Florida and the postbellum environs of Georgia and the Carolinas, Southerners collide with visitors from New England who are portrayed as stoic peacemakers. The tension



between these parties occupies the foreground of each tale, creating bitter fights, unlikely romances, and new beginnings. In stereotyped caricatures, freed slaves linger in the shadows of the action, loyally serving their former masters. The Minorcans of Florida, another marginalized group, are presented as indolent and lazy. Yet all of the characters in *Rodman the Keeper*, despite their ethnic or geographic ties, cling helplessly to a diminishing way of life.

The genre of *Rodman the Keeper* is as significant as Woolson's outsider's perspective. It is too seldom recognized as a short-story cycle: a work of fiction that is comprised of individual stories, sometimes separated by poems and sketches, which display recurring locales, characters, motifs, and narrative methods. Although these symmetries are important, the fundamental component to the cycle is thematic unity. Ultimately, all of the pieces, when read together, reveal a singular design, one that is inherent in the work and not determined by presumptions about authorial intention.<sup>2</sup> For example, all ten stories in *Rodman the Keeper* are prefaced with poems, take place in the south, share a series of recurring African American or Minorcan characters, and rely on images of dilapidated ancestral homes to embody southern privation. The narrative voice, fluctuating between a third-person omniscient and first-person perspective, is sympathetic to southern loss but guided by a northern bias. Although every piece has a different plot, each work echoes irretrievable loss, the theme through which the continuous cycle ultimately develops.

The formal study of the short-story cycle did not begin until 1971, with Forest Ingram's pioneering work *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*.<sup>3</sup> The tradition of connected narratives, nonetheless, has existed since the origins of

literature. In fact, the concept of the novel, as James Nagel has pointed out, developed in the eighteenth century, but its antecedents are clearly linked to early short-story cycles such as Homer's *Odyssey*, Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>4</sup> The advent of linked narratives has also been influenced by religious texts and cultural practices: for example, the parables in the Old and New Testament can be interpreted as separate sketches related by theme; similarly, in the Native American oral tradition, recurring figures, such as Trickster or Coyote, are placed in various situations that extract similar moral lessons, all of which surface through the act of storytelling. In addition, as Susan Garland Mann has maintained, collections of poetry can also rely on interconnected verses to create a unified work. The sonnet sequences of the English Renaissance, for example, as well as nineteenth century works such as Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868) and George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862), are examples of verse cycles.<sup>5</sup> The short-story cycle, a genre that receives too little attention in contemporary studies, has thus evolved from various forms, countries, and time-periods.

It was not until the early nineteenth century that the tradition emerged in the United States. The earliest examples, such as Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book* (1820), *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village* (1824), sought to give shape and form to a uniquely American experience, using geographic ties to validate, if not create, a sense of regional and personal identity.<sup>6</sup> During the latter half of the 1870s, the approximate time in which Woolson composed *Rodman the Keeper*, the short-story cycle became an increasingly popular form. For example, in *Sam Lawson's Fireside Stories* (1879), Harriet Beecher Stowe used a series of linked narratives to

capture the people and customs of rural Maine; in *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), Francis E. W. Harper, similar to Woolson, focused on the postbellum years, but presented accounts of the African American experience; Mary Noailles Murfree's *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1884), the collection to which Woolson's short-story "Up in the Blue Ridge" is often compared, depicted the isolated and unchanged aspects of rugged, mountain life.<sup>7</sup> Similar to *Rodman the Keeper*, all of these works helped establish the local-color movement. Unlike Irving and Hale, who used the short-story cycle to reveal an authentic American identity, Woolson and her contemporaries fractured the national portrait by showcasing the country's regional, ethnic, and moral differences. Perhaps the authors of the late nineteenth century found the divided form of the cycle analogous to modern life. As the country underwent a disorienting transformation, previous certainties regarding race, identity, and politics crumbled. Simultaneously, the popularity of the short-story cycle grew. By the turn of the century, nearly one hundred had been published in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Woolson, in fact, produced three other short-story cycles in her literary career, all of which are preoccupied with restoring a diminishing past. In *Castle Nowhere: Lake Country Sketches* (1875), she focused on the midwestern lake region to show the effects of commercial expansion on areas of unspoiled wilderness.<sup>9</sup> The collision of French, Native-American, and British cultures dominates the dramatic exposition. In *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (1895) and *Dorothy and Other Italian Stories* (1896), two works previously unrecognized as short-story cycles, Woolson perpetuated the nineteenth century stereotype of the naïve American abroad, who clumsily stumbles upon, and ultimately disrupts, the timeworn customs of European life.<sup>10</sup> Although they are

geographically disparate, Woolson's fictional accounts of the Great Lakes, the South, and Italy have thematic similarities. The conflict between different ethnicities, groups, and cultures is a central concern in all of the pieces. In addition, the works are all set in a window of liminality. Characters cling helplessly to a lost past, or impose new, irreversible changes to present conditions.

*Rodman the Keeper*, in effect, came between two distinct periods in Woolson's literary career: from 1870 to 1874, she lived in and wrote about Great Lakes region where she vacationed as a child; from 1880 until her death in 1894, she lived in Italy and wrote fiction set in Europe. Significantly, when Woolson traveled, her perspective shifted, as did her identification with local characters and landscapes. A trained botanist, she was acutely aware of her natural world, and her surroundings influenced her creative process significantly. Her vivid descriptions of the midwestern lake country, the Florida swamps, and European cities, all illustrate her commitment to detail. Although she immersed herself in the places she lived, she has never been associated with one specific locale. Her nomadic lifestyle makes it difficult to affix her work, and thus her legacy, to the local-color interest of only one region. She always remained an outsider.

The significance of *Rodman the Keeper* is largely influenced by Woolson's position as a northern interloper, as well as the historical context in which it was composed. The author arrived in St. Augustine in 1874, four years before the contentious election of Rutherford B. Hayes. She was one of the few authors from New England or the Midwest who lived in the South during the Reconstruction period, which lasted from 1865 to 1877. Woolson and Harriet Beecher Stowe are the only northern fiction writers who lived in and wrote about the South during this period.<sup>11</sup> As political and commercial

interests precipitated the end of Reconstruction, popular literature mirrored the changing times, and the reformist texts of the antebellum years faded. Stories of pathos-filled nostalgia emerged. Even Stowe, who wintered in the Florida for two decades after the war, contributed to the trend. In *Palmetto Leaves* (1873), for example, a collection of southern vignettes, she praises the Edenic qualities of the land and even encourages farmers to capitalize on the cheap black labor.<sup>12</sup> Similar to Woolson, Stowe's sketches first appeared serially. Each author's decisions to collect and republish her work reveals the public's growing interest in the South, a region where plantations and people, rendered fallow and harmless, became sources of curiosity, fantasy, and amusement.

As Reconstruction ended, the market for short-fiction increased. Magazines such as *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *Atlantic Monthly*, courted an audience of northern, white readers who were, as Anne E. Rowe argues, "eager to be entertained and amused, anxious to be distracted with pictures of interesting people and places rather than be preached to about social inequality."<sup>13</sup> It is, nonetheless, a misrepresentation of Woolson to argue that her fiction is informed only by a northern bias that sought to entertain a distant audience. What makes *Rodman the Keeper* an interesting study is not merely the evidence of its author's regional loyalties. Rather, the cycle is made remarkable by Woolson's subtle presentation of the continuity of change. It is rarely observed that the four stories in *Rodman the Keeper* that take place in Florida are set before the Civil War. In effect, the ethnic and regional clashes that Woolson depicts in antebellum Florida, a colonized land with its own dark history, are markedly connected to the six remaining stories set in the postbellum South. Thus, what is most important about the ten pieces collected in *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches* is not what they contribute

individually but what emerges when they are recognized as a series of intertwining narratives, existing symbiotically with one another. The portrait that surfaces reveals an American frontier, scarred by the effects of colonization, war, division, and expansion, that exists in a state of constant transition.

## CHAPTER 2

### BIOGRAPHY: DAUGHTER NOWHERE

From a young age, Woolson had an intense wanderlust. In a letter to a childhood friend who was abroad, she declared her love of adventure: “I wish I could be in ‘exile’ too, if I could visit the most beautiful and famous places the world can show. You are the most fortunate young lady I know, and ought to be the *happiest*. I envy you to that extent that the tenth commandment makes me shudder.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps her desire to travel is owed to the instability of her early life. She was born in Claremont, New Hampshire, reared in Cleveland, Ohio, and, shortly before the Civil War, she attended boarding school in New York City. Her family’s move to the mid-west followed great loss. In 1840, less than a month after her birth, her three older sisters, each under the age of five, died from scarlet fever. By the fall of 1840, her parents sought a new beginning in Cleveland, a city that was chartered only four years before they arrived.<sup>15</sup>

Although they relocated to the expanding, ever-changing mid-west, both of her parents had strong ties to the east-coast establishment. Hannah Pomeroy Woolson, the author’s mother, was born in Cooperstown, New York and was the niece of James Fenimore Cooper. Constance’s father, Charles Jarvis Woolson, was born in Chester, Vermont and also descended from two distinguished New England lines.<sup>16</sup> Their daughter, nonetheless, remained financially, socially, and geographically disconnected

from her ancestral history. It was not until 1858, when she was eighteen years old, that she visited Cooperstown, New York.

After her father's death in 1870, Woolson began publishing travel sketches and short-stories to support her family. In a letter to a friend, she revealed her financial dependence on writing: "With the money I earn by my pen, Mother and I are entirely comfortable in our quiet way: without it, we should be very cramped, and every day an anxiety."<sup>17</sup> Woolson, however, was a smart businesswoman who knew how to market her fiction. She began including her middle name, Fenimore, in her published work, knowing that her connection to America's first celebrated fiction-writer was significant. Jokingly she referred to Cooper, who she never met, as her "one little anchor out in a crowded harbor," recognizing that her granduncle's fame, as well as his association with the American frontier, could help secure her financial and literary livelihood.<sup>18</sup>

In the autumn of 1874, Woolson, at age thirty-three, arrived in St. Augustine with her widowed mother. Her sister, whose husband had also died, also came south, along with her infant daughter.<sup>19</sup> The family's decision to leave Cleveland was prompted by financial problems as well as health concerns. The standard of living was markedly less expensive in Florida, and, Woolson, as the financial provider for the matriarchy, was entirely responsible for their livelihood. In addition, her mother, Hannah, was rheumatic and could take convalescence in the humid air. Amidst the swamps and slow coastal life, the author found a "certain wild freedom" in the quiet, undeveloped beaches of northern Florida. Appreciating the solitude, she went so far to declare herself as "utterly alone as Robinson Crusoe."<sup>20</sup> Thus, in the quiet tropics of the nation's oldest city, she found a



creative sanctuary to write and a new world to explore. In a letter to a friend back in Cleveland, Woolson shared her love of the remote coastal life:

[I take] a row boat and go prowling down the inlet into all sorts of creeks that go no one knows where; I wind through dense forest where the trees meet overhead, and the long grey moss brushes my solitary boat. . . . I meet alligators, porpoises, pelicans, cranes, and even deer, but not a human soul.<sup>21</sup>

Woolson, who once claimed to “never [tire] of studying human nature in all its manifestations,” frequently explored the beaches, Spanish ruins, and Minorcan communities of Florida.<sup>22</sup> During the stifling summer months, however, she, along with her family, visited the Cooper ancestral home in upstate New York. Traveling north with her young niece and her ailing mother required many periods of rest. These sojourns, which sometimes lasted for weeks, gave Woolson time to examine life in the states that once comprised the heart of the Confederacy.

Her observations from this time form the fictional world of *Rodman the Keeper*. Perhaps to gain credibility in the local-color movement, she prefaced her work with the vow that

the sketches included in this volume were written during a residence in the South, which has embraced the greater part of the past six years. As far as they go they record real impressions; but they can never give the inward charm of that beautiful land which the writer has learned to love, and from which she severs now with true regret.<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, in a letter to William Dean Howells, Woolson asserted, “Yes; I think ‘Rodman’ is good. It is an exact picture of reality; as I saw it.”<sup>24</sup> Whether her claims of authenticity were true or merely clever marketing, the public’s response to *Rodman the Keeper* was overwhelmingly positive. In the book’s first review, an anonymous critic at *Literary World* remarked that Woolson had written “the kind of stories that people like to read. . . . They are all of the South, and though the writer is a Northern woman they more thoroughly represent the South as it is than anything of the kind that has been written since the war.”<sup>25</sup> In June of 1880, only a few months later, *New York Times* ran a favorable review, in which they commended her depiction of southern women, as well as her ability to be

perfectly familiar with Southern life and scenery. The faculty of describing locality may be easily acquired, but where the author shows real genius is in that finer appreciation of Southern women. Miss Woolson evinces a very touching sympathy for her Southern sisters, who, after the war, were often placed in the saddest plights, and what the author has written about them is full of tender grace.<sup>26</sup>

Although most critical comment praised Woolson’s ability to describe southern life, not all readers were convinced that *Rodman the Keeper* provided the “real impressions” that its preface promised.

For example, in 1880, a lukewarm review appeared in *Scribner’s Monthly Magazine*. Unlike the *Times* critic, the anonymous reviewer from *Scribner’s* reproved Woolson’s use of southern women and mockingly suggested that

we dare not positively assert that Southern girls, when brought up sufficiently, may not make use of such hollow phrases as the following: ‘Shall I forget these things? Never! Sooner let my right hand wither by my side!’ etc., but if they do, they are not so genuine in their grief or in their wrath as Miss Woolson would have us believe.<sup>27</sup>

In an unpublished letter, Woolson responded to the critic. Although she did not know to whom she was writing, she wrote a lengthy account of why she chose to portray her southern women with lofty and colorful mannerisms. She did not, however, apologize for her portrayal or offer any excuses. Instead, she tactfully asserted that

as to the way my Southern girls talk, I do not think it is overdrawn. They do—or did—talk in that way, when excited. Not all Southern girls, of course; but the daughter, for instance of those old Virginia and Carolina families who raised their own neighborhoods and their own state in the old days. Just before the breaking out of the rebellion, I was sent from Cleveland to an old-fashioned French school in New York—that of Madame Chegaray. At that period, almost all of her boarding-pupils were southern girls, and they were so entirely new to me—I was so fascinated by their ways and grandiloquent style of talking, that I spent most of my time listening to, and looking at, them. Later, when I went South myself I met some of these girls again, and I noticed in what they said (as well as in the stories other southern ladies told me), that the same old grandiloquence had survived through all their sorrows and sufferings. I do not deny that there was much absurdity in much of their old-time rhetoric. I have given

it as it was, intentionally. But, they lived up to it in one way. The very girls who, at school, had grandly called themselves ‘The Daughter’s of Carolina,’ (to the astonishment of the new western pupil, who had never thought of styling herself ‘The Daughter of Ohio’) proved themselves her daughters indeed, when the time came, suffering with her—although mistakenly—every privation.<sup>28</sup>

Woolson’s humorous announcement that she never considered herself “The Daughter of Ohio” is a telling remark. Her inability to feel defined by any particular region was, Sharon Dean suggests, a double-edged sword that severed her from a sense of home while giving her the freedom to break ties that would have bound her creative ability.<sup>29</sup>

Although Woolson’s frequent travels exempted her from a provincial world-view, it is likely that she realized that her reputation as a virtual “Daughter Nowhere” would advance her career. It would no doubt help to authenticate her position as a neutral and unbiased visitor to the places she traveled. Critical opinion has focused on the rootless nature of Woolson’s life, and although this observation is valid, it is complicated by the fact that she maintained she strong ties to her family, with whom she lived for most of her adult life. In addition, several of her personal letters reveal her strong attachment to Ohio. For example, after observing the Confederate Memorial in Atlanta, she described it as “a massive structure, but, like the one in Richmond, not to be compared with those we have in the north.”<sup>30</sup> Woolson also showed a deep connection to the Union soldiers who lost their lives while fighting in the South. In fact, she and her mother visited Civil War cemeteries in Chattanooga, Atlanta, Savannah, Washington, D. C., and Virginia. After visiting the Chattanooga Cemetery, Woolson recalled that

opposite were those batteries which had cut to pieces so fearfully our Ohio regiments, and all the way down to Chickamauga, ten miles distant, every step was fought for till the little creek we saw ran red.<sup>31</sup>

Although Woolson claimed not to consider herself a “Daughter of Ohio,” her personal correspondence reveals that she did grieve for the state’s lost sons. Her public image as an outsider writing from unexplored areas, however, undoubtedly helped to establish her literary career.

In fact, throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Woolson remained a best-selling author. Esteemed authors also respected her work. In 1884, for example, Henry James claimed that she and William Dean Howells were the only English-language novelists that he read.<sup>32</sup> In *Partial Portraits* (1888), James continued to praise Woolson, and maintained that in *Rodman the Keeper* she had

done nothing better than the best pages in this succession of careful, strenuous studies of certain aspects of life, after the war, in Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas. As the fruit of a remarkable minuteness of observation and tenderness of feeling on the part of one who evidently did not glance and pass, but lingered and analyzed, they have a high value, especially when regarded in the light of the voicelessness of the conquered and reconstructed South.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, it is not just with the lens of time and distance that her contribution to American fiction is appreciated. Her fellow writers also recognized that her work was unique in its form, content, and vantage point.

Despite her peers' high praise, contemporary scholarship devoted to Woolson is marked by gaps and silences. Since she moved frequently, was born between the domestic novelists and the New Woman novelists of the nineteenth century, and did not gain notoriety by forming a close relationship with another woman in what was coined a "Boston Marriage," she is difficult to categorize.<sup>34</sup> In effect, she is seldom anthologized.<sup>35</sup> Although Woolson appears briefly in Leon Edel's voluminous biography of James, he paints her as a minor, uninteresting writer. Only four letters remain from James and Woolson's lengthy correspondence, as a result of their pact to burn all evidence of their communication. The existing letters, all written by Woolson, total approximately fifteen thousand words. From this evidence, Edel surmised that

Miss Woolson's propensity was to pour herself out to James. Full of self-pity at her foot-loose state . . . wandering among the Continental cities to places far removed from the Western Reserve and the American South, felt herself alien and solitary. . . . The tone of her letters, above all else, is one of depression and of touching loneliness—a middle-aged woman reaching out to a man younger than herself for a friendliness that she had glimpsed. . . . Fenimore complained in the very act of not complaining.<sup>36</sup>

Although Edel implies a vast discrepancy in the authors' ages, the two were only born three years apart: Woolson in 1840 and James in 1843. The biographer also relates Woolson's apparent suicide, a fall from her Venice apartment window in 1894, to be the result of James's unrequited love. Upon her death, James wrote that Woolson "was so valued and close a friend of mine and had been for so many years that I feel an intense nearness of participation in every circumstance of her tragic end."<sup>37</sup> Many critics have

thus assumed that Woolson provided the inspiration for May Bartram in “The Beast in the Jungle.”<sup>38</sup> All of these claims are little more than literary gossip, but, unfortunately, they have eclipsed the significance of Woolson’s own work.

These factors are compounded by a dearth of autobiographical material. Her niece Clare Benedict published the majority of Woolson’s letters but altered the documents dramatically: sentences are excised, ellipses interrupt thoughts, and very few dates are included. The attempt to restore her voice has been an ongoing process. In the 1930s, Dwight D. Kern published the first scholarly study of Woolson, in which he organized her fiction by the three main regions in which she lived, the Midwest, the South, and Italy. In the 1960s, Rayburn S. Moore, primarily a James scholar, published an insightful study of Woolson, which sought to, as he claimed, examine her work “first in relation to her own times and then in the light of ours.”<sup>39</sup> Moore also attempted to find a space for Woolson in the annals of nineteenth century literature, noting her contribution to international themes as well as local-colorism. In the late 1980s, the study of Woolson was rejuvenated by Sharon L. Dean, Cheryl B. Tornsey, and Victoria Brehm. Their efforts have culminated in numerous scholarly works, as well as a collection of critical essays, and a book containing many of her unpublished letters, stories, and travel narratives.<sup>40</sup>

All of these efforts have helped recover Woolson, yet she remains a difficult author to historicize. She wrote, perhaps to her detriment, in a time when geographic ties were incredibly important, influencing a literary period in which authors were defined, if not immortalized, by their associations with region and setting. Yet Woolson, by choice and obligation, traveled often and never even considered herself the daughter of any one

state. This contributes to her minor presence in contemporary studies, but it is also what makes her work most interesting. She remained a constant outsider, a self-described daughter from nowhere, an author positioned somewhere in the betwixt and between of North and South, truth and fiction.<sup>41</sup>



### CHAPTER 3

#### THE GENRE OF THE SHORT-STORY CYCLE

In 1971, Forrest Ingram brought a new perspective to American literary studies with the publication of *Representative Short-Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in Literary Genre*. His work was groundbreaking, and his definition of the twentieth-century short-story cycle remains the point from which all subsequent discussion grows:

A short-story cycle [is] a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts.<sup>42</sup>

Ingram's study is concise and pragmatic, and he divides the genre into three main categories: composed, arranged, and completed. He maintains that a composed cycle is one in which the author foresees all of the elements of his or her project before pen is put to paper. Simply put, the writer has a master plan. Arranged cycles, by contrast, are what he calls the "loosest cycle forms," relying on themes, characters, or motifs to unify individual stories. Completed cycles, the most ambiguous arrangement, occur when an author "consciously" recognizes the unifying strands "subconsciously begun" in disparate stories.<sup>43</sup> Although Ingram sparked the examination of a new genre in literary studies,

his original three categories have since been dismissed on the basis that they rely too heavily on presumptions about authorial intention.

As attention to Ingram's work has grown, so have the definitions and terms used to describe a series of interrelated stories. Robert M. Luscher sought to replace the short-story cycle with a "short-story sequence," the latter of which, by his definition, is

a volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader successfully realizes underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme. . . . Each short story is thus not a completely closed formal experience.<sup>44</sup>

Luscher's attention to reader response and sequence eclipses the more obvious concerns of a work's unifying theme and characters.<sup>45</sup> For example, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1918), which is often cited as the definitive example of a series of interrelated stories, unfolds in a linear fashion, or, as Luscher would argue, a progressive sequence. Yet it is counterintuitive to assume that if the work had been published posthumously, and an editor changed the order of the stories, that the reader's "perceptions of pattern and theme" would change.

Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris also attempted to attach a new name and expand new possibilities to the "generic label" that Ingram developed in the 1970s.<sup>46</sup> They proposed "composite novel" to be a more appropriate label for a series of interrelated stories. The crux of their argument, however, is too firmly rooted in the implications of terminology. Dunn and Morris assume that "the composite novel's structural aesthetic permits the inclusion of text-pieces that short story cycle might reject, text-pieces that have not traditionally been thought of as 'stories' or even 'fiction' or 'prose.'" <sup>47</sup> They do

not, however, make a clear argument of how the words “composite” and “novel” better define a genre that is more inviting of non-standard prose.

In *The Short-Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (1989), Susan Garland Mann’s argument, breaking away from Ingram’s definitive blueprint, does not presume the intentions of the writer. Nor does it rely the impressions of the reader, a problem that J. Gerald Kennedy perpetuates with the claim: “One must concede at last that textual unity, like beauty, lies mainly in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>48</sup> Distinguishing herself from Dunn and Morris, Mann resists rooting her argument in the syntax used to describe the genre. Instead, she focuses on what is inherent and most evident in the short-story cycle: “The stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated.”<sup>49</sup> The clear-cut applicability of Mann’s definition is extended in James Nagel’s *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (2001), the study that ultimately provides the clearest definition of the genre. Commenting on the academic debate that has ensued, Nagel maintains that

the concept of the “short-story cycle” remains to be sufficiently defined in literary scholarship. Any attempt at a systemic definition, however provisional, ultimately encounters not only concept of “story,” differentiating this form of short fiction from other modulations, but of the “cycle,” distinguishing this model from loose collections of stories on one side and “novels” on the other. Perhaps it is axiomatic in scholarship that the most common terms are the most difficult to define.<sup>50</sup>

Nagel stresses that the “central point” to understanding the short-story cycle is recognizing that “each component work must stand alone (with a beginning, middle, and

end) yet be enriched in the context of the interrelated stories.”<sup>51</sup> Nagel focuses his study on contemporary sets of linked narratives, but he also provides a clear and knowledgeable account of the historical context in which the genre emerged in American literature.

Ultimately, the definition of a short-story cycle has changed shape since Ingram’s pioneering work, and the catalogue of representative works is constantly expanding.<sup>53</sup> Although scholars such as Kennedy, Dunn, and Morris, have sought to modify the tradition to include works with poems and sketches, critical comment has never suggested that alternative forms, similar to the ones in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, inhibit a work from being a short-story cycle. Although the genre should, as Nagel has pointed out, be dominated by the presence of linked narratives that have a beginning, middle, and end, the central concern of the cycle is thematic unity. Thus, alternative texts such as poems, plays, vignettes, and sketches, can also exist within a series of linked narratives. In fact, they should be recognized as integral components to the cycle’s development. It should be noted, however, that alternative text-pieces function as the thematic glue to the more important presence of the short-stories, the form that ultimately governs the development of the cycle.

In effect, recurring locales, characters, motifs, and narrative methods are important symmetries in a series of linked narratives, but the fundamental component to the short-story cycle is thematic coalescence. When read together, all of the pieces, alternative and standard, should reveal a singular design, one that is inherent to the work. Unfortunately, the contemporary study of the short-story cycle has been complicated by theories that presume writers’ motives as well as readers’ perceptions. The initial problem, assuming that authors impose similar characteristics upon individual works for

the sole purpose of creating a cycle, is detrimental to the study of Woolson and authors such as Stowe, Frances E. W. Harper, George Washington Cable, Mary Noailles Murfree, and Grace King, who produced short-story cycles in the nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> Most of their stories, as *Rodman the Keeper* evidences, first appeared as separate pieces in various literary magazines. The ten stories that comprise *Rodman the Keeper*, for example, were produced over the span of five years and appeared in magazines as diverse as *Appleton's*, *Lippincott's*, *Scribner's*, *Harper's*, *The Galaxy*, and *Atlantic Monthly*. Although some cycles, such as Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of Pointed Firs* (1896), began as serial installments in one magazine, there are no grounds to assume that any author wrote with the foreknowledge that her or his work would be republished as a series of interconnected narratives.

The linked nature of the short-story cycle should thus be examined as a characteristic belonging to the work itself. The speculation over authorial intention ultimately detracts from the more important study of a text's intrinsic unity. For example, Woolson's *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (1895) and *Dorothy and Other Italian Stories* (1896) were published after her death. Perhaps for this reason they have not been previously recognized as short-story cycles. The posthumous release of Woolson's Italian collections, however, should not limit their admission into the literary genre. It is speculative to assume that her editor's assemblage of previously published narratives could create or undermine the connected nature of the stories themselves. Although some scholars, similar to Kennedy, have argued that the connectedness of a cycle largely depends on the readers' perceptions, this theory is also self-defeating. A short-story cycle exists as an established genre that is defined the by specific criteria:

recurring locales, characters, motifs, and narrative methods, all of which develop thematic unity. These characteristics appear in the work itself, not in the eye of the beholder.

The genre of the short-story cycle has existed since the second century B. C., and while it has transcended many counties and time periods, its appearance in nineteenth century America was largely influenced by travel narratives as well as the country's shifting perceptions of race and gender.<sup>54</sup> As the nation expanded and new boundaries were explored, Americans became increasingly curious about their neighbors and their surroundings. The travel sketch satisfied this interest by providing short, often humorous, depictions of remote regions and people. The evolution of the sketch into the short-story is evidenced in Woolson's own work. When she arrived in a new locale, she would publish brief, colorful accounts of her environs as a means to supplement her income, and as a method through which she could organize her ideas for her longer fiction. Interestingly, it is seldom observed that her travel sketches, similar to her short-story cycles, had recurring characters and settings.

In the sketches, the narrator is an unmarried aunt, who, similar to the author, escorts her young niece from the Great Lakes to St. Augustine and eventually to southern France. Thus, Woolson's travel narratives, although they were never collected as a linked series, can be read as precursors to her short-story cycles. Dennis Berthold suggests that the narrator of the sketches, a feisty and spirited academic, provided Woolson an "an opportunity to constitute another version of herself, to speak with another voice, and to criticize social customs that restricted female empowerment."<sup>55</sup> The tone of authority, humor, and confidence that the narrator uses in the travel sketches

does not appear so readily in the narrative perspectives of Woolson's longer fiction.

Only two works in *Rodman the Keeper*, "In the Cotton Country" and "Felipa," are told through a first-person perspective, but it is interesting that these works are also stylistically different than the other eight pieces. The narrator in these works, similar to the opinionated aunt in the travel pieces, reveals the events with an uncensored, nearly intimate voice.

As the travel sketch and the short-story cycle afforded women more autonomy in the literary market place, African-American authors were also gaining entrance into the world of short-fiction. In an informative and original study, Dunn and Morris maintain that at the turn of the century, African American authors, such as Frances E. Harper in *Sketches of Southern Life* (1891) and Susie King Taylor in *Reminiscences of My Life: A Black Woman's Civil War Memories* (1902), used the motif patterns of quilt work to inspire their collections of linked narratives.<sup>56</sup> Although the concept of a "patchwork composite" is an interesting and appropriate metaphor for the form of the short-story cycle, its relationship to the African American presence in short-fiction is uncertain.

Dunn and Morris's theory, as even they concede, seems less credible when considering that traditional African American quilts are markedly different than colonial-inspired pieces. They have less obvious symmetry and patterns, components that would seem essential for an analogous relationship to linked narratives. In addition, they were often made of motley colors and scraps and did not exhibit the motif patterns of stars, flowers, and shapes of colonial quilts. Ultimately, it was the country's changing perceptions of ethnic and gender roles, not its textile tradition, which played the greatest role in influencing women, as well as African Americans, to enter the literary

marketplace. The works that these authors contributed enriched the genre of the short-story cycle and reflected the changing spirit of the nineteenth century. In addition, as Dunn and Morris's argument seeks to prove, their fiction dealt with issues of marginalization, gender, and race, issues that undoubtedly form the tapestry of a uniquely American story.



## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS OF THE STORIES IN *RODMAN THE KEEPER*

The two groups of stories in *Rodman the Keeper*, those of the postbellum South and those of antebellum Florida, are each unified by setting, theme, narrative method, characters, and style. They do not appear sequentially or in any determinate order. The first group is comprised of six pieces that take in the years immediately following the Civil War, in the states that formed the heart of the Confederacy, specifically Georgia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas. Themes of loss and confusion abound. The narrative voice, frequently providing a third-person omniscient perspective, offers glimpses into the minds of both Southerners and Northerners, revealing that both groups, disillusioned and exhausted, are more similar than different. The northern characters, however, are portrayed as devoted caretakers to Southerners who are depicted as helpless wards. A group of African-American characters, Pomp, Dinah, and Cassius, reappear in each story. They are decidedly one-dimensional and remain nearly voiceless. The stylistic core of each work is achieved through the vivid descriptions of setting: from the mountains of Tennessee to the marshes of South Carolina, Woolson juxtaposes the devastation of southern people with the abundant beauty of their natural world.

The collection's title-piece, for example, takes place in the rolling hills of Tennessee. In "Rodman the Keeper," however, it is from the confines of a National Cemetery that the landscape must be appreciated.<sup>57</sup> Isolated and alone, the graveyard

keeper, an ex-Union soldier named John Rodman, rarely leaves the interminable walls that enclose the bodies of fourteen thousand Union soldiers. He considers himself a “stranger in a strange land” and lives in his memories of the past (12). Rodman’s figurative rebirth occurs with his attempt to nurse a maimed Confederate soldier named Ward De Rosset back to health. He also teaches Pomp, De Rosset’s freed slave, how to read. Bettina Ward, the sick-patient’s cousin, rejects all of Rodman’s assistance and is infuriated that her cousin has submitted to a Northerner’s care. Memorably, she swears that she would “sooner let [her] right hand wither by [her] side” than forgive the North (40).<sup>58</sup> Thus the two cousins personify the South, a land that is scarred and wounded but too proud to ask for help.

Woolson, emphasizing the helplessness of Southerners, gives the cousins the family name of “Ward.” In effect, Rodman is not just in charge of the local cemetery, he is the South’s keeper, morally obligated to look after the health, education, and well-being of its people. Ironically, Rodman’s care for his new neighbors is compared to looking after the dead. Ward, an amputee from the war, dies in his care; Bettina’s clothes are “old and faded” and “lank with famine,” making her appear a beautiful ghost, a relic from another time (10, 26). Even the freed slaves are likened to zombies: “Old men and women, ignorant field hands, bent, dull-eyed, and past the possibility of education even in its simplest forms” (33). The hopelessness of the townspeople is markedly contrasted to the moral vitality of John Rodman.

The poverty of Southerners is also personified in their dilapidated plantations and shanty houses. When Rodman visits the old Ward mansion, he finds the house decrepit and rundown. With disdain, he observes the “quick-growing summer vines” that Bettina

planted in a vain attempt to hide its signs of decay (30). He initially criticized the vines as a “woman’s pathetic effort to cover up what cannot be covered—poverty” (30). Yet when Ward dies and Bettina leaves town, he buys the uprooted vines from the new owner, who, ironically, is a northern developer. As he moves the vines from the house to his graveyard, Rodman acknowledges, with empathy and frustration, the entanglement of Southern and Northern losses.<sup>59</sup>

The crumbling facades of plantations thus embody the house of southern suffering. “Old Gardiston,” another Reconstruction story, introduces seventeen-year old Gardis Duke, who, similar to Bettina, is beautiful, stubborn, and proud.<sup>60</sup> She also lives with her cousin, an elderly, faded aristocrat named Copeland. They are the last two members of the Gardiston family line. The cousins live together in “Old Gardiston,” the family’s ancestral home, which overlooks the rice-lands of coastal South Carolina. Unlike Bettina, when Gardis’s cousin dies, she marries a United States Army Officer and moves to the North. With her exit, Old Gardiston goes up in flames, and her ancestral history is erased.

Similar to the Ward House in “Rodman the Keeper,” Old Gardiston was in the midst of being purchased by a Northerner. When it burned, the narrator suggests that Old Gardiston knew “a contractor’s wife was waiting for it” (138). Clearly a sign of defiance, the house retains the fighting spirit of the Gardiston family pride. It is ironic that Gardis, whose name implies that she is the “guard” and protector of her family line, submits to the care of a former Union soldier. Similar to Bettina, her future happiness, if she is willing to accept help, relies on the care and unselfish efforts of a northern caretaker. Gardis, however, is only seventeen, and represents a different generation than the

relatives who preceded her in the ancestral home. Having to make the choice between guarding the past and moving into the future, the young woman chooses the latter, and, with this decision, the legacy of Old Gardiston is finally destroyed.

Cousin Copeland was the last member of the Gardistons who retained a connection with his familial and cultural history. Unlike his young cousin, he was fully immersed in the memories of the past and was unable to move into the future. Even his physical appearance mirrors his anachronistic presence in society:

Everything he wore was so old-fashioned, however, that he looked like the pictures of the high collared, solemn little men who, accompanied by ladies all bonnet, are depicted in English Sunday-school books following funeral processions (112).

Copeland's death was the inevitable end to a man who, unlike his young niece, was afraid to move forward. He was most comfortable when connected to the past, tracing the names and comforts he used to know. For example, the faded aristocrat spent his days recopying family deeds and documents that were "a century or two old" (109).

Ironically, these old, dried papers started the fire that destroyed the home; not surprisingly, it was Gardis's candle that accidentally lit the flame. Although Gardis leaves the South, Dinah and Pompey, the family's two loyal ex-slaves, "refuse to leave" their former masters (107). In effect, it is only in the ashes of their ancestral history that Gardis, as well as Dinah and Pompey, can pursue a new beginning.

One of the most extreme examples of southern pride embodied by the female and the home occurs in "In the Cotton Country," which, similar to "Old Gardiston," takes place in the low-country regions of South Carolina.<sup>61</sup> The narrative is framed through the

first-person perspective of a northern woman who is lost on a walk in a desolate marsh.<sup>62</sup>

When the visitor stumbles upon a woman and a small child living in the squalor of a deserted home, the narrative shifts into a modified dramatic monologue in which the Southerner relays, for the majority of the story, the hardships that she has endured.<sup>62</sup>

After the death of her father, brothers, and husband, as well as the destruction of their family home, she and orphaned child took residence in the abandoned home. The woman begs the northern visitor to take the “hollow-eyed” child with her. Yet she refuses to leave, awaiting her death in the abandoned, crumbling river house, taking on the suffering of the South and all its people, living and dead.

The protagonist of “In the Cotton Country,” more than any other white, female character in Woolson’s fiction, captures the grief of the South. She does not exude the charm, beauty, and determination of Bettina Ward or Gardis Duke. She is described as vapid and without a discernable age, wholly overcome by poverty and privation:

It was a face that was old and at the same time young; it had deep lines, it was colorless, and the heavy hair was gray; and still I felt like it was not old in years, but that it was like the peaches we find sometimes on the ground, old, wrinkled, and withered, yet showing here and there traces of the evanescent which comes before the ripeness (182).

The woman, whose name is never given, looks and speaks with hollow remove, resembling a ghost of her former self.

She reveals that she had been living in the house with her former slave Old Cassy, who has recently died. Like all of the Cassie and Pomp figures in the cycle, Old Cassy

was unwavering in her loyalty to her former mistress. The southern woman remembers Cassie with anger and affection:

Yes, Cassy is dead. She was buried by her own people, who forgave her at the last for having been so spiritless as to stay with “young missus,” when she might have tasted the glories of freedom over in the crowded hollow where the blacks were enjoying themselves and dying by the score. In six months half of them were gone. They had their freedom—oh yes, plenty of it; they were quite free—to die! . . . I do not know anything certainly any more, for my world has been torn asunder, and I am uprooted and lost. . . . I cannot adjust myself to the new order of things; I can not fit myself in new soil; the fibers are broken (195-96).

Unlike Bettina, who keeps fighting, and Gardis, who submits to the care of a Northerner, this daughter of Carolina is without consolation, without hope. She is neither clinging to a lost time nor moving into a new frontier. She is dead in spirit and void of life.

Although many of the stories in *Rodman the Keeper* involve the conflicts between southern women and northern men, “In the Cotton Country” does not rely on gender to develop its themes of loss and pride. The antagonist is an invisible enemy: the irretrievable past. Interestingly, “King David” is another story in the cycle that does not rely on gender differences for dramatic effect.<sup>63</sup> Instead, it concentrates on issues of race and education in the South. For these reasons, it remains one of Woolson’s most controversial works. In “Rodman the Keeper,” a Northerner’s attempts to educate Pomp comprise the background of the action. In “King David,” by contrast, Woolson pushes the issue of education into the foreground.

The action of events takes place in Jubilee Town, which is a freeman's settlement in rural Georgia. Physically meek with "extreme near-sightedness and an inherited delicacy of constitution," David King is an idealistic Northerner from New Hampshire who comes South to work with the Freedman's Bureau (255). Ironically, his African-American pupils rename him "King David." But David is no leader, and his weak physicality mirrors his feeble attempt to understand the generations of hardship and deprivation that his students have endured.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, he views teaching them as his "duty, not liking." Not surprisingly, his efforts to start a new school fail (259). King David leaves Jubilee Town with the promise that he will send an educated African American from the North to replace himself. To this, one of David's students exclaims that

a color'd man will unerstan us, 'specially ef he hab lib'd at de Souf; we don't want no Norden free niggas hyar. But a 'spectavle color'd preacher, now, would be de makin' ob Jubilee, fo 'dis worl' an' de nex'" (262).

In one of her few attempts at regional dialect, Woolson breaks away from her usual tropes of Pomp, Cassy, and Dinah, and gives a different voice to the African-American presence in *Rodman the Keeper*. The point that Woolson makes, however, is ambiguous at best. She shows the South's need for educational leaders in the same breath she criticizes the idealism of some who attempt to do so.

More significantly, in the wake of Reconstruction, Woolson presented a freed slave who was more interested in church than education. Her presentation of race issues remains a contentious and frequently debated issue. In 1963, Rayburn Moore viewed her

depiction of the race relations as unbiased and argued that “King David” is an overwhelmingly positive story that

reveals on the one hand a breadth of knowledge and a sympathetic understanding of a situation that few Northern observers could approach and on the other hand an objectivity that few Southern commentators possessed with regard to the particular problem. Miss Woolson’s point of view in the story becomes all the more remarkable when one remembers that she was a native of New Hampshire and a staunch Unionist. That the work possesses more than a passing topical pertinence should be clear to the modern reader, for its point, as Hubbell has described it—that good intentions are not enough for those who plan to make over the life of a region which they do not fully understand.<sup>65</sup>

By contrast, Anne E. Rowe argues that there are two pervading stereotypes of African Americans in “King David,” “those who are dull to learn, and those who have the intelligence but use it to seek more immediate gratification such as getting drunk and terrorizing whites.” Thus, in “King David” Rowe sees evidence of Woolson supporting the national sentiment that it was time to let the South regain management of its own affairs.<sup>66</sup>

In “King David” there are also two prominent stereotypes of white Northerners: David King, the idealistic do-gooder, and The Captain, a carpetbagger who has come South to collect votes in a corrupt political campaign. Ironically, it is the Captain who changes the lives of the African Americans in Jubilee Town: he opens a liquor store that becomes a corrupting force in the community. Students fall prey to his alcohol sales and



drop out of David's school. Ostensibly, the men have different intentions: David's are benevolent and altruistic; The Captain's are manipulative and self-serving. Yet, ultimately, it is the carpetbagger who is able to infiltrate the community and affect the lives of the freed slaves. In effect, the portrait that Woolson paints of the South in "King David" is not a positive one. This overt negativity, which does not appear frequently in the cycle, sends two messages in the same breath: it encourages Northerners to come to the South to fix a problem, while subtly implying that their help will not be welcome.

Unlike "King David," which deals with political and moral issues, "Bro." and "Up in Blue Ridge" are light-hearted romances.<sup>67</sup> Both, as many critics have pointed out, are less developed and less interesting than Woolson's other work.<sup>68</sup> In "Bro.," for example, the protagonist is so self-sacrificing that the story lacks the realistic development of her other stories. Mrs. Manning and her quiet, bookish daughter Marion live on the remote Sea Islands somewhere off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Ambrose Cranch is a painfully shy youth nicknamed Bro. because of "his inconsequence in every way" (226). He is in love with Marion, who, unknowingly, breaks his heart when she marries the world-traveled sophisticate Lawrence Vickery. Bro., an inventor with a patent from Washington, D.C., gives all of his money to Vickery when he hears that the groom plans to flee town on account of financial problems. Bro.'s benevolent scheme works, and Vickery and Marion are happily married. Unfortunately for the young inventor, his spirit is stomped out and he never invents anything again.

The sacrifice of Bro. seems to comment on the life of the artist, who, in order to produce, must be inspired. The story lacks a central purpose, and the theme is tangled in both love and loss, issues that Woolson's deals with in a less elementary way in other

works. The Sea Islands' remote location and distance from the rest of the country heightens the presence of the visiting outsider, Vickery. Ironically, Vickery is not as much of an outsider as he would have the townspeople believe. In fact, he is the drawbridge keeper's son who has been traveling the world for almost a decade. In effect, he assumes the role of northern caretaker with double the condescension of Woolson's other visitors from New England.

The hollow melodrama of "Bro." is not repeated in "Up in Blue Ridge," although the latter work is too long and lacks a clear focus. Similar to the physical isolation of the Sea Islands, the story takes place in Ellerby, a remote town in the Blue Ridge Mountains that remains unchanged by time:

These mountains are in the middle South. . . . Here and there are villages, or rather farm-centers, for the soil is fertile wherever it is cleared; but the farms are old and stationary: they do not grow, stretch out a fence here, or a new field there; they remain as they were when the farmers' sons were armed and the sent to swell George Washington's little army (279).

The inhabitants of Ellerby are also removed from the effects of time. Although the Civil War has occurred, the mountain-people are "much bewildered as to the state of the world, but unchanged in their lack of the questioning capacity . . ." (285). Their slow, easy life is disrupted when Stephen Wainwright, a wealthy, arrogant New Yorker arrives. The displaced Northerner quickly falls in love with the local librarian, Honor Dooris, and sets off a series of events that wreak havoc on the small town. There is a shooting involving some local moonshine, and, much to Wainwright's disappointment, he finds out that Honor is in love with another man.

These events constitute the climax, but another, more interesting, storyline also surfaces. Similar to Bro.'s selfless love for Marion, it involves quiet infatuation. Wainwright confides all of his private feelings to Adelaide Kellinger, his devoted "conversation friend," who happens to be, unbeknownst to him, very much in love with him (278). Adelaide, however, never confesses her feelings to Wainwright. She remains his loyal friend and accompanies him back to New York, hoping that one day he will discover that he is also in love with her.

Woolson's six pieces about the Reconstruction South in *Rodman the Keeper* are interwoven with four stories, connected by setting, theme, narrative method, characters, and style, which capture antebellum life amidst the dense tropics of coastal Florida. The central themes are preoccupied with a tangible past. Ruins of Spanish plantations, reminders of Native-American civilizations, and disrupted Minorcan communities linger in the shadows of each narrative, creating an almost supernatural development of setting and mood. The past and the land come alive. The narrative perspective, which is primarily third-person omniscient, goes so far to reveal the thoughts of the ancient live oaks and the deserted burial grounds. All of the works involve Northern visitors who intermix, in friendships and romances, with members of the Minorcan community. Stylistically, these stories comprise Woolson's best work in short fiction.

Perhaps it was her reading public's ignorance about Florida, or their lack of personal investment in the state, that gave her the freedom to write with new authority and confidence. In "Miss Elisabetha," for example, ethnic intermarriage controls the storyline, a topic that Woolson was not likely to broach in her Reconstruction pieces.<sup>69</sup> In the small town of Beata, Elisabetha Daarg, an elderly, anachronistic aristocrat from

New York City, cares for her deceased lover's orphaned child. It is implied, through a blush, that the man who Miss Elisabetha loved left her for a Minorcan woman. Thus, her adoptive son, Doro, is of mixed blood. The narrator guesses that "a Northerner would have said that he was over twenty, but Spanish blood hastens life, and Teodoro in years was actually not yet eighteen" (79). Miss Elisabetha, who is filled with illusions of her family's grandeur in the North, tries to repress all signs of the orphan's biological heritage.

Ironically, Miss Elisabetha's efforts are self-defeating. Doro, like his father, marries a local Minorcan girl and has "a careless, idle, ignorant, happy brood" of children (104). Throughout the Florida stories, Minorcans are presented as lazy, indolent, and ignorant. These attributes are markedly contrasted to Miss Elisabetha's proper constitution. She is orderly and productive, earning money by braiding Palmetto expertly, teaching music to the "black eyed daughters of the richer townspeople," and running a very efficient, organized household (81). Unfortunately, it is her need to control not only the present, but also the past, that pushes Doro into a life she would not have chosen for him.

The conflict arises when the beautiful opera singer Cécile Kernadi comes to Beata from New York to rest her voice in the warm climate. The singer wants Doro to come apprentice with her, but Miss Elisabetha is offended that "a person of no name, of no antecedents, a public singer" should attempt to take him away (95). Ironically, her selfish attempt to hold on to the memory of her old lover forces the past to repeat itself. There is an element of the grotesque in "Miss Elisabetha," the dark tale of an elderly woman whose affection for her adoptive son, a mirror image of her former lover, fuels her

jealous attempts to keep him close. It is as if the past is all she can see. In addition, because Doro, like his father, dies young, their deaths seem connected to marrying women outside of their own ethnicity.

Thus, the work implies that the past, as well as relationships outside of one's race, hold elements of danger. In "Felipa," the story of another interracial child, there are even suggestions that people of mixed ethnicities are tempted to engage in bisexual love.<sup>70</sup> Felipa, similar to Doro, is a young orphan. She is half Spanish and half Minorcan, or, as the narrator claims, "part pagan, part Catholic, and wholly ignorant" (199). A group of northern visitors, Edward, Christine, and Kitty are vacationing in her small town of Madu Lagoon, Florida. Oddly, Felipa speaks of Christine and Edward as if they are one person. She is not able to discern between the two and is infatuated with them both. When the three visitors prepare to depart Madu Lagoon, the young girl is devastated and attempts suicide by swallowing poisonous herbs. Although she lives, her attempt to be understood, or even loved, is wholly unsuccessful.

There are different critical theories that attempt to explain Felipa's strange behavior, several of which suggest that the young girl embodies lesbian sensibilities.<sup>71</sup> It seems that Felipa's actions, however, are linked more obviously to her mixed ethnicity. Kern points out that the women of "a hybrid race" who appear in Woolson's fiction are typically depicted as "strange, unpredictable, and to a certain extent untrustworthy."<sup>72</sup> Significantly, Kitty observes that "it is a most extraordinary thing how that child confounds the two of you. . . . It is a case of color-blindness, as it were—supposing you were two colors." Her statement supports the theory that Felipa's attraction to a man and

a woman has more to do with her own ethnicity, the mixing of colors and the inability to be pure, than romantic love.

In addition, it is important that “Felipa” is the only story in the Florida series that is told from a first-person perspective. The narrative voice, provided by Kitty, is sympathetic, observant, northern, and female. Although Kitty tries to reach out to Felipa, and even sews her a dress, the young girl is only interested in Christine and Edward. The narrator’s statement, “I was forgotten, as usual,” suggests that she is a sensitive, complicated character (210). She is clearly the third-wheel on a vacation for lovers, and, similar to Felipa, she is viewed as a bit of an outcast. Unlike her companions, she is an artist who is intensely aware of the world around her. Thus, the theme of displacement felt in “Felipa” is not guided by geography. Instead, it resides in Felipa and Kitty, two women from two different worlds, connected by their search for identity.

While all the Florida stories depict the convergence of people from diverse backgrounds, “Felipa” stands out because of its dark portrait of a child driven to suicide by her inability to feel pure or wanted. Although “Sister St. Luke” is also the story of a misunderstood outsider, it is faster-paced and less puzzling.<sup>73</sup> On Pelican Island, a small community off the coast of northern Florida, Andrew Keith and George Carrington, two New Yorkers on holiday, meet Pedro Gonsalvez, a Minorcan lighthouse keeper and his wife, Melvyna Sawyer, a displaced Protestant from Vermont. The climax occurs when a meek Catholic nun, Sister St. Luke, rushes out to sea in a tornado to save the lives of the northern visitors.

The character development in this work is largely determined by stereotypes. Pedro is part of the local Minorcan community and thus associated with those “too

indolent to do anything more than smoke, lie in the sun, and eat salads heavily dressed in oil” (45). By contrast, his wife Melvyna, similar to Miss Elisabetha, is characterized by her distinctly northern tendency to keep her house orderly and clean. The lighthouse “shone and glittered” under her daily care (44). The northern vacationers are strong and robust men who condescend to Sister St. Luke’s insular, timid vision of her life and world. They encourage her to walk in time to the sea’s rhythm, to take larger strides on the beach, and to let the wind blow in her face.

Sister St. Luke is a dedicated student, yet complains that outside of the convent she is “so lost, so strange am I, so wild in everything” (51). The men are amused to think that they are instructing a “uniformed, timid, mind” (49). Ironically, it is Sister St. Luke who braves her life during a tornado to save their lives. The men, who previously mocked the young nun for her orthodox faith, are impacted by her bravery. Although her life is simple and quiet, she does not fear her own death. In effect, her unselfish efforts represent the inner-strength of the misunderstood outcast. Sister St. Luke’s character is also analogous to the life of the artist. Similar to Kitty, the narrator of “Felipa,” the young nun must look inward for strength and acceptance, as the world around her is not sensitive enough to understand her dreams and fears.

Significantly, the plot centers on Pedro and Melvyna’s lighthouse, which stands as a relic to Florida’s forgotten past:

It was an old square tower which was founded by the Spaniards,  
heightened by the English, and now finished and owned by the United  
States, whose Lighthouse Board said to each other every now and then

that really they must put a first-class Fresnal on Pelican Island and a good substantial tower instead of that old-fashioned beacon (44).

Thus, the lighthouse, inhabited by a Minorcan keeper, his northern wife, and a local Spanish nun, embodies the complicated foundation of Florida. Although it is destroyed in the storm that threatens the Northerners' lives, it is rebuilt with the efforts of the community. Similar to the motley origins of Florida, the lighthouse has been erased and resurrected by a number of different visitors.<sup>74</sup>

The presence of a tangible past impacts "Sister St. Luke," but out of all of the Florida stories, "The South Devil" uses setting most vividly to recall the state's complicated history.<sup>75</sup> Two half-brothers, Mark and Carl Deal, have recently moved South and live in the ruins of Monteano plantation, an abandoned Spanish estate. The grounds of the estate remain scarred by its previous inhabitants:

Behind the live oak, two tall, ruined chimneys and a heap of white stones marked where the mansion house had been. The old tree had watched its foundations laid; had shaded its blank, white front and little hanging balcony above; had witnessed its destruction, fifty years before, by the Indians; and had mounted guard over its remains ever since (140).

The brothers are humbled and even frightened by traces of the plantation's former owners. Yet it is a swamp named "South Devil" whose mysterious powers entrance Carl, who has come to Florida to recover from an illness. With every visit to the swamp, his health declines rapidly.

Carl foresees his death and asks Mark to carry him through the South Devil and bury him on a bluff overlooking the ocean. He claims that he does not want to lie in a



graveyard with the “Dons and the Aztecs” (173). Mark respects his wishes, and, upon Carl’s death, he floats his brother’s body through the swamp in a canoe. He does not cover his body so that he can see South Devil “though his closed eyes” (173). After he is buried, Mark, with his “face turned northward,” leaves Florida to find his lost love back in New England (177).

In “The South Devil,” the past is an entrancing, dangerous entity that is represented by the dark swamp. Carl, who is a young artist, feels the power of the land and it wholly overcomes him. He claims that his purpose in life is to “write out the beautiful music of the South Devil, the sounds one heard in there.” (154). His desire to capture the past proves to be an exhaustive endeavor, one that ultimately kills him. The narrator shares Carl’s concern for history and remarks that

fifty years before the first settlement was made in Virginia, and sixty-three years before the Mayflower touched the shores of the New World, there were flourishing Spanish plantations on this Southern coast. . . . But one does not stop to remember it; the belief is imbedded in all our Northern hearts that, because the narrow, sun-bathed State is far away and wild and empty, it is also new and virgin, like the lands of the West; whereas it is old—the only gray-haired corner our country holds (142).

In her strongest story of the Florida series, Woolson, similar to Carl, attempts through art to capture the sounds of one state’s buried origins.

Ultimately, Woolson’s four stories of Florida depict a complex, interesting land with a history that is unique to the rest of the country. Her time in the “gray-haired corner” of the nation undoubtedly influenced her view of the United States, which stood

as a fractured body at the time of her writing. By examining how all of the pieces of *Rodman the Keeper*, those of the South and those of Florida, come together to create a meditation regarding the continuity of change, the scope of her short-story cycle is ultimately realized.

## CHAPTER 5

### CYCLE UNITY: CONNECTING THE STORIES

It was not until 1934 that the first comprehensive, book-length study of Woolson appeared. In *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Literary Pioneer*, John Dwight Kern observed that the ten stories in *Rodman the Keeper* can be placed into three distinct groups. He did not, however, identify her work as a short-story cycle. Kern, who was writing four decades before Ingram's pioneering book, referred to *Rodman the Keeper* as a "volume of southern tales." With pragmatic consideration, he suggested that

these tales can perhaps best be considered within the limits of the three classes into which they can be conveniently grouped: that is, stories of social conditions amid the lush fragrance of semi-tropical Florida; romances of the Civil War and of the post-war South, in which local color is a variable factor; and tales of the effects of the war and of its horrible aftermath—Reconstruction—upon the lives of individual Southerners.<sup>76</sup>

Thus Kern only identified the elements that unify the stories within their groups; he failed to explore how the respective groups, when read in dialogue, form a coalescent cycle.

Interestingly, although *Rodman the Keeper* is listed on two contemporary bibliographies of the American short-story cycle, no in-depth study has been offered to explain how and why the text can be considered part of the genre.<sup>77</sup> Although Kern identified three interrelated groups, he did not have the recourses to define the patterns he

was seeing. In addition, the dynamic impact of *Rodman the Keeper* is best studied when its stories are organized into only two groups: those in Florida before the war and those in the heart of the Confederacy after the war. It is not enough, however, to identify patterns in these groups alone.

Instead, recognizing the similarities between all of the stories reveals the theme of irreversible loss in *Rodman the Keeper*. The first unifying element is stylistic, as all ten works are preceded with short poems.<sup>78</sup> The poems lend a lyrical quality to *Rodman the Keeper*, for they are all romantic in tradition, and many are melancholy laments. As such, they soften the seams between each story. By borrowing from poets such as Sidney Lanier and William Dean Howells, Woolson created depth through intertextuality and technical interest. Since the poems did not appear in all of the original serial publications, their inclusion adds to the development of the continuous cycle.

One of the most obvious symmetries in all ten narratives is the presence of Northerners in the South, a region in which they were, as Woolson described, “strangers in a strange land.” The visitors from New England are portrayed as obvious outsiders to the customs and traditions of the land. They frequently face disillusionment, and even danger, with their attempts to redeem southern people. For example, in “Miss Elisabetha” and “Felipa,” Elisabetha and Kitty come to the Florida as single, self-sufficient woman and both end up taking care of orphaned children of mixed descent. Ironically, neither Doro nor Felipa accepts their help. This results in the misery of Elisabetha, the disillusionment of Kitty, and, ostensibly, the early death of Doro. Felipa, wrecked by her inability give or accept love, attempts suicide.

“Old Gardiston,” “In the Cotton Country,” “Rodman the Keeper,” and “King David” all focus on northern visitors who are presented as self-sacrificing saviors. In “Old Gardiston,” a Union soldier lifts Gardis Duke from the ashes of her former life; “In the Cotton Country” reveals a northern woman, who, similar to the protagonists of “Miss Elisabetha” and “Felipa,” asserts the role of mother to an orphaned, southern child; in “Rodman the Keeper,” the selfless keeper is the redeemer of all the townspeople, black and white, who he tries to nurse back to moral and physical health; and, in “King David,” the naïve but honorable efforts of a northern schoolteacher culminate in a story that suggests that no matter how hard Northerners try, southern people are too provincial and stubborn to accept their help.

“Sister St. Luke” and “The South Devil” also attempt to show the danger of immersing oneself in southern life. “Sister St. Luke” showcases Keith and Carrington’s attempts to broaden the worldview of a local nun of Spanish. Their efforts are self-defeating, and the men are humbled when it is they who are rescued in a treacherous storm. In “The South Devil,” Carl’s deep connection to the swamp, which represents the mysterious power of land’s dark history, makes him a figurative Southerner, one whom his brother cannot save. Accordingly, “Bro.” and “Up in Blue Ridge,” reveal the disappointment that comes from reaching out to southern women, who are portrayed as sources of mystery and frustration. Similar to Bettina Ward in “Rodman the Keeper” and Gardis Duke in “Old Gardiston,” Honor Dorris and Melinda Blank hold the power to reject the advances of both northern and southern men.

In addition, the recurring of image of a house is used to contrast northern self-sufficiency to southern dependence. “Miss Elisabetha” takes place in a home of well-

dusted antiques and spotless order. It, however, falls prey to Doro's Minorcan children, who bang on the old piano until it breaks. "Sister St. Luke" focuses on Melvyna Sawyer, a Protestant from Vermont, and her diligent care for her Minorcan husband's lighthouse, which was a former Spanish fortress. Her efforts are also in vain. The house is destroyed by a devastating tornado. In "The South Devil," the Deals, similar to Melvyna, try to occupy the ruins of a Spanish house, but the mysterious forces of the land also overwhelm them, ultimately killing Carl.

In "Old Gardiston," "Rodman the Keeper," "In the Cotton Country," and "King David" the presence of northern visitors under southern roofs also offers redemption and help. Similar to the orphan in "In the Cotton Country," Gardis Duke, in the ashes of her former home, is rescued by a Northerner. "Rodman the Keeper" presents Rodman's small home as a place of refuge. It functions as a hospice and a schoolhouse. By contrast, the Ward's plantation is smothered in thick vines, and, similar to De Rosset and Bettina, can only be redeemed, or, purchased, by a northern visitor. In "King David," the only hope for the southern schoolhouse lies in the patience of northern teachers. The narrative voice, however, insinuates that the African American pupils are more willing to enter a liquor store or even a church than sit under the necessary protection that the house of education provides.

In effect, the depiction of African-American and Minorcan characters in "Rodman the Keeper" is overwhelmingly negative. It should be noted, however, that Minorcan characters such as Doro in "Miss Elisabetha," Pedro in "Sister St. Luke," and Felipa, all of whom appear in the Florida stories, are developed with more depth and intelligence than the Pomp, Cassy, and Dinah figures who appear in the Reconstruction

pieces. The Minorcan characters are integrated into the life of white Northerners, whereas the African-American are generally ignored. Doro, for example, is the adored foster child of a white woman and the love interest of a famous opera singer; Pedro is married to a nurse from Vermont; and, even Felipa, the most pitiful interracial child to appear in the cycle, is cared for by northern visitors. By contrast, Pomp, Dinah, and Cassie are portrayed as sub-superior foils to both the Northerners and Southerners who surround them. They are depicted as either too ignorant to learn or wholly uninterested in advancing themselves.

In fact, in “Old Gardiston,” “In the Cotton Country,” “Rodman the Keeper,” and “King David,” all of the ex-slaves refuse to leave the house of their former masters, who, in every story, end up abandoning them first. In “Old Gardiston,” Gardis leaves Old Dinah and Pomp, as well as her southern identity, for her new husband in the North. In “Rodman the Keeper,” Ward dies and Bettina moves, leaving Pomp and Cassie behind. By contrast, “In the Cotton Country” shows that Cassie dies before the southern narrator. It is suggested, however, that her former mistress is also preparing for death, living in the abandoned house with no family and no money. Ultimately, the Pomp, Dinah, and Cassie figures appear in four stories and function as generic, nearly voiceless, representations of ex-slaves, living in South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee.

Setting plays a major role in connecting the stories of the South to the tales of Florida. For example, “Bro.” and “Up in the Blue Ridge” take place after the Civil War, but there is no mention of the Pomp, Cassie, and Old Dinah characters. These two stories, which are essentially romances, instead focus on the unchanged manner of rural life in the Appalachia and the Sea Islands. The time period is postbellum, but the

environs are unmarked by the effects of the war, and thus provide a stylistic buffer between the stories of Florida and those set in the South during Reconstruction, which ultimately offer the greatest comparison of life before and after the war. Interesting, the relics and swamps of Florida are markedly connected to the cemeteries and old plantation houses of the deep South. Both settings offer the visceral presence of a disappearing past. Through a traditional Minorcan song floating through the air in “Miss Elisabetha,” the old Spanish mansions and Native American graveyards in “Swamp Devil,” and the old fortress in “Sister St. Luke,” relics of the past are constant reminders of colonization and conflict. Similarly, the decrepit ancestral homes in “Old Gardiston” and “Rodman the Keeper,” as well as the crumbling slave quarters in “In the Cotton Country,” also represent the effects of colonization and war. In addition, the marsh land of South Carolina in “In the Cotton Country” and “Old Gardiston” is presented with the same intoxicating power of the swamp in “The South Devil.” The characters who live in either landscape are unnaturally, even dangerously, attached to the land, as the southern narrator of “In the Cotton Country” and Carl Deal in “The South Devil” illustrate.

Only two pieces in the collection, “In the Cotton Country” and “Felipa,” unfold through a first-person perspective. The remaining eight pieces are related through a third-person omniscient point of view, a method that is especially useful to contrast the thoughts of northern and southern characters. All ten stories, however, are told with the bias of distinctly northern sensibilities. In her informative study of regional ties in *Rodman the Keeper*, Karen Weekes maintains that the

sketches show a South incapable of helping itself; story after story  
portrays needy, proud, or lazy Southerners relying on the strength of the



North to save them. Woolson's sympathy might lie with the South, but in *Rodman the Keeper*, her sensitivity to variations in character and theme surely lie elsewhere.<sup>79</sup>

Weekes's observation is accurate, and, in the years since Kern and Moore's pioneering works on Woolson, critical opinion has increasingly suggested that the narrative perspective of *Rodman the Keeper* is overwhelmingly partial to Northerners and overtly patronizing to Southerners. While this is true, it should be recognized that Woolson's regional bias alone is not what makes *Rodman the Keeper* an interesting study. While it is evident that all of the stories in *Rodman the Keeper* were written by a nineteenth-century northern author, who undeniably carried a regional bias, it is perhaps more important to observe how and when that perspective surfaces to create themes of loss in a continuous cycle.

For example, when "Rodman the Keeper" appeared serially in 1877 there was a heated scene in which Rodman vehemently urged Bettina to help educate the freed slaves. Three years later, when the story was collected, the scene was excised. Perhaps the early appearance of the story, which coincided with the last year of Reconstruction, sought to show Southerners' unwillingness to help and thus assuage s' guilt about the federal government's withdrawal from the region. This, however, cannot be proven. What can be clearly argued is that the deletion of the heated debate affected the theme of the story. It shifted from being a thesis-laden story that held Southerners accountable for their own region, to a less political story with more a sympathetic theme, one that linked the frustrations felt by both northern and southern people.

Ultimately, through recurring characters, motifs, settings, and narrative methods, the controlling theme of *Rodman the Keeper* focuses on a general loss of identity. In the Florida stories as well as the Reconstruction pieces, the characters, Northern, Southern, White, Black, Minorcan, adult, and child, all suffer from a sense of disorientation and loss. The stories offer a series of uniquely American problems, all predicated by colonization, conflict, and ethnic intermixing. By connecting Florida's chaotic history to the events in the contemporary South, the cycle highlights the similarities of both regions, particularly their marginalized communities, conquests and wars, as well as immigrants and outsiders. The theme of the work, however, is not one that reconciles the events of the past or the present. Rather, by focusing on the cyclical patterns of the nation's history, *Rodman the Keeper* shows that the Civil War and its aftermath comprise one horrific but short chapter in the nation's turbulent history. In effect, Woolson presents a uniquely American story: one that is held together by its pieces, past and present, forever in the midst of continuous change.

## CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSION

The debate over how Woolson should be remembered, and if she should be recognized in the canon of American literature, remains a contentious subject.<sup>80</sup> In 1915, Fred Lewis Pattee provided a fair evaluation of her literary position in *A History of American Literature Since 1870*. Assessing that her work was “not to be compared to the perfect art” of Grace King and Kate Chopin, he acknowledged that her artistry, especially in the stories that she produced about the South, deserved recognition. He maintained that with *Rodman the Keeper*,

the North found its most adequate picture of the territory over which had been fought in the *Civil War*. . . . It showed the desolation wrought by the armies during the four years, the pathos of broken homes and ruined plantations, the rankling bitterness, especially in the hearts of women, the helpless pride of the survivors, and the curious differences between the Northern and Southern temperaments. It was careful work. . . . The standpoint was that of an observer from without. There was no dialect in the tales, there were no revealings of the heart of Southern life as in Harris and Page and the others who had arisen from the material they used, but there was beauty and pathos and a careful realism that carried conviction.<sup>81</sup>

Pattee's evaluation is well balanced and largely representative of the early scholarship devoted to Woolson. However, as literary studies progress into the twenty-first century, the greater significance of Woolson, as well as *Rodman the Keeper*, becomes apparent.

Sharon Dean was one of the first in the second wave of Woolson criticism to recognize that her importance should not only be measured against the legacy of writers such as Chopin and King. Instead, Dean sought to extract what was unique about Woolson's own life and work. In regard to her southern period, Dean surveyed previous criticism on the author and observed that many scholars had overlooked the colonist implications of her work. Taking this into account, Dean conceded that

in terms of its victory, its industrialism, and its literary traditions, the North was clearly the dominant culture, but Woolson was never a part of the eastern establishment tradition. Aware of her position as an outsider, a single woman who had lost her home, she was sensitive to southern loss; aware of the newness of western communities, she quickly perceived the age and tradition of southern ones. . . . This, of course, does not mean she was free from bias.<sup>82</sup>

In her articulate and open-minded observation, Dean acknowledges that Woolson was a more complicated author than many scholars had previously recognized. She was indeed a product of her times, an author whose views of race and gender were largely influenced by the historical context in which she wrote.

Yet she was also sensitive to the pain of the human experience. By 1880, she had survived two parents, one brother-in-law, and three siblings; she had lost her ancestral home Cooperstown and her childhood home in Cleveland; and she, similar to many

Americans, had lived through the Civil War and mourned the death of hometown acquaintances who died in it. These losses were compounded by the disintegration of her physical health. She was gradually losing her hearing, a problem that would leave her nearly deaf by 1890. She found her disability humiliating, and it severed her ties to the outside world. Perhaps this is part of the reason that she put pen to paper, taking advantage of an art that could support her livelihood and provide a method of personal expression.

Although her presentation of regional people and politics is overwhelmingly negative in *Rodman the Keeper*, her depiction of southern loss is infused with sensitivity and trenchant detail. Significantly, Woolson was one of the few writers from the North who witnessed the South's emotional recovery after the Civil War. As a "stranger in a strange land," she was enamored with the region's natural beauty and impressed by its peoples' ability to sustain great loss. Ultimately, however, she remained frustrated at their inability release the past and move into the future. Perhaps her own endurance of loss made her critical of those who allowed grief to paralyze their lives. Thus, with entangled sentiments of contempt and empathy, she transposed her opinions and observations upon *Rodman the Keeper*, which remains a valuable historical and literary study.

*Rodman the Keeper* is also significant because it is a short-story cycle. Although the collection has been mentioned in several studies of the genre, in particular, those by Ingram, Mann, Morris and Dunn, and Nagel, no scholarship has demonstrated how the text is unified by a series of linked narratives. In fact, neither Dean, Tornsey, nor Brehm, the decade's principal Woolson scholars, has ever identified *Rodman the Keeper* as a

short-story cycle. This inhibits a deep understanding of her work. Unfortunately, it also hinders the potential of her literary status. She was a sophisticated and subtle writer who contributed to the development of a new genre in American literature, one that was used to capture the struggles of a divided country. By recognizing her as an author of late nineteenth century short-story cycles, scholars will help Woolson occupy a clearer place in academic studies. Perhaps if *Rodman the Keeper*, as well as *Castle Nowhere* and her two Italian collections, were more widely acknowledged as short-story cycles, Woolson's legacy could be cemented. She undoubtedly belongs among the ranks of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Francis E. W. Harper, Mary Noailles Murfree, and Charles Chesnutt, all of whom used linked narratives to convey a uniquely American experience through the local-color tradition.

Ironically, it seems that even during her lifetime Woolson was fighting to distinguish herself from other contemporary writers. Caroline Gebhard argues that in her short-story "The Lady of Little Fishing," which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1874, Woolson attempted to rewrite one her time period's most recognizable and successful pieces, Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp." In her revision, Woolson transformed Harte's tale of a male community in remote California into a story told through the eyes of a female narrator. This rewrite, as Gebhard maintains, "[undermines] Harte's version of the American fantasy of a happy all-male existence uncomplicated by women by exposing that this fantasy depends upon women."<sup>83</sup> Although Gebhard's study is well informed and interesting, it perpetuates the tendency to compare Woolson to other male authors, such as James Fenimore Cooper and Henry James.

In effect, it is unfortunate that Woolson, even by the scholars committed to recovering her legacy, is not recognized for what makes her work most unique. Although there were many short-story cycles produced in the nineteenth century, no other author used linked narratives to present as many frontiers as she did. In her collections of the Midwest, the South, and Europe, she constantly challenged herself to capture new landscapes and people. Although the conflict between different ethnicities, groups, and cultures is a central concern in all of the collections, *Rodman the Keeper* remains the most important. Woolson was one of the few northern authors who lived in and wrote about the Reconstruction South, and her perspective of the region was not a retrospective. She was there as the events unfolded.

Thus, more critical emphasis should be placed on Woolson's contribution to the short-story cycle genre, as well as her rare position among the few northern writers who visited and wrote about the South between 1865 and 1910. In her illuminating study of New England and Midwestern authors in the deep South, Anne E. Rowe identified the two main literary trends during and after the Civil War:

Harriet Beecher Stowe's work encompasses the entire range from thesis-laden criticism to later blatant praise. The work of the Union soldiers John De Forest and Albion Tourgée illustrate the thesis-oriented fiction of the war period, though despite their theses the novels reflect an unconscious idealization of the South. In contrast, the fiction of Constance Fenimore Woolson, Lafcadio Hearn, Owen Wister, and even Henry James reflects the second-stage treatment of the South—that of rapt praise and overt idealization of the escapist, faraway country. By Wister's time, indeed, the

praise even comes to *include* the social thesis. If the novel was an arena for sectional war, as even the supporters and detractors of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seemed to agree in the 1850s, then so far as northern novelists were concerned the South would seem to have lost the initial battle but won the war.<sup>84</sup>

Although it is an overstatement to claim that Woolson's depiction of the South is one of "rapt praise" in *Rodman the Keeper*, Rowe's study uncovers a small but significant niche in American literature that goes largely unexplored. By recognizing Woolson's place within this movement, her position in American literature shifts, affording her legacy room to grow in the crowded annals of the nineteenth century's local-colorists and travel-writers.

Remarkably, it has never been observed that the four Florida pieces in *Rodman the Keeper* are set before the Civil War. Unlike Stowe, who used her Florida stories in *Palmetto Leaves* (1873) to depict life after the war, Woolson focused on the dark and forgotten stages of the state's evolution. The effects of colonization, conflict, and ethnic intermixing are felt throughout the cycle, allowing Woolson the opportunity to present an American frontier in midst of continuous change. Her relationship with Florida also sets her apart from the many writers who set their southern work in the heart of the Confederacy alone. Woolson anticipated that her reading public, comprised mostly of white Northerners, were preoccupied with the aftermath of the Civil War and largely unaware of Florida's motley origins.

By relating the state's history to their own, she made a connection that few authors ever sought to capture. Although Florida was part of the Confederacy, very few



battles were fought there, and it was ultimately a foreign and distant land to most of her readers. This mystique afforded Woolson the ability to write with candid confidence about the tropical region. Unlike her stories and sketches set in the deep South, Woolson knew that her depiction of northern Florida, the country's "gray haired corner," would not be the source of political contention. It would, however, become a source of creative inspiration for her fiction. Ultimately, Woolson's eagerness to explore the Florida's remote landscape and diverse people is a testament to her unquenchable curiosity. As a small child, Woolson's family called her "And Why," a nickname that suggests that her desire to know more about the world around her was not something that developed with age or circumstance.<sup>85</sup> This curiosity, in fact, would become the force that carried her across the Atlantic in 1880, when she moved from St. Augustine to Florence. Once again, Woolson was Daughter Nowhere, an American interloper starting another adventure on a new frontier.

It is unfortunate that an author who has made such unique contributions to American literature is currently out of print. Perhaps this is because she has existed in an undefined space in the canon of American literature. In addition, most of her best work exists in the form of the short-story cycle, a genre that is poorly understood in American fiction.<sup>86</sup> Although Woolson arrives without the mythology of Cooper, the social theses of Stowe, the style and grace of Chopin or King, or the critical reputation of James, she should be remembered. Her work, as *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches* attests, captures frontiers in transition and a human experience that is marked by constant change and loss.

## Notes

1. For a concise primary bibliography to Woolson's work, see *Constance Fennimore Woolson: Selected Stories and Travel Narratives*, ed. Victoria Brehm and Sharon L. Dean (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 339-42.
2. There have been many attempts to define the genre of the short-story cycle, as Chapter 3 will explore. This explanation is my own, and the one through which I will study *Rodman the Keeper*.
3. See Forest Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles: Studies in a Literary Genre* (New Orleans: Loyola University, 1971).
4. I am indebted to James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 3-4.
5. For providing comprehensive bibliographies of the short-story cycle in American literature, I am indebted to Susan Garland Mann, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (Westport: Greenwood, 1989), and to Maggie Dunn and Anne Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995).
6. See Dunn and Morris, *The Composite Novel*, xx-xxi.

7. For the most informative study of the short-story cycle's emergence in American literature, I am indebted to Nagel's informative study in *Contemporary American*, 3-7.

8. See Nagel, *Contemporary American*, 4.

9. Constance Fenimore Woolson, *Castle Nowhere: Lake County Sketches* (Boston: J. R. Osgood & Company, 1875).

10. *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895) as well as *Dorothy and Other Italian Stories* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896) were published after Woolson's death and have not been previously recognized as short-story cycles. The posthumous publication of an author's work, however, should not limit admission into the genre, as presumptions regarding authorial intentions can never be determined.

11. I am indebted to Anne E. Rowe, in *The Enchanted Country: Northern Writers in the South 1865-1910* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978), xx-xxi, for her informative study of northern writers in the postbellum South.

12. Anne E. Rowe, *The Idea of Florida in the American Literary Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2002), 29-30.

13. See Rowe, *Idea of Florida*, 31.

14. Clare Benedict, *Constance Fennimore Woolson* (London: Ellis, 1932), 17. Benedict published the majority of her aunt's letters posthumously in three volumes. They appear in this collection as well as *Voices Out of the Past* (London: Ellis, 1929), and also *The Benedicts Abroad* (London: Ellis, 1932).

15. Rayburn S. Moore, *Constance Fennimore Woolson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1963), 18.
16. John Dwight Kern, *Constance Fennimore Woolson: Literary Pioneer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), 3.
17. Benedict, *Voices*, 229.
18. Benedict, *Woolson*, 247.
19. After Woolson's death, Clare Benedict became the proprietor of her aunt's estate, which she donated to Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida. She was also Woolson's first biographer.
20. Benedict, *Voices* 231.
21. See Benedict, *Voices*, 230-31.
22. Benedict, *Woolson*, xv.
23. Constance Fennimore Woolson, *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1880). All references to this edition of *Rodman the Keeper* will be cited parenthetically within the body of the text.
24. Constance Fenimore Woolson to William Dean Howells, June 28, 187[6?]. Collected in *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Selected Stories and Travel Narratives*, ed. Victoria Brehm and Sharon L. Dean (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 3. Woolson wrote this letter to Howells shortly after "Rodman the Keeper" appeared serially, in *The Atlantic Monthly* 34 (March, 1877): 261-77.
25. Anonymous, "Southern Sketches," in *Critical Essays on Constance Fenimore Woolson*, edited by Cheryl B. Tornsey (New York: G. K. Hall & Company),
28. Originally published in *Literary World* 3 (July, 1880): 223.

26. B. Phillips, "Review of Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches," in *Critical Essays*, 25. Originally published in *New York Times* (June 11, 1880), 3.

27. Anonymous, "Miss Woolson's 'Rodman the Keeper,'" in *Critical Essays*, 29. Originally published in *Scribner's Monthly Magazine* 20 (August, 1880): 633-34.

28. Constance Fenimore Woolson to Anonymous Critic, August 9, 1880, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. The reviewer to whom Woolson wrote can be identified as Hjalmar Hjorth Boyeson, a contributing editor to *Scribner's* in 1880. His name is annotated in pencil on her unpublished letter of response.

29. Sharon L. Dean, *Constance Fennimore Woolson: Homeward Bound* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 26.

30. Woolson to Mrs. Samuel Livingston Mather, [date unknown]. Collected in Benedict, *Voices*, 252.

31. Woolson to Mrs. Samuel Livingston Mather, [date unknown]. Collected in Benedict, *Voices*, 252.

32. Cheryl B. Tornsey, *Constance Fennimore Woolson: The Grief of Artistry* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 5.

33. Benedict, *Voices*, xix-xv. Originally published in Henry James, *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1888).

34. See Dean, *Homeward Bound*, xii. I am indebted to both Dean and Tornsey for uncovering several reasons as to why Woolson is not recognized more often in academic discourse. See Tornsey, *Grief*, 5-21.

35. I am indebted to James Nagel and Tom Quirk, the editors of *The Portable American Realism Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), for including Woolson in their comprehensive anthology. It was here that I was first introduced to “Rodman the Keeper,” the title piece of the short-story cycle my study explores.

36. See Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 296.

37. Henry James to John Hay, January 28, 1894. Collected in *Henry James: Selected Letters* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), 269.

38. For more scholarship regarding James’s literary use of Woolson see Sharon L. Dean, “Constance Fenimore Woolson and Henry James: The Literary Relationship,” *Massachusetts Studies in English* 7, No. 3, (1980): 1-9, and Rayburn S. Moore, “The Strange Irregular Rhythm of Life: James’s Late Tales and Constance Fenimore Woolson,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 41 (1976): 86-93.

39. See Moore, *Constance Fennimore Woolson*, 7.

40. See *Selected Stories and Travel Narratives*, ed. Brehm and Dean, as well as *Critical Essays*, ed. Tornsey.

41. I am indebted to Victor Turner’s study of liminality in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), in which he maintains that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (95).

42. See Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles*, 19.

43. See Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles*, 17-18.

44. Robert M. Luscher, "The Short-Story Sequence: An Open Book" in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 148.

45. J. Gerald Kennedy also adopts Luscher's definition of the short story sequence, modifying it only slightly. See *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities* (New York: Cambridge, 1995).

46. Maggie Dunn and Anne Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 2.

47. See Dunn and Morris, *The Composite Novel*, 7.

48. See J. Gerald Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities* (New York: Cambridge, 1995), ix

49. See Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 15.

50. I am indebted to Nagel, *Contemporary American*, 13.

51. See Nagel, *Contemporary American*, 15.

52. I am indebted to Nagel, *Contemporary American*, 4, for cataloguing the major American writers of short-story cycles in the nineteenth century.

53. For providing comprehensive bibliographies of the short-story cycle in American literature, I am indebted to Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, and to Dunn and Morris, *The Composite Novel*.

54. See *Contemporary American*, 2. Nagel maintains that in the second century B. C., the author Aristedes wrote a series of tales about Miletus, Greece, his birthplace; the collection is entitled *Milesiaka*.

55. Dennis Berthold, "Miss Martha and Ms. Woolson: Persona in the Travel Sketches," in *Woolson's Nineteenth Century*, ed. Brehm, 111-12.
56. See Dunn and Morris, *The Composite Novel*, 23-25.
57. Kern, in *Literary Pioneer*, 73, was the first critic to assume that the cemetery in "Rodman the Keeper" was Andersonville National Cemetery in Georgia. Woolson's letters, however, suggest that the cemetery in "Rodman the Keeper" was also based on Chattanooga National Cemetery, a place she visited in the early 1870s. In a letter from Woolson to Mrs. Samuel Livingston Mather, composed December 4 [year unknown], she wrote from Chattanooga and observed that "on a green slope below us gleamed the low headstones of fourteen thousand of our soldiers, gathered from the hills around." This description undeniably echoes the "mounds where reposed the bodies of fourteen thousand United States soldiers" in "Rodman the Keeper" (10). For access to this letter, I am indebted to The Clare Benedict Collection Of Constance Fenimore Woolson Memorabilia, Olin Library, Rollins College.
58. This passage was the source of contention between Woolson and the critic from *Scribner's Monthly Magazine* in 1880.
59. Dean, *Homeward Bound*, 39.
60. "Old Gardiston" was originally published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 52 (April, 1876): 662-74.
61. "In the Cotton Country" was originally published in *Appleton's Journal* 15 (April 29, 1876): 547-51.
62. Leonardo Buonomo claims that the northern narrator in the story is a "thinly disguised stand-in" for Woolson, yet there are no grounds to validate this assumption.



See “The Other Face of History in Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Southern Stories,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 28, No. 3 (1998): 16.

63. “King David” was originally published in *Scribner’s Monthly* 15 (April, 1878): 781-89.

64. When King David moves to Jubilee Town, he attempts to grow his own cotton. His naïve project is unsuccessful. Interestingly, in *The Enchanted Country*, 17-18, Rowe maintains that Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wintered in Florida from 1868 to 1884, also tried to grow her own cotton, and her attempt was also failure. In fact, she rented a cotton plantation, hoping to provide her son, a veteran of the war, with a new project that would keep him busy while also promoting paid black labor. Stowe lost ten thousand dollars in the project. Since Woolson and Stowe years in Florida overlapped, she might have been aware of the venture and parodied it in “King David.” The protagonist of the story, similar to Stowe, is a Northerner brimming with high ideals that seem unrealistic to many.

65. Moore, *Constance Fennimore Woolson*, 59.

66. Anne E. Rowe, “Constance Woolson and Southern Local Color, in *Critical Essays on Constance Fennimore Woolson*, ed. Cheryl B. Tornsey (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1992), 149.

67. “Bro.,” was originally published in *Appleton’s Journal* 5 (November, 1878): 417-28. “Up in the Blue Ridge” appeared two months earlier in *Appleton’s Journal* 5 (September, 1878): 104-25.

68. For example, see Kern, *Literary Pioneer*, 65.

69. "Miss Elisabetha" was originally published in *Appleton's Journal* 13 (March 13, 1875): 327-34.

70. "Felipa" was originally published in *Lippincott's Magazine* 17 (June, 1876): 702-13.

71. Kristen M. Comment, "Lesbian 'Impossibilities' of Miss Grief's 'Armor,'" in *Constance Fenimore Woolson's Nineteenth Century: Essays*, ed. Victoria Brehm (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 208-09.

72. Kern, *Literary Pioneer*, 60.

73. "Sister St. Luke" was originally published in *The Galaxy* 23 (April, 1877): 489-506.

74. Woolson based the lighthouse in "Sister St. Luke" on the one that still stands on Anastasia Island, off the coast of St. Augustine. Shortly before Woolson arrived in Florida, the original lighthouse was damaged in a tornado, possibly inspiring the story. I am indebted to Rosalinda Lidh, in *St. Augustine Lighthouse: A Short Story* (St. Augustine: Historic Print & Map Company, 2002).

75. "The South Devil" was originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* 45 (February, 1880): 173-93.

76. Kern, *Literary Pioneer*, 60.

77. See the annotated bibliography by Mann, in *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*, and in Dunn and Morris's *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, xix-xxxi.

78. Luscher maintains that titles, prefaces, epigraphs, or framing stories encourage the cohesion of a short-story cycle. See “The Short-Story Sequence: An Open Book,” *Crossroads*, 150.

79. See Karen Weekes, “Northern Bias in Constance Fenimore Woolson’s Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 13, No. 2 (Spring, 2000): 113.

80. For more scholarship regarding Woolson’s place in American literary studies, see Susan Koppleman, “The Politics and Ethics of Literary Revival: A Test Case—Shall We, Ought We, Can We Make of Constance Fenimore Woolson a Kate Chopin?,” *Journal of American Culture* 22, No. 3 (Sept. 1, 1999), and Susan K. Harris, “But is it any Good?: Evaluating Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Fiction,” *American Literature* 63, No. 1 (March, 1991): 43-61.

81. Pattee’s quotation is reprinted in *Critical Essays*, 87-88. It was originally published in *A History of American Literature Since 1870* (New York: Century, 1915), 317-18. After teaching at Pennsylvania State University, Pattee taught at Rollins College, where Woolson’s estate was donated. In 1938, Pattee wrote the Dedicatory Address for the Constance Fenimore Woolson English House. I am indebted to Dean, *Homeward Bound*, xiii, for this information.

82. See Dean, *Homeward Bound*, 34.

83. See Caroline Gebhard, “Constance Fenimore Woolson Rewrite Bret Harte: The Sexual Politics of Intertextuality,” in *Critical Essays*, ed. Tornsey, 224.

84. Rowe, *Enchanted* xx-xxi.

85. Benedict, *Constance Fennimore Woolson*, 16.

86. See Nagel, *Contemporary American*, 4.