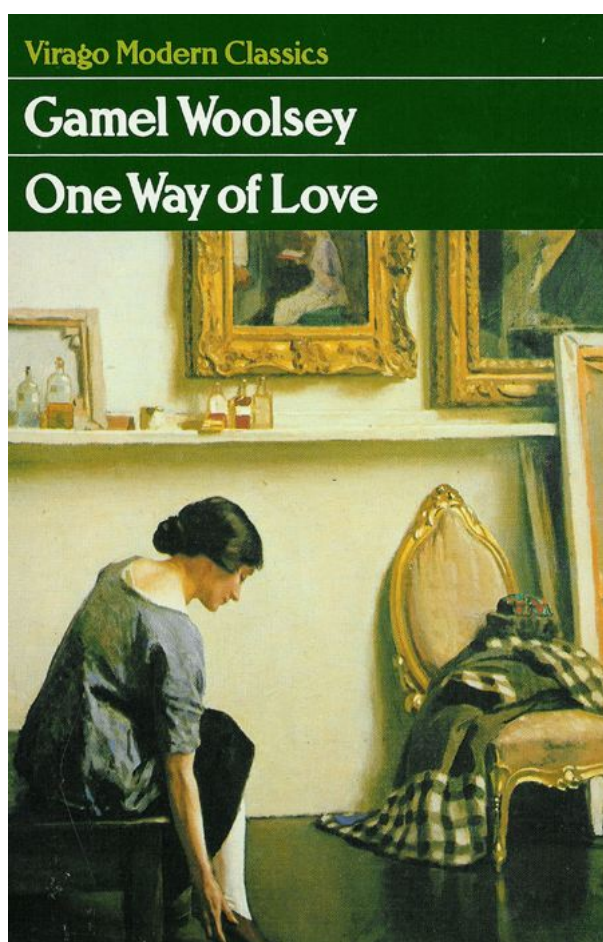


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Gamel Woolsey: Thwarted Ambitions¹

Because our dreams were all too strange to share,
And a dream must be lonely and must be free.²



LLEWELYN POWYS, like the Spanish philosopher and writer, Miguel de Unamuno, believed in the continuity that his seed, successfully brought to life, would assure him. But the women he loved, for one reason or another, were unable to conceive, or bring a pregnancy to term. Gamel Woolsey (1895-1968) was the last of these women, and both her writing and her story were silenced while she was still alive. Malcolm Elwin, in his biography of Llewelyn Powys, heeded Alyse Gregory's request to eliminate all reference to Woolsey, not for her sake, but for that of her friend³. Woolsey was by then married to Gerald Brenan, who, although he declared repeatedly that he was not jealous of Powys, would not have relished finding his wife's story in print. Since then, Brenan himself, in *Personal Record*, gave the basic story, and later biographers of the Powys

¹ The author would like to thank the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale (BRBM), and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (HRC), for Fellowships which enabled her to consult their collections related to Gamel Woolsey; thanks also to Margaret Tenney, of Ashley Hall, for information on Gamel Woolsey's school days.

² Gamel Woolsey, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Kenneth Hopkins, Intro. Glen Cavaliero, Warren House Press, 1984, p.34.

³ Malcolm Elwin, *The Life of Llewelyn Powys*, Bodley Head, London, 1946.

brothers and of Brennan have not hesitated to write of it, although they have dismissed Woolsey more or less summarily⁴. Llewelyn Powys's fictionalised account of their relationship in *Love and Death*, which gives only the man's point of view, totally disregards the woman's situation and suffering and Gamel Woolsey did not think it recovered any of the complexity of their feelings⁵. Hers is a sad tale of disappointed love and thwarted ambition which she submerged in that world of myth, legend and dream that she had begun to weave about her when still a child, her own private "Middle Earth."



Woolsey had met Llewelyn Powys in New York in 1928, when they were both living in Patchin Place, the alley of row houses just off Sixth Avenue and 10th Street. Powys had returned to New York with his wife, Alyse Gregory, novelist, essayist and one-time editor of *The Dial*, to write for the *Herald Tribune*. At that time, Woolsey was in the process of separating from her husband, Rex Hunter, who, although he no longer loved her, felt that she had no right to leave him. Both Powys and Woolsey were fighting tuberculosis; Powys had been repeatedly ill and his health was generally precarious, while Woolsey had recently submitted to the termination of a pregnancy because of a return of the tuberculosis she had suffered from as a young girl. Hunter's horrified reaction to her pregnancy had made her realize that her husband's possessive attitude toward her body would never include the child she wanted.

By this time, Woolsey, who had a small income of her own, had had some poems published in *Caprice: A Poetry Art Magazine* and in the "Literary Review" section of the *New York Evening Post*, and was selecting poems for her first book, which would be published by Simon & Schuster in 1931, under the title *Middle Earth*. Her adolescent poems had appeared in *Cerberus*, the Ashley Hall School magazine she had helped found, back home in Charleston, S.C., where, after graduating in 1913, she had studied painting with Alfred Hutton. In 1921, rebelling against the constricting mores of Charleston, Woolsey moved to New York and settled in Greenwich Village, where she met Rex Hunter, and married him on 25 April, 1923. Hunter was a journalist, with poetic ambitions, who took his young wife off to London, and kept her virtually locked up in their rooms, isolated from friends and family, while he flaunted an insouciant bachelorhood on Fleet Street. Woolsey touchingly retells her experience of marriage in *One Way of Love*, a fictionalised autobiography, which would not be published till 1987 by Virago.

The story of its publication is paradigmatic of Woolsey's literary fate. After a few excursions and dinners with Gerald Brennan, whom she had met on 10 July 1930, she allowed him to read the unfinished manuscript of *One Way of Love*.

⁴ Gerald Brennan, *Personal Record: 1920-1972*, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

⁵ Llewelyn Powys, *Love and Death: an Imaginary Autobiography*, Bodley Head, 1939.

Brenan, who was already spinning his web around her, marvelled at the “quality and precision” of Woolsey’s writing, at the “often surprising beauty of the images” and at the “penetration of many of her observations upon people and things.”⁶ He felt that the “magic carpet of language” that Woolsey had created was carrying him into the very depths of her being, and he determined to marry her. Possibly, part of the attraction of the novel was that it contained descriptions of the protagonist’s, Mariana’s, reactions to her husband’s lovemaking. David Garnett of the Nonesuch Press, to whom Brenan showed the manuscript, expressed his admiration of the passages where “she writes about going to bed”⁷, while Frances Partridge, who was “enthralled” by the novel, enjoyed the “descriptions of love-making” most, and thought they were “the best, without a moment’s doubt, that I have ever read in modern literature.”⁸ It was precisely these descriptions, however, that would cause trouble. Victor Gollancz accepted the manuscript for his recently founded press; he was a daring publisher, of radical convictions, and he signalled this by putting his books in striking bright yellow covers. He had *One Way of Love* typeset and printed—and then, suddenly overcome by fear of the censor, decided to withdraw the novel. A libel suit brought on by the sexual explicitness of one of his previous publications, *Children Be Happy*, made him fear further trouble. When we read Woolsey’s novel today we find Gollancz’s decision very difficult to understand and yet, when he returned to the novel in 1934, it was to confirm that publication would be too risky. Woolsey kept two copies; the rest were destroyed.

Many years later, when she was well into her sixties, Woolsey had one copy bound and tellingly gave her novel a new title: *Innocence*. After her death, Gerald Brenan sent this copy to the British Museum, with a covering letter (today placed inside the volume) explaining that Woolsey had been a friend of all the Powys family and had been close to other luminaries of the times, such as Bertrand Russell, and that therefore her autobiographical novel “has an interest which its merits do not justify.”⁹ Disregarding this paternalistic and patriarchal put-down, Virago published *One Way of Love* in 1987, and so made available a novel from the early years of the twentieth century that tells of a sensitive woman’s awakening to sex, and of the drudgery and oppression that marriage can bring.

Woolsey’s next attempt at publication, *Death’s Other Kingdom*¹⁰, a memoir of the first days of the Spanish Civil War, did not fare much better. She had settled in Churriana, a small village near Málaga in southern Spain, with Gerald Brenan. Brenan had won her from Llewelyn Powys, taken her on a long tour of Italy, where, because Woolsey did not have a divorce from Rex Hunter, they performed their own private marriage ceremony in Rome, before the altar of the church of Santa Maria d’Aracoeli. They then returned to England and eventually

⁶ *Diaries*, Notebook 4, 26 July 1930. Gerald Brenan Papers, HRC

⁷ David Garnett to Gerald Brenan August 1930. Gerald Brenan Papers, HRC

⁸ Frances Partridge to Gamel Woolsey, no date. Gerald Brenan Papers, HRC.

⁹ Gerald Brenan to the British Museum, 5 February 1968.

¹⁰ Gamel Woolsey, *Death’s Other Kingdom*, Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1939.

decided to live in Spain, with their adopted daughter, Miranda¹¹, in a large, old house, from which they could see the Mediterranean, the grey hills surrounding Málaga and, behind them, the ranges of the Sierra Nevada, snow-capped till late spring.

But their peaceful refuge was disturbed in July 1936 by “lorries full of armed workmen”¹² rumbling past their doors, and Anarchist soldiers, young boys full of “hope and determination,” confident that they would “lead us all... to Man’s Promised Land”¹³, insisting on searching the house for weapons. Both Woolsey and Brenan wanted to remain in Spain, naively believing that their foreignness would elevate them above the forces raging outside their home and render them immune to suspicion from both the rebel and the republican side. However, they managed to antagonise both sides by indiscriminately helping all who needed their aid, and when their money ran out in September, they left Málaga, well before the area was taken by the rebels in February 1937. After some time in Gibraltar and in Portugal, they managed to return to England, where, according to Brenan, he “produced two large books,” *The Spanish Labyrinth* (1943) and *The Literature of the Spanish People* (1951), while Woolsey merely “wrote an account of our experiences.”¹⁵ Woolsey’s memoir is indeed more personal and much more sensitive than Brenan’s in-depth study of Spanish politics; she tells of the bombing inflicted by Franco and his insurrectionist troops on the city of Málaga and its small military airport, right next to Churriana, and of the villagers’ fear at the announced arrival of the Moors¹⁶, showing how those who are not directly involved in war suffer its consequences: the insecurity, the petty revenge, the violence, the fear, the scarcity of food. But her memoir goes beyond a day-to-

*Pattering rain in the streets —
or little hooves
of black goats
coming down from the hills
to the milking doors?
The village is waking:
on the horizon, cocks
crowing, and children shouting,
and water flowing
into the bright gardens....
And where was this,
where the morning light
whitens the whiter walls?*

*Churriana,
I would wrap you up
and carry you with me —
like that picture by Greco:
Toledo in sun and storm —
safe in my pocket
the fierce light
and the broad skies.*¹⁴

¹¹ Miranda was Gerald Brenan’s daughter by Juliana, a young girl who had worked as a servant in his house in Yegen, Spain, when he had lived there before meeting Woolsey. See Gerald Brenan, *Personal Record*, and John Gathorne-Hardy, *The Interior Castle: A Life of Gerald Brenan*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1992.

¹² *Death’s Other Kingdom*, p.13

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.14

¹⁴ “Alba”, from Gamel Woolsey’s *Collected Poems*.

¹⁵ Gerald Brenan, *The Face of Spain*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987, p. 9

¹⁶ i.e. the legionarios, Franco’s Army of Africa.

day account of the first two months of the war in Málaga; it is an insightful and humane analysis of the Spanish character and of the historical situation, of war and its attendant atrocities. Woolsey was horrified at the intensity of feelings aroused and she astutely recognised that “Hate is the other side of fear”¹⁷. She was very critical of foreign reporters, and of the English and the other foreigners stranded in Spain and in Gibraltar who seemed to relish the horror stories that they circulated; as she observed the “blood-lust upon their faces,” she found she understood “what atrocity stories really are: they are the pornography of violence. The dreamy lustful look that accompanies them, the full enjoyment of horror... show only too plainly their erotic source”¹⁸.

Death's Other Kingdom was published, with an impossibly misogynistic and denigrating preface by John Cowper Powys, in October 1939, by which time the Spanish Civil War was over, and the Second World War had begun. And so this classic on the psychological and personal effects of war was quickly forgotten, and not republished till 1988, by Virago. Ten years later, in 1998, it was published in the United States, by Pythia Press, in what the editor calls an “aerated version”¹⁹ and with its apt and evocative title—taken from T. S. Eliot—changed to *Malaga Burning*.

During the years they spent in England, before returning to Spain in 1952, Woolsey wrote another novel, *Patterns in the Sand*, which has never been published. Here, she evokes the Charleston she had known as an adolescent, its pseudo-aristocratic mores which stifled all women's ambitions and desires and made their days melt into one continuous session of waiting for something to happen behind drawn curtains, sheltered from the musty, cloying heat and from the busy, exciting life that men lead in the public sphere. When something does happen to Sara Warren it is the only thing that can happen to a woman in such circumstances: she falls in love and learns the pleasures of the body—and the perils of pleasure. Not directly based on Woolsey's life, this short novel is more tightly structured than *One Way of Love*, and more moving.

Although Woolsey spent much of her time typing out Brenan's lengthy manuscripts—a task she hated because she was not a good typist—she managed to find the time to translate a novel by the Spanish nineteenth century writer, Benito Pérez Galdós, *La de Bringas*, into English, as *The Spendthrifts*, as well as a collection of Spanish folk tales, and some poetry. Her adolescent ambition to become a poet never left her, but her *Collected Poems*, published by Kenneth Hopkins in 1984 with Brenan's authorisation, is a slim volume that reflects the disappointments and frustrations of a woman who, more and more, preferred to seclude herself in a mythical, oneiric retreat, in which happiness depended only upon her imagination. The title poem of her first collection, *Middle Earth*, published in 1931, had already created this safe harbour:

¹⁷ *Death's Other Kingdom*, p. 125

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.126

¹⁹ *Malaga Burning*, p.17

It is not heaven, it is not hell,
This world between them where I dwell.
With secret pain, with open mirth,
I go my way on middle earth.²⁰

Woolsey's sonnets, which have been likened to the early work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, do indeed capture a similar lightness of tone at times, but the solitude and sorrow expressed go deeper, as in "When life is over, yet there's time to kill," with its interminable, mournful last line: "Where the grey desert spreads nothing remains"²¹.

The one poem which gained Woolsey a measure of recognition in her lifetime, "The Search for Demeter," is a heart-felt cry of loneliness and sorrow for the past, a modernist quest for relief in antiquity, but also an appeal to her mother, recently dead, for the love she sensed must have been hers as a child. It was published by *Botteghe Oscure* (1956, vol. XVIII), an avant-garde, multilingual literary journal brought out in Rome, Italy, by Marguerite Chapin, the Princess Caetani, from 1948 to 1960. Abandoning the constrictions of the classical sonnet, Woolsey used a free verse which she knew to be more suited to her material, and likens herself, in her youth, to Persephone or Koré: "Tell me,/ O myth, O memory, tell me:/ How was Koré lost?"²² Woolsey's poetic voice is here at its best, as she laments not only her mother's death, and the loss of love and of youth, but the inflexibility of the past:

Oh, must we always live
with the fixed past?
Is there no future
in which we can alter the sunken day?²³

The existential loneliness of humankind affected the sensitive spirit of Gamel Woolsey to such a degree that she would often feel unable to write creatively or even to translate. Toward the close of her life, the hot summers of Churriana reminded her of her native South Carolina, and she withdrew into memories and dreams, from which not even her best friends, Phyllis Playter and Alyse Gregory could recall her. Gamel Woolsey died of cancer on 18 January, 1968, and is buried in the British Cemetery in Málaga; Gerald Brenan, who outlived her by almost twenty years, had these words from *Cymbeline* carved on the stone of her grave: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun/ Nor winter's furious rages."

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²⁰ *Collected Poems*, p.12

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.76

²² *Ibid.*, p.141

²³ *Ibid.*, p.145