Constance Fenimore Woolson’s literary production reflects her rootless, restless, and wandering existence. Born mid-century in Claremont (New Hampshire), since her girlhood in Cleveland she dreamt of going away from home—above all from the many tragedies which troubled her family—and of travelling the world over. In her twenties she wrote a letter to a friend visiting Europe: “I envy you to that extent that the tenth commandment makes me shudder” (Benedict, Woolson 17). After many trips around the Great Lakes Region and ten years spent in the post-Civil War Southern States, she finally left America and went to Europe, never to return. She died, in fact, in Venice in 1894, probably by suicide: she was by that time a famous writer and had published five novels, two volumes of short stories and many other successful works.

When in Europe—mostly in Italy where she spent fourteen years on and off—she proved herself a typical tourist: she read all her Murrays and Baedekers and visited what was worth seeing, systematically, patiently, sometimes enthusiastically—according to her guidebooks. Like many of her fellow countrymen, she was in “Search of the Picturesque”!

After arriving in Florence in April 1880, she expressed her enthusiasm in a letter to her nephew Samuel Mather: “I am enchanted with Florence, it is even more beautiful than I expected...” (Benedict, Woolson 181).

In June the same year she wrote him from Venice:

We are enchanted with Venice. After having heard of it and dreamed of it and looked at pictures of it all my life, I find the reality more picturesque and wonderful than my expectations ... Remember how many long years I have been imagining! (216-217)

James Buzard in “A Continent of Pictures: Reflections on the ‘Europe’ of Nineteenth-Century Tourists” (1993), maintains that these
travellers were seeking alterity, difference, what was “peculiar to the spot” (31), as a Romantic response to industrialization and capitalist expansion, to the image of life as a prevailing utilitarian enterprise, to the dreary vista of monotonous toil, without any sense of enjoyment.

Henry James was often Woolson’s guide and mentor in her sightseeing tours in Italy and in many European capitals; he had a taste for European art and landscape and loved the picturesque: “that delightful element of the crooked, the accidental, the unforeseen, which, to American eyes, accustomed to our eternal straight lines and right angles, is the striking feature of European street scenery” (Transatlantic 9-10).

Woolson too was in search of the picturesque, but the very picturesque that in her letters seems to have been so attractive for the cultivated tourist she certainly was, becomes repulsive in many of her stories, as in “Dorothy”, for instance, or “A Waitress”, or “A Transplanted Boy”, and, above all, “The Front Yard”, in which her cry: “What, indeed, could a New Hampshire-born American do in a Renaissance casino?” (Benedict, Woolson 256) materializes from her deeply-felt empathy with the character of Prudence, which is the strangest, the most original and impressive in the whole of Woolson’s narrative written in and about Italy.

First published in December 1888 in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, subsequently as the title story in a posthumous volume in 1895, then in a volume edited by Rayburn S. Moore in 1967, “The Front Yard” was always praised by critics without reserve. However, John White Kern, although he considers this text as one of the best of Woolson’s Italian short stories, points out that:

... the very nobility of Prudence Wilkin challenges credulity ... The fact that this scion of puritanism lives amid surroundings that are utterly foreign and therefore utterly obnoxious to her does not in any way alter her conception of her duty, nor does sharp-toothed ingratitude deter her from its performance. (143)

The words James wrote in “Miss Woolson” with regard to Margaret, the main female character in East Angels, may be easily attributed to Prudence’s heroic figure and, thus, also explain Kern’s perplexity: “She (Woolson) has drawn Margaret with so close and firm and living a line that she seems to put us in a quandary, if we repudiate her, of denying that a woman may look at life from a high point of view” (quoted in Weimer, Exiles 278).
Rayburn S. Moore notes that, even though Woolson has always been “something of a pioneer”, this tale is different in approach and in effects: “In ‘The Front Yard’ the central character is not only a humble member of society, but the whole point of view is focused on that character and, therefore, on a different level of society from that usually treated in international-episode fiction” (63).²

However, “The Front Yard” owes its originality and its strangeness primarily to Woolson’s extraordinary skill in using the ironic and, above all, the self-ironic mode. With Prudence, the protagonist of “The Front Yard”, in fact, Woolson—a born traveller and a perfect specimen of the nineteenth-century American “passionate pilgrim”—succeeds in portraying the figure of the accidental passionless resident, the exact antithesis of what a tourist was then meant to be, how he was expected to behave, what he was expected to be interested in and in search of.

In “The Front Yard”, the reader obviously finds echoes of Hawthorne’s disgust, for instance, in his moral and aesthetic comparison between the rude stone buildings of Tuscany and the neat wooden houses of New England, as expressed in The Marble Faun (1860):

In Italy, there are no neat door-steps and thresholds; no pleasant, vine-sheltered porches; none of those grass-plots or smoothly shorn lawns, which hospitality invite the imagination into the sweet domestic interiors of English life. (ch. 32)

As Leonardo Buonomo observes in Backward Glances (1996): “Compared with New England dwellings, Tuscan cottages and farmhouses appear to the narrator ugly, miserable and uninviting” (50). These houses, as Turri has pointed out, are built to meet the exigencies, and correspond to the rhythms, of agricultural work and life (Semiologia 220). But Hawthorne’s and Woolson-Prudence’s ideas and concepts of the functions of a farmhouse are completely different, and reveal that neither full comprehended the local use of space and the local idea of family and community.

Prudence’s observations about Assisi and its inhabitants also remind the reader of the words of Mark Twain in The Innocents Abroad (1869) about Civita Vecchia and its people:

This Civita Vecchia is the finest nest of dirt, vermin, and ignorance we have found yet ... The people here live in alleys two yards wide, which have a smell about them
which is peculiar but not entertaining ... These alleys are paved with stone, and carpeted with deceased cats, and decayed rags, and decomposed vegetable-tops, and remnants of old boots, all soaked with dish water, and the people sit around on stools and enjoy it. They are indolent ... They work two or three hours at a time, but not hard, and then they knock off and catch flies ... They are very uncleanly—these people—in face, in person, in dress ... (170-171)

While, then, many American travellers, Henry James among them, were in search of alterity, for "a perfect feast of crookedness ... and odd domestic interspaces" (James, Transatlantic 9-10), "for a change from a diet of wide clean streets with regularly spaced brown-stone fronts" (Buzard 37), other tourists like Twain and Hawthorne were repelled by some traits of character and culture of the Old World and yearned for "straight lines and right angles" (James, Transatlantic 10).

In "The Front Yard", Woolson presents these two contrasting aspects of the nineteenth-century American tourist in Italy. The novelty lies in her treatment of the familiar subject. While a positive attitude is embodied by the minor character of the American friend—and marginalized in the back-ground—a negative one is stressed through the figure of Prudence.

In this way, Woolson builds an ironic—mostly self-ironic indeed—binary opposition between her own contrasting attitudes—as a tourist—towards Italy and the Italians, though the definition of tourist with reference to Prudence is inappropriate. Prudence is an accidental resident, without either knowledge of or any interest in Italian art, landscape, history or culture.

Prudence does not even wish to admire the magnificent Umbrian landscape all about her to be enjoyed from her house on the hill. Her desire is narrowly circumscribed: all she wants is to tidy up a small space for herself and to recreate in it a New Hampshire front yard. Then, she "shall feel like Ledham again" (Yard 42).

The contrast between two characters, two ways of life, and two outlooks is very frequent in Woolson’s narrative. In the case of "The Front Yard", however, the whole story is a contrast, and that contrast is so radical that it may be seen not only as a mere comparison between different cultures, customs and habits, but also as a Manichean duel between Good and Evil, between the world of innocence and the world of experience, between Heaven and Hell.

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As Northrop Frye writes in the chapter “Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths” in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), there are

... three organizations of myths and archetypal symbols in literature. First, there is undisplaced myth, generally concerned with gods and demons, and which takes the form of two contrasting worlds of total metaphorical identification, one desirable and the other undesirable. These worlds are often identified with the existential heavens and hells of the religions contemporary with such literature. These two forms of metaphorical organization we call the apocalyptic and the demonic respectively. Second, we have the general tendency we have called romantic, the tendency to suggest implicit mythical pattern in a world more closely associated with human experience. Third, we have the tendency of “realism” ... to throw the emphasis on content and representation rather than on the shape of the story. Ironic literature begins with realism and tends toward myth ... (139-40, emphasis added)

However, in “Miss Grief”, the writer-narrator, the one who says “I model myself a little on Balzac”, states exactly the contrary: “... for writers are as apt to make much of the ‘how’, rather than the ‘what’ as painters, who, it is well known, prefer an exquisitely rendered representation of a commonplace theme to an imperfectly executed picture of even the most striking subject” (131, emphasis added).

According to Frye:

The apocalyptic world, the heaven of religion, presents, in the first place, the categories of reality in the form of human desire, as indicated by the form they assume under the work of human civilization. The form imposed by human work and desire on vegetable world, for instance, is that of the garden, the farm, the grove, or the park. (141, emphasis added)

In “Neptune’s Shore”, for instance, the dream of Azubah Ash, a character similar in many ways to Prudence Wilkin, was a farm: “... the farm she should like to have some day ...” (Yard 67).

The difference between the point of view of Frye and that of Eugenio Turri is noteworthy. Although Turri acknowledges, as Kant had, that gardening is a work of painting in the landscape and that, in constructing parks and gardens, men use landscape to create works of art (*Antropologia* 160,163), in *Semiologia del paesaggio italiano* (1979), he is very critical of the idea of a detached house with a gate, a straight path and a little gar-
den surrounded by a hedge—the sort of front yard dreamt of by Prudence—because “it is inconsistent with the Italian landscape and because it is a product of conformism” (26).

A helpful description of the demonic world can be found in Frye’s theory of myths:

Opposed to apocalyptic symbolism is the presentation of the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion; ... the world also of perverted or wasted work, ... ruins and catacombs ... And just as apocalyptic imagery in poetry is closely associated with a religious heaven, so its dialectic opposite is closely linked with an existential hell, like Dante’s Inferno ... (147). Corresponding to the apocalyptic way or straight road ... we have in this world the labyrinth or maze, the image of lost direction, often with a monster at his heart like the Minotaur. (150, emphases added)

The comparison between Frye’s apocalyptic and demonic worlds encourages the suggested reading of the tale as a Manichean duel, as the eternal fight between Good and Evil, in which Evil is always on the side of Italy, Assisi and its inhabitants, whereas Good is, on all occasions, on the side of America, Ledham (New Hampshire), and Prudence.

Actually, “The Front Yard” may be examined as a series of binary oppositions; for instance, only demonic metaphores and negative references and stereotypes can be found referring to Assisi and its inhabitants: “... the steep, narrow streets, with garbage here and there, the crowding stone houses, centuries old, from whose court-yard doors issued odors indescribable” (3); dark houses with no fireplaces to warm the whole family—“in Assisi no one made a fire for warmth” (7)—but only “tightly hugged, hidden ‘scaldini’” (31) made for individual confort; fires to cook expensive and savory meals, seasoned with olive oil and served with wine, pointing out Italian gluttony and waste in abundance; the showy dressing style, “in that singular exaggeration of the fashions which one sees only in Italy” (19); the “peasants with their bare heads and frowzy hair” (39); the mysteries of the ‘papish’ religion: “the constant presence of a mystery is particularly trying for a New England mind” (10); the winding road and the path interrupted—images of Frye’s labyrinth and lost direction—by the smelly cowshed, the “indecent old Antiquity” (3); “the facile Italian way” (5) of making love; the mercenary marriages: “[Antonio Guadagni] Divining her savings, and seeing with his own eyes her wonderful strength and energy, ...” (5); the singing, the mandolin, the romantic atmosphere of
the nights full of stars and of importunate nightingales whose songs annoyed even the sensible Mrs. North in “Dorothy”: “The nightingales hoot so” (23); the various landscapes with undulating hills and violet mountains far away.

These elements foreshadow the deceptive speeches; egoism and ingratitude; the way of Umbrian life, always pervaded with “the same continuous leisure and causeless beatitude” (4); the despicable tricks at other people’s expense; the malefic gambling which is the cause of the betrayal of Giovanni, Prudence’s best-loved foster-son.

On the other hand, on the side of Prudence and Ledham (New Hampshire), there is nothing but apocalyptic metaphores, positive stereotypes and aspects: clean and tidy modern buildings, well heated during the winter with a lovely square garden and “a nice straight path going down to the front gate” (16) and a lot of sweet-smelling flowers; the longed for plain cooking: “... she would be haunted by a vision of a ‘boiled dinner’, the boiled corned-beef, the boiled cabbage, turnips, and potatoes, and the boiled Indian pudding of her youth” (10)—metaphore of the Puritanical, and purifying, concept of life, opposed to the lavish Catholic outlook; the bonnet as a sign of respectability; the rationality of a religion with no mysteries; the modest, plain-looking clothes that Beppa complains about to Prudence “You never wanted us to have nice clothes” (35); the love marriage: “It was her one moment of madness (who has not had one?)” (5); Prudence’s idea of a ‘purity’ view, precisely the view from Sage’s Hill, at Ledham: “You could see all the fields and the medders of Josiah Strong’s Farm, and Deacon Mayberry’s too; perfectly level and not a stone in ‘em. And the turnpike for miles and miles, with three tollgates in sight. Then, on the other side, there were the factories to make it lively. It was a sweet view” (48).

These positive elements anticipate the tireless laboriousness, the constant meticulous cleaning, the serious and practical speeches of Prudence and her strength, her honesty, her sense of duty and of self-sacrifice.

This continuous binary opposition could at length have become monotonous, were it not for the heroine’s naïve, almost unconscious goodness and, above all, for the bright self-ironic tone which pervades the whole story. “The Front Yard”, in fact, tells the story of Prudence Wilkin, a New Hampshire-born American—like Woolson—whose origin in insisted upon nine times in the course of the tale.

Prudence stands out in the halo of her honesty, her commitment to her duty, her clever husbandry—like the ants of Aesop’s well known fable—
against the crowd of dirty and rough loafers and ne’er-do-well liars. The grasshopper of the fable is well exemplified by Prudence’s relatives, including her late husband Antonio Guadagni. Close to Prudence there are no honest and sincere human beings, but for the American friend and two foster-daughters: the mentally defective Annunziata/Nounce and the mystical-contemplative Assunta/Sooner secluded in a nunnery. All the remaining relatives, appearing on the scene, share the previously mentioned faults; besides, all of them seem to have the same purpose, either the bossy, sharp-tongued, always hungry invalid grandmother, or the lazy and violent son Augusto/Gooster, or the mocking and rude daughter Beppa/Bepper, or, in the end, the unthankful nephew Pippo/Pipper who steals Prudence’s anxiously cared for figs: everybody tries to take advantage of her and to deprive her of her hard won and saved money.

Giovanni/Jo Vanni, the best-loved son, behaves even worse than the others; informed by his foster-mother of her jealously kept secret, he betrays her trust and robs her at night of the money set aside to pay, the following day, for the longed for front yard. Dante would have plunged him into the ice of the ninth “cerchio”, where Cain is punished along with the relatives’ traitors (Inferno, XXXII 35).

In Aesop’s fable of the ants and the grasshopper—in “The Front Yard” there are many grasshoppers and only one ant—the ants send away the improvident grasshopper which, instead of working, has been singing the whole summer, and they leave it starving in the cold winter. Prudence, on the contrary, keeps on nourishing her singing grasshoppers for seventeen years after being left alone in Perugia upon the death of an old relative, in whose company she had come to Italy.

She then lost “the chance of returning to Ledham with her effects to pass by unnoticed” (5) ...This “remarkable lapse” was due to a handsome Italian waiter Prudence had fallen in love with and then married.

“It was her one moment of madness” (5) and her first and only romance. She was forty-five and he, Antonio Guadagni—the sense of the name is obvious—eighteen years younger; “divining her savings, and seeing with his own eyes her wonderful strength and energy”, Antonio had married her and made her walk to Assisi and then to the squalid house where she discovered that the “all alone in the world” (5) Antonio had a large family: seven children of his and his late wife Annunziata, an orphaned nephew, an invalid grandmother and an uncle who wrote sonnets.
Tonio "enjoyed a year of paradisiacal opulence ... until a fever—the recurring fever of many Italian tales—carried him off, and his widow, who mourned for him with all her heart, was left to face the world" (6) with his numerous family and with the little money left of the six hundred she had brought him.

The idea of going back to America never occurred to her; her sense of duty was too strong to permit her to desert Antonio's family. So she set to work with her whole strength, brooding, in the meanwhile, on a great dream: to save as much money as possible to buy and destroy the evil-smelling cowshed that spoiled the house and the front path, and to build in its place a front yard, in conformity with Ledham fashion.

Sixteen years after her husband's death, with almost all his children settled, Prudence thinks of her dream as a possible reality. She works even harder than before and saves furiously; six times she is about to fulfil her dream, but her attempts are ruined by the greediness and the deceitfulness of her foster-family. In the end, the front yard is built, not by the bedridden Prudence, but by an American tourist woman, to whom she tells the story of the last betrayal, that of the beloved son, Giovanni—like "John, the disciple Jesus loved" (John 19.26)—her desperation and her last words of love and forgiveness.

"The Front Yard" is like the reversal of the Biblical story of the Creation; if God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh (Genesis,1), Prudence tried six times to create the garden she dreamt of and was forced to rest on the seventh, while somebody else created for her—too late—what she was not allowed to because of others' wickedness.

Punctuated by the passing of the seasons, like For the Major, to point out the cyclic, natural movement of time (but for Prudence the most important dates of the year are the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day), "The Front Yard" is told in a chronological manner, with only two flashbacks: the first sums up sixteen years of Prudence's married and widowed life; the second tells the reader what happened in a month and a half, from the catastrophe, that is the discovery of Giovanni's robbery on August 30, to the accident with the sack of potatoes and the consequent, happy encounter with the generous American friend.

The incipit is original; it plunges the reader in medias res: Prudence is sitting on the side of a path for a short rest on her way home. She is accurately described from her bare feet to her straw bonnet carefully tied in a bow under her chin; sixty years old, strong and tall in spite of her age and
constant toil, “her eyes spoke a language which told of energy that would last as long as her breath” (2).

While the description continues, those eyes are staring at a low building without windows, with a sloping roof and a black door. The reader is thus informed of the casus belli, i.e. of the secret motive of Prudence’s constant toil and unceasing saving. “Prudence had hated that cowshed for years” (3), but now she hopes to succeed in getting rid of it, and, making a triumphant gesture, she exclaims in that direction: “Jest you wait till next Fourth of July, you indecent old Antiquity, you!” (3).

After the stop or narrative pause, and the first flashback, the narrative flow resumes its course, along with the series of Prudence’s plans, all of them doomed to failure, reminding the reader of the popular fable variously titled “The Milkmaid”, or “The Cottage-Cheese” or something similar. In this fable a young peasant girl, after receiving a piece of cottage-cheese as a gift, decides to go to the market to sell it. Along the road, with the cheese on her head, she thinks of her future profits: “With the first money I earn, I will buy a hen, then, by selling the eggs, I will have the money to buy a goat, then, selling her milk, I will be able to buy a cow ...”, and so on. In the end, fancying herself a rich woman to whom everybody should pay homage, the peasant curtsies, the cheese falls from her head and is scattered on the ground together with all her castles in the air.

The narrative of Prudence’s dreams and failed attempts follows the track of the milkmaid of the fable. Both women build castles in the air, the milkmaid alone, however, is responsible for her own failure, whereas Prudence is definitely not: every time she thinks she has reached a satisfactory stage, something happens and stops the progress of her plan: she is not able to work at the shop in Assisi because the bossy and voracious grandmother doesn’t accept being deprived of her hot meal at noon; she cannot sell her carefully grown figs because Pippo/Pepper steals them at night-time; she is forced to give the money she has saved to Augusto/Gooster to stop him from murdering a friend out of jealousy, to uncle Pietro/Patro to pay his gambling debts and to Beppa/Bepper who is going to be married and refuses to invite Prudence to her marriage: “I don’t want to shame ‘em” (34). But what breaks her heart, “the most unkindest cut of all” (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar 4.2) is Giovanni’s betrayal. Prudence explains her despair to her American friend:

You see, I minded it because it was him ... For I’d always been so fond of the boy ... at last I did get a letter, and he said as how he’d meant to put it back the very
next morning, sure. But something had happened, so he couldn’t, and so he’d gone away. And now he was working just as hard as he could ... (46)

The analysis of the protagonist’s names—Prudence Wilkin Guadagni—like that of Azubah Ash in “Neptune’s Shore” and Modesta in “A Waitress”, demonstrates once more the significance of names in Woolson’s texts, and also the effectiveness of the principle “nomina sunt consequentia rerum” (De Biasio, “Chopin” 39). The ironic use of the name “Prudence” is pointed out by the narrator himself who notes about the imprudent marriage:

... Prudence had allowed the chance of returning to Ledham with her effects to pass but unnoticed—a remarkable lapse of the quality of which her first name was the exponent, regarding which her whole life hitherto had been one sharply outlined example. This lapse was due to her having already become the captive of this handsome, this irresistible, this wholly unexpected Tonio ... (5, emphasis added)

With regard to Prudence’s family name—Wilkin—an interesting hypothesis could be suggested: the suffix *kin*, if read as a Germanic diminutive—*cannikin* as a *small can*—may suggest *too small a quantity of will*. Cheryl B. Torsney’s point of view is similar: she, in fact, states that “The art of Prudence Wilkin’s life is sacrificed to the *will* of her *kin* (Grief 150). A third solution seems more suitable for Prudence because of her origin, her Puritanical tradition, and her strong personality: the name Wilkin, divided in Wil-kin, may suggest the idea—according to the rule of the inverted order of compound names of Germanic origin—of a *kin of will*, a stock of strong and determined will, a quality very appropriate to Prudence.

The husband’s name—Guadagni—obviously refers to the non-gains or the losses which are a direct consequence of the marriage; the allusion is so explicit that it is possible to speak of humour rather than of sarcasm.

The scene of the action, the pivot round which the whole narrative revolves, is the poor house on the hill: “It was a small narrow house, built of stones plastered over and painted bright yellow. But though thus gay without, it was dark within” (6), because of the few small windows, covered with an iron grating, all in front and not ten feet distant from the cow-shed. But the real centre, the heart of the story is the dreamt garden, not the one approximately built by the American friend: “... there had been an attempt at grass; ... we couldn’t get snowballs or Missouri currant, so we had to take roses” (47).
The garden of the dream, that was to replace the recurrent and obsessive nightmare of the cowshed-come-pigsty, is described twice with full details and very few variations to reaffirm the solidity and the constancy of that heavenly vision:

Well, here is only the last day of August, and the cow-shed will be gone to-morrow. Then will come the new fence; and then the fun, the real fun, Nounce, of laying out our front yard! It will have a nice straight path down to the gate, currant bushes in neat rows along the sides, two big flowerin' shrubs, and little flower beds bordered with box. I tell you you won’t know your own house when you come in a decent gate and up a nice path to the front door ... You’ll feel like another person, Nounce; and I am sure I shall—I shall feel like Ledham again—my!” (42)

After an extreme, scornful gesture towards the cowshed with its offensive smell, Prudence delights again and again in the description of her dream which now seems so real and solid to become almost visible and tangible. It appears clear from the number of words of place—here, there, from, up, down, along, and their compounds—used to draw attention to the objects and their location in space; also worth noting is the relief given to the American white—dazzling, clear and untainted—in opposition to “these [Italian] yellows”, symbolising dirtiness, deceit and corruption:

I shall have to make the front walk all over ... And here ‘ll be the gate, down here—a swing one. And the path will go from here straight up to the door. Then the fence will go along here—palings, you know, painted white; a good, clean American white, with none of these yellows in it, you may depend. And over there—and there—along the sides, the fence will be just plain boards, notched at the top; the currant bushes will run along there. In the middle, here—and here—will be the big flowerin’ shrubs. And then the little flower-beds bordered with box”. (43, emphasis added)

According to J.M. Lotman (quoted in De Biasio, “Chopin” 4), the “artistic space” is not a priori identifiable with the physical; it is a particular channel which sometimes in literature takes upon itself the task—in a metaphoric sense—of portraying relations not at all spatial but rather connected with feelings, fancies, and in general with the modelling structure of the world.

This concept of “artistic space” seems suitable for the purpose of representing—also through obsessive repetition of the same spatial typology—the ideal spaces where Prudence’s narrative is located. The mean
dwelling on the hill with its yellow exterior—perhaps an ironic reference to the American utopian city on the hill of the old Puritanical tradition—hides a dark interior, for the small windows, all on the front, do not let in the daylight but only an unpleasant smell.

The deceptive mirth of the yellow without may be read as Prudence’s will to ignore the deceit she suffered and to conceal the shameful interior (IN) with the happy exterior (OUT). The winding path has already been mentioned: it symbolizes the labyrinth, the maze, and the lost direction (Frye) through error and sin. The gloomy cowshed, with no opening except for a black door, concealing INside the invisible but imaginable monster of the demonic world (Frye 150), represents the unconscious error, the Evil which has to be removed and Prudence’s will to blot it OUT of sight. The steep slope from Assisi to the house may then be seen as the ascent of expiation, and the seven attempts—including the realization, by her American friend, of a facsimile of the garden Prudence dreamt of—as the seven ‘cornici’ in Dante’s Purgatorio, even though the idea of a purgatorio certainly was “particularly trying to the New England mind” (10), like that of a mystery. Having been through these seven ‘cornici’, Prudence is finally able to enjoy her real garden on the top of the Purgatorio mountain; the Earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden—to which she is probably referring—to in her last unfinished sentence before dying.

As in most of Woolson’s narrative, the narrator is omniscient, thus allowing the reader to know and to foresee things and events the protagonist cannot or will not. The reader knows, for instance, that Prudence has been bitterly deceived, betrayed and exploited to the utmost by her husband and her foster-relatives, but no idea of fraud or deceit crosses her mind. When she, just married, arrives at her husband’s crowded house, the narrator ironically comments: “...then she understood—why they had walked. But she never understood anything else. She never permitted herself to understand” (5).

The focus, the narrator’s attention, the spotlight is always directed upon the protagonist. The point of view, however, shifts back and forth from the protagonist to her foster-Grandmother, her foster-family, the inhabitants of Assisi and her American friend. These changes of the visual angle allow the reader to see Prudence’s story, her outlook and her feelings from different points of view and support the play of contrasts between two opposite mentalities.

Woolson’s love for Italian art and the splendid Umbrian landscapes, emerging from all her letters, is represented by the American woman who
appears on the scene when Prudence is in need of help; this new friend cannot understand Prudence’s lack of interest in the Umbrian landscape. Speaking of the removal of the cowshed and the construction of the front yard, she says: “I am not surprised that you thought about it, ... it was the view you were longing for—fancy its having been cut off so long by that miserable stable! But now you have it in perfection”. Prudence naively adds: “You mean the view of the garden ...” The American, however, remains unconvinced:

No; I mean the great landscape all about us here ... That broad Umbrian plain with those tall slender trees; the other towns shining on their hills, like Perugia over there; the gleam of the river; the velvety blue of the mountains; the color of it all—I do believe it is the very loveliest view in the whole world! (47)

At last she is forced to surrender to Prudence’s good faith: “The truth is, I don’t care much for these Eyetalian views; it seems to me a poor sort of country, and always did” (48). Then she explains her preference for the view of Ledham to be enjoyed from Sage’s Hill.

From the point of view of her dreadful Grandmother-in-law, her foster-children and the inhabitants of Assisi, Prudence, America and Americans look completely different: exactly like the other side of the coin. Her attempt to offer the family an American meal fills it with disgust: “... fit only for the hogs” (10); her desire for a front yard as a mark of Ledham respectability is considered madness; “... to spend precious money for such a whim as that—only an American could be capable of it; but then, as everybody knew, most Americans were mad” (16); her devotion to work, her sense of duty is sarcastically despised rather than admired. When Uncle Pietro/Patro asks nine francs of Prudence to pay a gambling debt and she advises him to do “day’s work” for his creditors, he replays in scorn: “The Americans are all mercenary ... Being themselves always influenced by gain, they cannot understand lofty motives nor the cold, glittering anger of nobility” (26); Uncle Pietro, then, feigns a stroke to move her, and the Grandmother shouts: “... it’s a stroke; and you have brought it on, talking to him of working, working all day long like a horse—a good old man like that” (26-27); the people of Assisi sympathise with Tonio’s children for falling into her hands: “Few knew her; fewer still liked her, for was she not a foreigner and a pagan? Besides, what could you do with a woman who drank water, simple water, like a toad, and never touched wine—a woman who did not like oil, good, sweet, wholesome oil!” (31).
In conclusion, this was the common opinion of Prudence.

However, everybody agrees on one thing, a merit which nobody can deny, even the family: her frankness, her faithfulness in keeping her promises: “Even Grammar believed Prudence’s yes; her yes was yes and her nay was nay to all the family” (12).

In “The Front Yard” Woolson handles the question of language with a fine sense of humour: Prudence’s English, for instance, is Ledham (New Hampshire) dialect, and her Italian is the Umbrian dialect of Assisi. In her firm belief that Italy is “a poor sort of country” (48), she also has a poor opinion of the Italian language which she thinks of as a by-product of the English language: “She remained always convinced that Italian was simply lunatic English, English spoiled” (8)—Gray, in “A Waitress”, was more or less of the same mind. As a matter of fact, however, Prudence’s English is written out in the New Hampshire dialect—the fact reminds the reader of the character of Azubah in “Neptune’s Shore” published in 1888, the same year as “The Front Yard”—while the Umbrian dialect is transcribed in the correct English spelling.

Besides, Prudence attaches particular meanings to her foster-childrens’ names—perhaps she too is persuaded that ‘nomina sunt consequentia rerum’—thus these names become mangled in Prudence’s own fashion. The mentally defective daughter named after her mother Annunziata—the mere recollection of “that comely young mother” makes Prudence burn with jealousy—is called Nounce: “If it means ‘Announce’, Nounce is near enough, I guess” (9). This daughter, who perhaps was not so mentally defective as she was thought to be, voices a wise, and almost far-sighted intuition about the danger of believing too confidently in the possible realization of one’s own dreams; in fact, when Prudence exclaims in rapture: “Oh, Nounce, I can’t hardly believe it—it will be so beautiful! I really can’t”, she objects, with the wisdom of the poor in spirit: “You needn’t if you don’t want to; there is here yet to believe” (43). Giovanni, however, is renamed Jo Vanni: “Jo was a good New England name; Vanni was probably some senseless Italian addition” (9), which once more demonstrates Prudence’s attitude towards Italy: a poor, on the whole inferior country.

A further humorous allusion to the language appears when the narrator mentions the Italian spoken by the American nurse assisting Prudence during her illness: “... her Italian (which was grammatically correct) was delivered in the vowels of Vermont” (44). The result can easily be imagined.
In Prudence’s story in Italy, in her attitude towards Italians, and in her strict Protestant law of moral imperative, many similarities may be found with Woolson’s short story “Miss Elisabetha” (1875). This text tells the story of an old gentlewoman from New York, Miss Elisabetha Daarg, of remote Dutch origin, forced to move to the Atlantic coast of Florida in order to take care of her ward, Doro. In Florida, Miss Elisabetha, like Prudence in Assisi, works hard to provide Doro and herself with a decent life; in the meanwhile she teaches him to sing, according to her—out of date—knowledge and belief. As Prudence nourishes a feeling of contempt for the inhabitants of Assisi, Miss Elisabetha despises the indolent, happily improvident and irresponsible people of Florida. At last, however, all her care for Doro’s education and career prospects proves useless toil. Doro marries a young, cheerful, and irresponsible Minorcan, dies young, and Miss Elisabetha has to provide for his numerous family in Florida, as Prudence does in Assisi.

These similarities reveal Woolson’s tendency to confront Northern people with Southern, apart from any distinction of nationality or language, and almost always the contrast turns out badly for the “Southener race” (Dorothy 26); in “The Front Yard”, however, the contrast becomes more radical: an epic battle between Good and Evil.

Comparing Prudence to Miss Elisabetha and Marion Carrol, the protagonist of For the Major, Torsney interprets in an original way some less obvious aspects of “The Front Yard”:

Prudence is another version of Miss Elisabetha and Marion Carrol, who, by sacrificing herself to her family, turns her narrative into art. Prudence’s sacrifice, however, is not that of self to a generalized and all-consuming love of family. Her sacrifice is very specific: is that New England art of domestic landscaping, which translates into identity, respectability, and pride. (Grief 148-149)

The comment is appropriate: Prudence’s sacrifice is not merely unselfish; she wants to construct a project for herself too.

Susan Harris, in her research on the most suitable interpretative strategies for a critical re-reading of nineteenth-century American women’s novels, insists on the importance of the language of flowers as a mean of communication. According to Harris, in the first didactic—or domestic—novels, and in those she defines “exploratory novels”, such as Ruth Hall (1855) by Fanny Fern or Queechy (1852) by Susan Warner,
these typical conventions of women’s writing are used in a traditional way, while in later novels, like *Work: a Story of Experience* (1873) by Louisa May Alcott, they have explicit feminist purposes.

The point has been elsewhere mentioned with regard to *For the Major* and “A Pink Villa”; in “The Front Yard” flowers are widely used, too and it is very probable that they are meant to suggest symbolic meanings. The list of flowers Prudence plans to grow in her garden: “... snow-balls or Missouri currant ..., matrimony ..., bachelor’s buttons, Chin y-asters, lady’s slippers, and pinks” (16) inevitably reminds the reader of Shakespeare’s symbolic use of flowers in the scene of Ophelia’s madness (*Hamlet* 4.5) and particularly in the scene of Perdita as Queen of the Feast (*The Winter’s Tale* 4.4). Prudence’s flowers probably symbolize her way of being: traditional, observant of the convention she learnt during her upbringing in Ledham. Daisy means purity, freshness, naturalness everywhere, but also pearl, precious stone (Dante, *Paradiso* II, 34-35); pink means freedom and love in its different aspects; Chin-y-aster, however, symbolizes a fickle mind, odd ideas, and, in general, whimsicality and fancifulness; it may be read as Prudence’s longing—beneath her severe appearance—for something new and exciting. She too, had her one moment of madness:

... the poor plain simple-hearted spinster, to whom no one had ever spoken a word of gallantry in all her life before, had been completely swept off her balance by the novelty of it ... It was her one moment of madness (who has not had one?). (5, emphasis added)

Besides, in her lack of love and affection during the hot Umbrian summer, “... the never-ending light, the long days of burning sunshine, the nights with the persistent moon, the importunate nightingales, and the magnificent procession of the stars had sometimes driven the New England woman almost mad ...” (41).

The roses Prudence’s American friend has planted instead of snow-balls and Missouri currant not to be found in Umbria, certainly have a funereal meaning. The habit of planting roses close to the tombs is of very ancient origin and was always considered a precious homage to the dead. According to the theory of archetipal myths of Frye:

In the West the rose has a traditional priority among apocalyptic flowers: the use of the rose as a communion symbol in the *Paradiso* comes readily to mind, and
in the first book of the *Faerie Queene* the emblem of St. George, a red cross on a white ground, is connected not only with the risen body of Christ and the sacramental symbolism which accompanies it, but with the union of the red and white roses in the Tudor dynasty. (144)

The meaning of death and Resurrection as heavenly communion may be applied to Prudence’s destiny; she will not enjoy for long the garden her friend has built for her. “Last of all, her dulled eyes turned from the little window and rested upon her friend: ‘It seems a pity—But perhaps I shall find.’” (49). The unfinished sentence allows the reader to imagine that Prudence, at the moment of her death, has begun dreaming of a new, finer garden; perhaps, after the expiation of her “remarkable lapse” (5), the doors of Eden are opening for her.
"In Search of the Picturesque" is the title of a travel sketch Woolson wrote and published in 1872 in Harper's New Monthly Magazine.

The phrase point of view is here used with the meaning of focus, that is the attention the narrator draws to a specific character, place or event.
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