Foreword to Special Section: Affect and the Short Story and Cycle

Robert M. Luscher
I am pleased to have been asked by the editors to serve as the Designated Editorial Board Consultant to introduce this Special Section of *JSSE* on “Affect and the Short Story and Cycle.” Having devoted a significant portion of my career to studying the short story—especially its individual and collective behavior within the short story cycle—it is gratifying to see concerted attention devoted to the intersection of reader and text, particularly as it occurs in relation to the production of affect. The volume contains seven essays—three of which focus on the short story cycle and four of which analyze particular stories—as well as a first-time feature in *JSSE*: an electronic roundtable on a variety of questions related to the implication of affect in the study of these genres.

Guest Editors Paul Ardoin and Fiona McWilliam precede their judicious selection of essays with an incisive introduction that utilizes the concept of “stickiness” to integrate the variety of concerns examined in the contributors’ essays and the concluding roundtable. This adhesive quality, they contend, can be applied to various intersections that occur in the autonomous story as well as within a linked collection: the convergence of reader and text, the relationship between characters and stories within the cycle, the effect of repetition, and the resonance produced by various narrative strategies. As Ardoin and McWilliam review the section’s contents, sketching the particular concerns of each essay, they provide a sense of the rationale behind the section’s arrangement and of its theoretical range and resonances. In doing so, they suggest that the section—like the short story cycle—creates a “stickiness” of its own through the accumulating affective value that binds it and generates an effect greater than the mere sum of its parts. A similar effect occurs as they provide a review of the main roundtable, attending to the comments of individual scholars and the threads that weave their remarks together.

The three essays focused on short story cycles take various critical approaches to examining the role affect plays across the wider canvas of the short story collection. Daniel Davis Wood’s essay on two cycles by African American writer Edward P. Jones, building on Charles Altieri, shifts focus from fiction as representation of affective
experience to its role in generating affect aesthetically, especially during conscious moments of attentiveness. Both the modular form of the cycle and the repetition of affective triggers, Wood contends, create a spatio-temporal panorama with disquieting experiential significance built into geographic markers from the characters’ affective experiences. Rachel Lister, in contrast, examines moments of happiness, with Sara Ahmed’s theories of affect as her lens on story cycles by Katherine Ann Porter, Eudora Welty, and Alice Munro that focus on the lives of marginalized female characters who move beyond the norms of their affective communities to experience moments of transformation or returns that move them beyond hegemonic notions of happiness. These cycles contain a more positive form of repetition, enabling acts of reclamation and renewed comprehension, most often through affective lyric moments. Rebecca Cross concludes the section, drawing on Wolfgang Iser’s narratological theories as she examines the return motif in story cycles by Elizabeth Strout and David Schickler, both of which recursively utilize patterns of absence in a metanarrative fashion. Cross is particularly interested in the process of ideation and reconciliation that occurs affectively for the reader in the gaps between stories in a cycle, and her analysis draws attention to this undertheorized issue.

4 Fiona McWilliam leads off the section on autonomous stories with a study of Lydia Marie Child’s critically neglected “The Black Saxon,” analyzing Child’s strategy of sympathetic identification to demonstrate how the story displaces reader sympathy to the socio-political realm; nonetheless, as the story’s protagonist demonstrates, feeling does not always translate into the impetus for action. Dennis Brink closely studies the affective atmosphere of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” analyzing the relationship of interior and exterior generation of situational affect and the vicious circle of negative affect—one which becomes an allegory for the reading experience and utilizes its brevity to transmute affective infection to the level of affective possession. Kuo Chia-chen’s essay on Virginia Woolf’s “The String Quartet” focuses on the affective impact of musicality, both as it is represented in the story and as it functions stylistically and metanarratively to produce a kaleidoscopic effect that progressively transports both narrator and reader. Rob Welch concludes the section with a study of intersecting affective realms in Stephen Crane’s “The Blue Hotel,” employing Raymond Williams’ concept of “structures of feeling” to argue that the story’s affective dimension moves it beyond merely expressing determinism—an approach which he contends will similarly extend criticism of Crane’s other short fiction. The genre’s intensity, the accumulation of charged affective moments, the function of gaps, and the impact of juxtaposition and multiplicity are all repeated concerns in these essays.

5 The concluding roundtable reiterates and particularizes many of these concerns as applicable to affect in the autonomous story and the cycle, as well as in unjoined sequels to particular stories. Patrick Colm Hogan, Gerald Lynch, Justine Murison, James Nagel, Jane Thraikill, and Miriam Wallace engage in a wide-ranging exchange on form and affect, providing analyses of a number of particular stories in support of their positions in the longer section on the short story. Far more attention is paid to the short story than to the cycle, with the latter discussion providing numerous possibilities for further pursuit of issues of form and affective resonance that these scholars have the space to raise but not to pursue, providing an open-ended conclusion to the special section not unlike that of the story within a cycle.
Before readers begin their review of this issue’s contents, thanks are due to the other members of the JSSE editorial board who contributed their time and expertise to reviewing and refining these essays, to the editors of JSSE who assisted with the conceptualization and production of this special section, and to guest editors Paul Ardoin and Fiona McWilliam for assembling and editing these essays and the roundtable, writing an eloquent introduction, and seeing this stimulating special section through to its conclusion.

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