Yearning, Frustration, and Fulfillment: The Return Story in *Olive Kitteridge* and *Kissing in Manhattan*

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The use of absence in the short story cycle is an overlooked but vital element of the genre.¹ It contributes to the way that cycles can manipulate the focus in their stories, using developed patterns of absence to influence the reader’s response. The technique of the return story is identified by Gerald Lynch in his 2001 book *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles*. He describes the return story as the final story in a cycle which returns it back to its origins, spiralling back in on itself to create a meaningful connection to its starting point, often by referencing characters and events which occur throughout the stories (32). Both *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout and *Kissing in Manhattan* by David Schickler are short story cycles which use absence to develop patterns to direct the focus back into the preceding stories through the contrast presented in the return story.

In relation to the structure of the short story cycle, I use the term “absence” to represent elements of the text which are not physically present but which, regardless of their lack of presence, have a noted and significant effect on the cycle as a whole. Absence functions both as an abstract concept that describes the interaction between the reader and elements that are left out of a text and also as a focus of the content of the stories. The cycles present characters who experience a void in life, and the stories describe the characters’ respective searches to fill these voids. The two cycles lend themselves to a study of absence within the genre because of this interaction between the structural absences and the absences presented in the content.

These absences create the affective experiences of yearning, frustration, and fulfillment for the reader. The absences construct these emotional reactions, which become affective reactions to the text. The repetition of this absence in both texts appears on the surface...
to be the factor which allows the cycles to influence the focus of the reader. However, this article explores the way that the pattern of absence is built up throughout the cycles to explain how it becomes so significant. When the return story is reached, the contrast created within it directs the focus back to the previous stories, effectively drawing together the individual stories so that they are conceived of as a cohesive whole.

4 Olive Kitteridge is comprised of thirteen short stories, seven of which are told from the character Olive’s perspective, whilst the remaining six stories are told through different characters that intersect with Olive’s life in varying degrees. The stories are set in the small town of Crosby, Maine. Olive is a middle-aged wife to Henry and mother to Christopher. She is a retired high school mathematics teacher and avid gardener. She is portrayed throughout the cycle as an unfriendly and often unkind woman who feels an absence of understanding in her life. The stories describe significant events in the characters’ lives, such as Christopher’s wedding, Henry’s flirtation with his young and naive pharmacy assistant, and the terrifying night when Olive and Henry become hostages in a hospital hold up orchestrated by two men looking for drugs. Olive’s negative memories and thoughts about the absences in her life are often associated with black imagery. She is extremely unhappy in her life and yearns to be understood within her relationships. This metaphor of blackness is repeated throughout the stories, in particular the stories that are told from Olive’s point of view. The repetition gradually strengthens the association between the black imagery and the absence that Olive feels within her life. The development of the pattern of this metaphor becomes representative of Olive’s desire to be explicitly understood.

5 The final story of Olive Kitteridge, “River,” portrays a change in Olive’s mental state. Instead of yearning to be understood, she begins to feel unconditionally loved. This story is set after Henry’s death and describes her new relationship with Jack Kennison, a man she meets on one of her daily walks by the river. Olive and Jack’s relationship is characterized by openness and truthfulness. The imagery of clearness and blueness to describe Olive’s feelings which is used in this story contrasts with the prevailing imagery of blackness. The change in imagery highlights the contrast between Olive’s positive feelings in this story and her negative emotions in the previous stories, emphasizing the association between the images of blackness and the absence she experiences in her life.

6 Throughout the cycle Olive’s yearning to be understood takes different forms. Olive and Henry have been married for many years and have a strained and distant relationship but ultimately love each other. Olive has a tense relationship with their son Christopher, who divorces his first wife Suzanne after only a year of marriage. Shortly afterwards, Henry suffers a stroke and never recovers. He is put in a nursing home in a nearby town and Olive assumes the role of the dutiful wife, visiting him twice daily until his death, which is disclosed in “River.” Her relationship with Christopher is further tested when he remarries and only informs her of the existence of his new wife, Ann, after his marriage to Ann takes place. After Henry’s death, Olive begins a relationship with Jack. He helps Olive move on from repeatedly dwelling on her mistakes from the past and to begin to accept herself for the sharp-tongued but well-meaning woman she is.

7 Although absence functions in Kissing in Manhattan through the repetition of expectations, its use in the return story has the same effect of drawing attention to the cycle as a whole and the way that the stories build upon each other. This cycle is comprised of eleven short stories which are told from the point of view of nine different characters whose lives become intertwined. The stories are set in New York and focus on
the Preemption Building, which becomes a connecting image throughout the cycle. James Branch, one of the dominant characters of the cycle, has three stories told from his perspective and appears in four other stories. He is a lonely man who works in finance and imagines himself eventually meeting his dream woman, who has specific “honey-colored hair.” The expectation and temporary absence of fulfillment of this expectation that James will eventually meet such a woman is developed through the repetition of this phrase. Rally McWilliams, a character featured in several stories, matches this description, further strengthening this expectation. The repetition of the phrase “honey-colored hair” becomes a form of present absence in the cycle which creates a desire for James and Rally to become a couple.

In “The Green Balloon,” the return story of Kissing in Manhattan, the anticipated relationship between James and Rally finally occurs. Although James and Rally meet several times throughout the cycle, nothing ever comes of these meetings. This piece of information alters the desire for the relationship to occur to a sense of satisfaction that the anticipation has finally been released. The sudden change from anticipation to satisfaction directs the focus back into the preceding stories, where the anticipation is developed. The contrasting sense of satisfaction prompts a reflection on the ways that this anticipation is gradually built up throughout the cycle through the repetition of the phrase “honey-colored hair.” The individual stories are brought together as a whole through this renewed focus and reflection on the ongoing patterns.

Both Olive Kitteridge and Kissing in Manhattan are examples of the recent surge in popularity of the short story cycle. However, this increase in popularity has not been matched with an increase in critical attention. Very few recent studies focus entirely on the genre. Two of the most notable contemporary contributions are Victoria Kuttainen’s Unsettling Stories: Postcolonialism and the Short Story Composite, which focuses on the way the short story cycle can be used to present settler postcolonialism and its ongoing effects on society today, and James Nagel’s The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle, which considers the genre in comparison with aspects of ethnicity in America and explores the representation of minorities in cycles and the paradigms implicit in this representation. These studies use Forrest L. Ingram’s foundational 1971 work Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century, which is the first critical work to name and describe the genre; however, none of these critical works places emphasis on the significance of absence to the genre.

One of Ingram’s central arguments is that repetition in the short story cycle leads to “patterns of recurrence and development” (20), which become integral to the establishment of a sense of unity throughout the cycle. These patterns become more discernible and they strengthen as the cycle progresses, unifying the individual stories into a larger work. I suggest that these “patterns of recurrence and development” do not only encompass elements which add a straightforward sense of continuity and unity to the cycles but can also be comprised of elements which draw the cycles together through absence. Both Olive Kitteridge and Kissing in Manhattan contain a return story that draws together the preceding stories through its contrast to the prevailing pattern of absence. In Olive Kitteridge, the repetition of blackness gradually becomes a metaphor for the absence in Olive’s life, whereas the repetition of “honey-colored hair” in Kissing in Manhattan creates absence through its pattern of repetition.

My analysis of the return story uses Lynch’s definition as its base, extending the concept to suggest that the return story uses absence to create its movement. This encourages the
reader to return to the stories that have come before and re-evaluate their content in light of the cycle as a whole. While the use of extended metaphor and phrase repetition are not the only factors that contribute to the effect of the return story, I argue that in each of the texts under study this kind of repetition is the factor that most strongly influences the reader's feelings of anticipation and satisfaction. There are many different elements that make up a short story cycle, several of which could be used to discuss the return story; however, these other features are beyond the scope of this essay.

In addition to providing the basis of the return story, Lynch's work is also useful because it initiates conversation about the elements of a cycle which detract from the sense of unity. He argues that the genre "is a form that allows for a new kind of unity in disunity, reflecting a fragmented temporal sense, and incorporating a more authentic representation of modern sensibilities" (18). The tension between "the one and the many," between the individual stories and the cycle as a whole, allows short story cycles to encompass both unity and disunity. Using his idea of being able to find "unity in disunity," I argue that the movement created by the patterned absences throughout the cycles leads to a consideration of the text as a whole.

My analysis of Olive Kitteridge and Kissing in Manhattan focuses on the recurrence and development of different kinds of absence in each text—absence through metaphor and absence through repetition. Beginning with Olive Kitteridge, I demonstrate that the significance of absence functions twofold in this cycle. The images of blackness that pervade Olive's mind and body throughout the first twelve stories become physical representations of absence, while the movement back into the stories after the return story highlights the connection between Olive's yearning to be loved and her bodily blackness, revealing the way that absence in Olive's life creates connections between the stories. The images of blackness become an overarching metaphor in the cycle and its sombre tone affects the cycle as a whole.

My analysis of Olive's blackness is focused on three of the stories told from her perspective: "A Little Burst," the fourth story in the cycle; "Tulips," the eighth story; and "River," the thirteenth and final story. The first two of these stories have been chosen because they exemplify the recurrence and development of the images of blackness. This understanding of the extended metaphor can then be used to demonstrate the effect of the return story and the contrast of the images of blueness that are included in it. The images of blackness presented in "A Little Burst" and "Tulips" occur in conjunction with descriptions of Olive's feelings and take the form of squid ink, sludge, and black fingers. A connection therefore develops between the negative connotations of the images of blackness and the absence of understanding Olive feels in her life and her close relationships. Contrastingly, when Olive meets Jack in "River," positive images of blueness—brightness and sunshine—are used to describe their relationship.

In "A Little Burst," squid ink becomes aligned with the lack of openness in Olive's life. This story occurs before Henry's stroke and depicts Christopher's first wedding, which is held at his house in Crosby. At the end of the day Olive feels overwhelmed by the event and goes to rest on Christopher's bed, where, through an open window, she overhears her new daughter-in-law Suzanne telling some of her relatives, "He's had a hard time you know" (70). Olive makes the assumption that Suzanne is referring to her and is faced with recurring guilt surrounding Christopher's childhood. She laments that "deep down there is this thing inside me, and sometimes it swells up like the head of a squid and shoots blackness through me. I haven't wanted to be this way, but so help me, I have loved my
son” (71). The “blackness” of the ink of the squid represents the desperation of Olive’s yearning for Christopher to understand how much she loves him and for their relationship to be closer. The violent bodily invasion of the squid ink adds the idea of mental and physical permanence when it is shot inside Olive’s body, indefinitely staining everything it touches.

This first example of the connection between Olive’s yearning for more openness in her life and the recurring metaphor of blackness is strengthened in “Tulips,” where the bodily invasion of blackness is further described. This image of blackness builds on the squid ink, taking the form of sludge. In this story, which occurs after Henry’s stroke but before his death, Olive feels disturbed after visiting Louise Larkin, a neighbour who is suffering a mental illness and whose son has been convicted of murdering a woman with whom he was romantically involved. Olive longs to talk to Henry about the visit, which “sat inside her like a dark, messy injection of sludge spreading through her body. Only telling someone about it would get it hosed out” (157). The sludge provides a negative image of covering and concealment. The unpleasant and dirty connotations that accompany the word “sludge” add another layer of complexity to the image of blackness. Like the squid ink, the sludge too is an unwilling invasion of Olive’s body, demonstrating the control that the blackness, and by extension, her yearning, has over her emotional state.

The idea that the blackness becomes the vehicle through which the reader is able to understand the absence in Olive’s life can be further understood through an analysis of the structures in the text that are used to create and signal this absence. In On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction, Brian Boyd discusses the way that the reactions of the reader can be anticipated through the content of a text, arguing that “[f]iction can design events and characters to provoke us to reflect on, say, generosity, or threat, or deception and counter-deception. And it efficiently evokes our intense emotional engagement without requiring our belief” (193). The connection between Olive’s yearning to be implicitly understood in her relationships and the images of blackness that are associated with her state of mind provokes a reflection on the development of the metaphor and the way that it works to tie different stories together. The recurrence of the images of blackness expands into representations of the absence in Olive’s life, demonstrating how this reflexivity is prompted by the absence in the cycle.

The metaphor of blackness is further extended in “Tulips,” where a reference to “black fingers” builds upon the image of the squid ink and the sludge, strengthening the connection between blackness and lack of fulfillment. After her disturbing visit to Louise, Olive rings Christopher, wanting to speak to him about her experience, but he claims he is too busy to talk to her. She then decides to visit Henry and on the drive to the nursing home finds that she yearns for her son to unconditionally love her, but she is also plagued again by an unrelenting guilt about her relationship with him: “It was shame that swiped across her soul, like these windshield wipers before her: two large black lone fingers, relentless and rhythmic in their chastisement” (160). This sentence creates a double link between the black fingers and the previous examples of the images of squid ink and sludge. The “two large black lone fingers” exist both as the shame in Olive’s mind and the windshield wipers on her car, providing a mental and physical representation of her yearning. The description of the shame that is swiped through Olive’s body with the two large black fingers links to the sludge that she cannot hose out of her body when she is unable to speak with Henry through the comparable actions they describe, which
strengthens the link between Olive's desire for more understanding in her life and the blackness that seeps inside of her.

These connections made in the mind of the reader through the repetition of the metaphor serve to link the different stories together, creating an overarching image of blackness throughout the cycle as a whole. Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading* explores this idea of the relationship between what is left out of a text and the reader. He discusses the function of gaps in a text, arguing that silences constructed in texts invite the reader to create his or her own meaning in the gap. The inclusion of gaps in a text means that “the reader is forced to try to find connections between the hitherto familiar story and the new, unforeseeable situations” (192). While there is no way of definitively ascertaining every reader’s reaction to this search for connections, which Iser refers to as the process of “ideation,” the process itself reveals the significance of gaps or absences in a text, positioning the reader to become part of the meaning-making process.

The process of ideation is particularly significant to the return story because it provides a way to begin to understand how the text prompts an attempt to reconcile the stories that have come before and how the reader is thus sent back into the stories to re-evaluate their content. Iser argues that ideation leads to an imaginative act whereby the reader becomes part of the text in the process of filling in the gaps (168). The sense of continuity developed through the different images of blackness illustrates the role of the reader to recognize and draw together the absences presented in Olive’s life. The images do not simply repeat themselves throughout the cycle but take slightly different forms.

Ideation works to draw these images together through the gradual build-up of connections between blackness and Olive’s yearning in her life, positioning the reader to recognize the connections between the images. For example, the continuous swiping movement of the windshield wiper fingers further develops ideas of negative growth that become familiarized through the other recurring images of blackness and invoke connotations of lack of control, suggesting that Olive cannot keep down the blackness inside of her. Her inability to restrict this blackness signifies that she is likewise unable to gain control over the emotional and physical absences in her life. The repeated use of verbs to describe actions which increase the size of the blackness means that they become explicit physical representations of Olive’s implicit desires. Like the image of the squid head which “swells” inside her and the sludge “spreading” throughout her body, the black fingers that are “swiped” across her soul provide another example of the increasing nature of the blackness, familiarizing the connection between growing absence and Olive’s feeling of lack in her life.

My analysis of the significance of the connections between these images relies on understanding how the text influences the response of the reader. In addition to Iser and his discussion of the role of gaps, more recent critics have built upon this work to further theorize the ways that readers use elements of texts to make sense of narrative worlds. The establishment of cognitive narratology, for example, is attributed to Manfred Jahn, who introduced the term in his article “Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology.” He argues that word and phrase choice can be used to analyze hermeneutic processes in texts. For instance, the analysis of hermeneutics reveals how the use of absence creates and maintains the expectations of the reader. David Herman extends this early model, suggesting in his article “Narrative Theory and the Sciences of the Mind” that the process of closely analyzing texts provides “a finer-grained account of textual patterns discoverable in the story” (427) and reveals...
how these patterns can be used to anticipate reactions. Herman demonstrates that narratological principles can be used to “illuminate the way interpreters use textual designs to fill out storyworlds, to the extent required by their engagement with a given narrative” (433). His analysis shows how the text creates the reaction of what he calls the interpreter, and what I refer to as the reader. Cognitive narratology discusses how a text can influence or affect a reader and in the context of absence and the short story cycle can be used to explain how the effects of yearning, frustration, and fulfillment are created in the mind of the reader.

Through the use of verbs of growth, the images of blackness position the reader to become aware of the depths of Olive’s yearning. Not only do these images build on each other to develop a stronger sense of the depth of the metaphor of blackness and hence the depth of absence in Olive’s life, they also initiate the hermeneutic process of searching for meaning behind the patterns. The description of the squid shooting blackness through Olive’s body creates an image which is paralleled in other descriptions of blackness. The ways that the sludge is injected into her body and the fingers swipe relentlessly across her soul describe blackness as something that is inserted into and spread throughout Olive’s unwilling body. The consistency of the forceful actions used in conjunction with images of blackness familiarizes the connection between the ideas, encouraging links to be made between these consistencies in the stories. The alliteration of the /s/ sounds in these forceful actions becomes another type of repetition. The repelling imagery of sludge spreading, squid ink shooting, and black fingers swiping in Olive’s body becomes a weighted sound, making the absence associated with blackness more present and familiar in the stories and highlighting the repugnance of Olive’s emotional state.

The images of blackness form a significant recognizable pattern throughout the stories that encourages the reader to realize Olive’s mental darkness. The importance of recognizing these patterns in texts and the effects that they can have on the reader is discussed by Herman in the introduction to *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. He suggests that analyses of texts should ask “not just about story structure as such, but about the patterned, non-random ways in which readers and listeners tend to impute structure to certain strings of events presented in discourse” (8). The patterns of absence anticipate the impact of the movement of the return story through their development in the cycle. Herman’s suggestion to consider the effect of these patterns on the reader can lead to a greater understanding of how they work to instigate movement of the reader’s focus.

The recognizable and established pattern of images of blackness is stopped in “River,” where contrast is created through the sudden change to images of blueness. Olive’s emotional reaction to her relationship with Jack is accompanied by positive images of blueness and sunshine. They are presented along with Olive’s new sense of fulfillment and openness. The change in imagery creates an unforeseeable but immediately recognizable break in the established metaphor, highlighting the effect of the previous prevailing images of blackness. The break in the familiar imagery invites a reflection on the effect of the accumulation of the images of blackness and the way that these images, as representations of absence, work to create connections in the cycle.

The unforeseeable change in imagery highlights the familiarity of the images of blackness through the confronting effect of the images of blueness. This confrontation occurs even though the new imagery is associated with positive emotions; the disruption to the
pattern creates this effect. The first image of blueness occurs after Henry’s death when Olive has begun her daily walks by the river to fill her mornings. One morning Olive sees Jack lying on the side of the path and the first thing she notices about him is that “his eyes were open. His eyes were very blue” (253). Jack’s blue eyes become a recurring image throughout “River,” described in this same way eight separate times (253, 254, 255, 260, 263, 268, 269). Like the images of blackness which implicitly represent Olive’s yearning, the images of blueness also reveal Olive’s emotional state, this time her feelings of fulfillment. The change in emotional state is uncovered through the contrast in imagery.

The reflection on the familiarity of blackness and its absence and the subsequent movement back into the other stories of the cycle is created by the recurrence and development of the blue imagery in “River.” When Olive admits to hitting Christopher as a child, she is afraid that Jack will reject her. However, Jack admits to Olive the guilt he feels at his rejection of his lesbian daughter, trusting that Olive will not judge his past, which then encourages her to do the same: “He sighed and shook his head, the sunlight from the windows catching his eyes, making them very blue. ‘Anyway, Olive, you can tell me anything, that you beat your son black and blue, and I wouldn’t hold it against you’” (268). This moment of truthfulness and acceptance in their newfound relationship includes references to both sunlight and blue eyes, demonstrating the association between these images and the sense of trust and fulfillment Olive feels in her relationship with Jack. The reference to “black and blue” places the two major recurring images of the cycle next to each other. In this instance the images of blackness that are perpetuated through the previous stories are accented by the contradicting image of blueness. The confrontation that occurs as a result of this contrast reveals the prevalence of the familiar metaphor of blackness, highlighting the way that its repetition has come to be expected whenever Olive’s mental state is described. The contrast focuses on the recurrent patterns in the cycle, which creates the return movement back into the previous stories to reconsider the significance of these patterns.

The ideational activity anticipated by the contrast in “River” relies on the recurrence and development of the images of blackness throughout the stories of the cycle. The absence of blackness and its juxtaposition with blue reveals its prevalence and highlights its representation of Olive’s emotional state. In contrast, *Kissing in Manhattan* uses absence in the form of repetition of the same image to create the effect of the return story. Where in *Olive Kitteridge* the absence is a feature of the recurring imagery, in *Kissing in Manhattan* absence becomes the recurring imagery. The expectations that are created in *Kissing in Manhattan* through the repetition of the phrase “honey-colored hair” are finally fulfilled in the return story. As in “River,” this return story is created through contrast. However, in this case the contrast exists through the expectation of the reader, who no longer anticipates a relationship between James and a woman with honey-colored hair but now feels satisfaction that it has occurred. The sense of satisfaction created is achieved through the recurrence and development of the expectations throughout the previous stories. Although *Olive Kitteridge* uses the repetition of metaphor and *Kissing in Manhattan* uses the repetition of a phrase to create the return story, the effect remains constant; it returns the focus to the previous stories and highlights the connectedness of the cycle.

In my analysis of the phrase repetition in *Kissing in Manhattan*, I focus on three stories which provide strong examples of the way this repetition occurs throughout the cycle—“The Opals,” the fourth story; “Kissing in Manhattan,” the fifth story; and “Telling It All to Otis,” the ninth story—before demonstrating the satisfaction created through “The
Green Balloon.” James Branch’s desire for a woman with “honey-colored hair” is introduced in “The Opals.” This story is told from James’ point of view and describes his habit of eating at a restaurant called Flat Michael’s for dinner. The story follows the events that occur one October night when he arrives at the restaurant later than usual after work and unexpectedly has to wait an hour to get a table. While waiting for his table, he wanders into a sex shop by accident and uses the excuse that he needs to use the bathroom to get away from the pushy saleswoman. He is directed downstairs, where on the way to the bathroom he finds a very old wooden door inscribed with the words “John Castle’s Nomadic” on the front in pink letters. Intrigued, he opens the door and unpredictably finds a jewellery workshop complete with a man working in it. The mysterious jeweller invites James to imagine which piece of jewellery he would choose if he had a woman to give it to: “James got a glimpse in his hand of a woman with warm skin and hair the color of honey. He pictured opals against her skin” (79). This is the first instance of the phrase in the cycle.

In addition to this first glimpse of James’ imaginary ideal woman, anticipation about this woman is also created through the rest of the conversation between James and the jeweller. When giving James his choice of opal earrings, the jeweller says to him, “Keep them somewhere safe. You’ll know when to give them to her” (79). James tries to explain that there has been some mistake because there is no such woman, but the jeweller confidently replies, “There will be soon” (79). This proclamation initiates the expectation that James will soon meet his woman with “hair the color of honey.” It increases the sense of anticipation for a romantic relationship for James and positions the reader to begin to actively search for clues that might hint at who this woman could be. The text initiates this search through the suggestion that the woman will soon come into James’ life. This is one of the ways that the repetition of the phrase influences the reader’s reaction to the stories.

This same image is repeated several other times throughout the stories, increasing the sense of anticipation through its salience. Immediately following the confident declaration from the jeweller, James thinks “of the woman who’d just popped into his mind, the one with the honey-colored hair” (79). The repetition of the image of the woman with “honey-colored hair” signals that there is a potential future relationship for James. The repetition of the phrase positions the woman to be seen as a real person rather than an idea, which increases the anticipation for the relationship.

The significance of the repetition of this phrase can be better understood through an analysis of the way that it influences the reader’s reaction to the cycle. Through its manipulation of the reader’s expectations of what will eventuate in the stories, the repetition of “honey-colored hair” draws the reader into the cycle, so that he or she becomes an active part of its structure. This kind of involvement of the reader is discussed by Alan Palmer in his article “The Construction of Fictional Minds.” He suggests readers undergo a process by which they construct “the plot by means of a series of provisional conjectures and hypotheses about the embedded narratives of characters” (42). The patterns in a text can prompt the reader to make assumptions about its content. These patterns guide the reader’s reaction. In the context of the phrase “honey-colored hair,” its repetition guides the reader to come to expect that it will hold significance in later stories and to wait for a relationship between James and Rally, the woman with honey-colored hair, to eventuate.
The following story, “Kissing in Manhattan” solidifies this presumption when it introduces a woman who fits James’ description. Rally is described as having “stunning honey-colored hair that tumbled to her waist and got her free drinks” (84). The repetition of the phrase in another story means that it becomes a marker in the cycle, suggesting a connection between James and Rally that is not yet established. The possibility of this connection extends the anticipation to surround both their characters. These expectations seem to be about to be realized when James and Rally meet by accident. However, nothing eventuates and the two quickly go their separate ways. This meeting occurs in “Kissing in Manhattan,” in the Cloister’s Museum tapestry hall, when the man next to Rally starts talking to her about the tapestry they are both looking at. He is described as “a slender young man with sleepy blue eyes and straight teeth” (99), but his name is never mentioned.

The knowledge that the stranger is James requires the involvement of the reader and demonstrates how phrase repetition holds importance in the cycle. The realization that it is James is based on a description of him that is included in the first story of the cycle, “Checkers and Donna.” In this story a man and a woman go on a blind date and eat at Flat Michael’s. James is described in this story as “a regular customer, a young accountant named James Branch, dining alone at a table far from the bar. He had sleepy blue eyes and straight teeth” (9). The exact phrase repetition of “sleepy blue eyes” when James is described in the museum becomes the indicator that it is the same character.

However, even if James’ identity in the museum is not realized in “Kissing in Manhattan” through the repetition from “Checkers and Donna,” the cycle presents another opportunity to make this connection. In “Telling It All to Otis,” James is again introduced, this time as someone who is “slender and quiet, with sleepy blue eyes and straight teeth” (178). This verbatim repetition of the phrase again suggests the connection between James and the unknown man at the museum, prompting another opportunity for recognition of the significance of the meeting in the museum with Rally. The expectation that James and Rally will begin a relationship is challenged when they walk away from each other with no more significance than a simple chat with a stranger in a museum.

In addition to drawing the reader into the cycle to use knowledge to make further discoveries about the stories, the repetition of James’ description also increases the anticipation that James and Rally become a couple. In turn, this heightens the sense of frustration experienced when James and Rally’s chance meeting comes to nothing. The withholding of their relationship until the return story further increases both the desire for it to eventuate and the frustration felt when it does not occur, which maintains reader engagement. The cycle influences this reaction through the way it positions the reader to make connections between the patterns of phrase repetition.

This influence can be seen clearly in “Telling it All to Otis,” where some of the anticipation is finally fulfilled. In this story James and Rally meet for the second time. The anticipation that has been built up through the phrase repetition is released when James unexpectedly finds a naked woman tied up in his housemate Patrick Rigg’s bedroom during a house party. Here Rally is lying “spread-eagled on her back on top of the covers, with her ankles and wrists bound tightly with black neckties to the four bedposts. She had honey-colored hair, cut razor short, like a cadet’s” (196). Rally is in an unhappy and confusing relationship with Patrick that she has been trying to end. She has been left by Patrick tied up in this position for the entirety of the party. James is initially embarrassed to speak to Rally but eventually the two strike up a friendship in this unlikely situation.
Even though it occurs in an absurd situation, this final repetition of “honey-colored hair” solidifies the sense of anticipation that James and Rally will become a couple because it occurs after they have met.

This meeting between James and Rally develops into a relationship in “The Green Balloon,” a return story that releases the peak of anticipation and positions the reader to reflect on the ways that the anticipation is built up throughout the stories. The commencement of James and Rally’s relationship satisfies the yearning that is developed through phrase repetition. The story opens with a description of a date, where James is at Flat Michael’s with “Rally McWilliams, his new love” (259). This is the first piece of evidence that James and Rally’s meeting in “Telling It All to Otis” has developed into a relationship. The story then goes on to create a direct link between the expectations set up in the previous stories and the fulfillment of those expectations in this story. The narrator explains that during their dinner at Flat Michael’s, James “wanted to give her a pair of opal earrings that had long been in his possession and even now were in his pocket” (259). The repetition of the opal earrings that James received in “The Opals” solidifies the connection between the stories and positions the reader to reflect back on this story. This movement in focus highlights the way that repetitions of “honey-colored hair” work throughout the stories to develop the sense of anticipation of a relationship and the fulfillment that is experienced in the return story.

The actualization of the relationship between James and Rally releases the tension surrounding the expectation of their relationship and replaces it with a feeling of fulfillment. The contrast between anticipation and satisfaction creates the movement back into the previous stories. The sudden release of tension highlights the significance of the phrase repetition and the way that it directs the reader’s expectations throughout the cycle. This encourages the reader to consider not only the effect of this repetition but how it is perpetuated throughout the cycle to create this effect. The return movement in “The Green Balloon” is created through the contrast between anticipation and satisfaction and highlights the way that reader engagement is encouraged through phrase repetition in the stories.

Although the return stories of Olive Kitteridge and Kissing in Manhattan use different techniques to return the focus of the cycle back to the stories as a whole, both utilize contrast to create this movement. The return stories demonstrate how absence creates an affective response in the reader. The reliance on this response for the cycle’s meaning and sense of wholeness is a unique feature of the genre. Absence is used to manipulate the focus of the texts, encouraging the stories to be viewed as a cohesive whole rather than as separate short stories. The juxtaposition present in the return story dissipates any remaining feelings of yearning or frustration and replaces them with a sensation of fulfillment. This change highlights the significance and impact of absence within the cycle—both as an abstract concept which represents elements of a text which are left out and as a concrete element of the plot which describes the feelings of lack that certain characters experience in their lives. In Olive Kitteridge this occurs through the change in imagery, from blackness to blueness, whereas in Kissing in Manhattan it is instigated through the fulfillment of expectations created through phrase repetition. Both return stories use contrast to return the focus to the previous stories, drawing attention to the structure of the cycle as a whole and the change from yearning and frustration to fulfillment. The return stories demonstrate how absence can function in the short story...
cycle and provide initial analysis that can be used to theorize the way absence constitutes a significant structural feature of the genre.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. I would like to express my gratitude to Debra Dudek and Anne Collett for their comments on a preliminary version of this article.

2. For example, many well-known authors have recently published works which form part of the genre, including Girl in Hyacinth Blue (2002) by Susan Vreeland; Mary & O’Neil (2002) by Justin Cronin; Cloud Atlas (2003) by David Mitchell; The Book of Ten Nights and a Night (2004) by John

3. While the significance of gaps in the genre remains under-theorized, many studies into the short story cycle focus on the limits of the genre or explicitly name its features. For example, Susan Garland Mann’s The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide gives a detailed history of the progression of the genre and provides an annotated listing of twentieth century examples of cycles. Robert M. Luscher’s book chapter “The Short Story Sequence, An Open Book” focuses on the reader and his or her reaction to a sequence, arguing that this is one of the predominant features of the genre. His subsequent book chapter, “The American Short-Story Cycle: Out from the Novel’s Shadow,” differentiates the genre from the novel, arguing that the cycle involves “active cocreation on the part of the reader” (360). In the introduction to Modern American Short Story Sequences Gerald Kennedy outlines the American contributions to the genre and his article “Toward a Poetics of the Short Story Cycle” discusses the different ways connections between the stories can be created. In The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition, Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris suggest that the genre shares more similarities with the novel than the short story or the collection of short stories and should be viewed as a contemporary version of the traditional novel.

4. Many other cognitive narratologists also suggest the significance of utilizing reception theory in conjunction with more recent narratological theories. For example, Jens Eder in his book chapter “Narratology and Cognitive Reception Theories” uses the intersection of these theories to determine the ways that texts can use language structures to anticipate specific cognitive and emotional processes (291). Additionally, Manfred Jahn, in his book chapter “‘Speak, friend, and enter’: Garden Paths, Artificial Intelligence, and Cognitive Narratology,” suggests that placing emphasis on how reactions are created and not just on what the reactions are will allow narratology to expand its scope to include a greater focus on the role of the reader (168).

ABSTRACTS

Cet article explore le rôle du lecteur dans le cycle de nouvelles, en se concentrant sur ce que Gerald Lynch nomme « le récit de retour ». Y sont exploités les récits de retour d’Olive Kitteridge d’Elizabeth Strout et Kissing in Manhattan de David Schickler afin d’expliquer l’importance de ces récits pour la structure des cycles. S’inspirant d’éléments de narratologie cognitive ainsi que des théories de Wolfgang Iser sur l’implication du lecteur dans le texte, cet article étudie le rôle de l’absence dans ces deux cycles. L’emploi d’absences à motifs tout au long d’Olive Kitteridge et Kissing in Manhattan amène à une reconsidération du texte dans son ensemble dans le récit de retour. Cette analyse montre dans quelle mesure l’absence forme un élément structurel décisif du cycle de nouvelles contemporain.
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Rebecca Cross is a PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her dissertation focuses on the contemporary short story cycle and the techniques used to engage the reader. Her research explores the way that the specific structure of a short story cycle can encourage the reader to become an integral part of the meaning of the text.