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A Review of Concise Literature: The Short Story Cycle

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Abstract

The Short Story Cycle is a genre of fiction that is relentless in its pursuit of navigating a storyline with little room to do so. Given the short story's limited word count, it is often paired with a sequence of other interrelated works that are strung together through common themes, characters, or viewpoints. Audiences are often unaware of the considerable requirements that it takes to produce a Short Story Cycle despite the extensive comprehension needed to truly plot out a successful one. Susan Minot has provided substantial progress in the conception and appreciation of this genre through her Short Story Cycle, *Monkeys*. Minot eloquently produced a cycle that elicited authentic feelings from her audience through episodic narratives. She then fed a level of satisfaction to the reader when the end of the cycle provided a resolution that solidified the outcome of each character's storyline.

In my personal Short Story Cycle entitled "Yin and Yang," I utilize the plot development, scene description, and dialogue that I have acquired from analyzing her cycles. However, each author owes the reader a piece written in their own voice, so I challenged these ideas and built a cycle that focuses on the illustrative power of poetry while still telling a story.

Keywords: Short Story Cycle, Literature, Monkeys, Writing

The First Section

Although it is one of the most highly accredited and widely acclaimed genres within the pool of literature, the Short Story Cycle remains unnoticed and underappreciated for its complex structure and interwoven topics. This can be said throughout history; authors, publishers, and viewers alike have continuously been overcritical of the genre without having any knowledge as to how it should be prepared. Unfortunately, this lies primarily in the misunderstanding of what a Short Story Cycle is and how it differs from other genres that it may resemble. When asked about Susan Minot's book *Monkeys*, a Short Story Cycle that helped to pave the way of this genre, A. R. Gurney Jr. stated in *The New York Times* that there was "tension in the novel" and that the book was composed of "nine chapters" (1986). This description clearly placed emphasis on traits surrounding the novel rather than the Short Story Cycle and paid no mind to the idea that there was, in fact, a genre that quite literally explained what he had described in a nearly perfect fashion. There is such a gap between the Short Story Cycle and every other genre that precedes it that one may think it was made up entirely, so much so that the quotes surrounding it sound as though they have created the genre themselves. It also leads those critiquing the stories to improperly condemn traits that would only be found in the Short Story Cycle. The inability to recognize a genre that has been around since second century B.C. (with the account of Homer's experience in the Trojan War) is astounding and goes to show just how little presence there is in one of the most well-established genres that literature has ever seen.^[1]

To fully understand the misinterpretation of this genre, we must first delve into the skeleton of the cycle and give appreciation to the complexity of its innerworkings. I cannot expect the reader to understand how shocking it is to witness comments that cheapen the experience of reading a Short Story Cycle without first perfecting their comprehension of it as

well. It would be unfair and far less intriguing of a subject without having the knowledge of what this genre is and how influential it has become.

To write a short story, one must put themselves in the frame of mind that this genre is dramatically different than that of a novel, poem, or essay. The novel aims to cleanly explain a story from beginning to end. There is no hiatus and no information that is, without reasonable doubt, too far out of our ability to assume (if we even must do that). It is done in one fell swoop and provides the steppingstones for which readers can follow the chronological events discussed. There is attention brought to the novel here specifically because it is the most commonly confused genre with that of the Short Story Cycle.

First and foremost, it is always a good idea to begin building the fundamental traits held by the characters. To write a believable story requires realistic characters, and because this is fiction, we must remember that it becomes rather simple to leave holes within what is considered to be the frontline of the story. A multitude of authors that write their Short Story Cycles choose to base their characters on people that they know in person. Those who surround the author are already composed of complete personalities, thoughts, and feelings which allow them to display a richness and depth that avoids any one-dimensional flaws. When looking at Hemingway's *In Our Time*, it is clear to see that the characters are those surrounding Hemingway as he is raised during World War I (2003). Without ever having the knowledge that this was the case, it is quite obvious to see how different the writing looks by merely adding personal experiences into the piece. It becomes much less about the storytelling itself and begins to focus plainly on the emotions, environment, and richness of the experiences that Hemingway has. This is the difference between most fiction and the Short Story Cycle- we see a shift from creating a story to telling one- as this is better developed through this type of genre. It is a more realistic viewpoint

when the stories do not follow one plot as life more so resembles the episodic narratives that Short Story Cycles are able to capture.

Next, the focus falls on to the plot. This becomes much richer when the author confidently understands their characters. It is crucial to determine how the characters would react in any given situation, and then to build the plot from there. The entire plot of our own lives revolves around the choices we have made and how those choices have indefinitely altered our own course. The same would go for that of the story character, thus building a distinct narrative surrounding their specific actions. Again, it feels much simpler to achieve this section through utilizing one's own experiences to create that natural flow so often found within Short Story Cycles. Susan Minot's *Monkeys* follows a closely resembled version of herself throughout her childhood and the affairs that her family engage in while living in an upper-class area. She tells the story of having nightmares that also influence the characters created, giving her a distinctive cast without feeling pressured to perfectly capture each event experienced. This blend of real-life personas and fictional traits allows for realistic characters while still keeping true to the fiction aspect of the genre.

After contemplating the scenario surrounding each character, it is imperative to develop a working sense of dialogue. Providing characters with their own voice is something the author owes their story. As the audience, we must be able to differentiate between the people involved, and we should be able to comprehend how and why these characters found themselves in the position that they are in. Analyzing conversations that happen within the realm of the writer's reality develops a stronger sense of conversation that better mimics true discussions. This allows the author to build an accurate idea of voice, and it provides them with the opportunity to gather ideas on the types of small talk that happen in between the formation of larger exchange.

Once these three primary components are determined, one short story has been created. Feasibly, this does not have to be the first story in the cycle, it can fall anywhere the author feels it will properly disperse information. A second story would need to be created next, but instead of holding the same steps as the first story, it retains the current storyline while developing a slightly newer plot. A third story may then be created, followed by any infinite number of collaborative stories. This is because Short Story Cycles do not have a set number of stories, but instead focus on the recurring patterns they have chosen to include and the evolution of each main character. In a more episodic fashion, the short stories share similar components, such as characters or setting. They can stand alone when read, but form a coherent timeline as a series, and clear changes can be seen within the books. They are not, however, a novel waiting to see a solution for every challenge experienced. The Short Story Cycle is characterized by its ability to relay stories in a fashion that avoids outright descriptions of minor (or major) details. As stated in an aforementioned paragraph, the reader does not have the luxury of a word count long enough to portray each chunk of information regarding characters, background, or setting. Because of this, we must utilize Hemingway's Iceberg Theory¹ and draw inferences from what we are provided. Some of the most crucial decisions and actions take place behind the scenes, leaving the reader only with a vague description experienced through another character's eyes. This does quite a few things for the story: one of those being the wave of realism that strikes when the reader understands an event only through someone else. See, we are witnessing the story from the viewpoint of, perhaps, a family friend. We are but a stranger peering through the window or a coffee shop patron that captures bits and pieces of fireplace chats. These cycles are often recounting of stories that have truly taken place within the author's life, so, as an audience,

¹ The idea that the information given in a piece is merely surface level; the true underlying meaning comes from the implications made when analyzing the words on the page.

we will continue to hear only one version of the story (as well as one viewpoint) despite it being an event that multiple people had to endure. This also allows for a certain character persona comprehension as the audience is left to gather evidence of personality only through witnessed actions and fleeting dialogue. Nevertheless, the reader is prompted to build their own representation of the situation and to fill in gaps that were not previously discussed amongst the characters. Although this may seem like an underdeveloped version of a novel or like something the reader must put more work into than they get out, it is actually a beautifully crafted series of events that pushes a theme without ever having to outright tell the reader what it is. It is, without a doubt, one of the most criminally underappreciated genres to ever exist. To pave the way for archetypes such as the hero's journey and to provide the steppingstones for a plethora of the genres that we know today is but a sample of what the Short Story Cycle has done over the last 200 years.

Now that we have given a working definition to the Short Story Cycle as a whole and provided evidence as to its differences amongst other genres, we can begin discussing some of the most influential authors to expand this type of writing. It is crucial to note the traits and dimensions of a Short Story Cycle prior to discussing specific versions of them because it allows the reader to better understand them at length. A more enriching conversation can only happen if there is common ground, so providing a foundation of that prior to reaching the authors who have (arguably) made this genre into what it is today gives us a stronger base. To start, Susan Minot, author of the Short Story Cycle *Monkeys*, provides us with a perfect example of the depth and richness attached to telling stories of seemingly uneventful situations. This storyline follows seven children and their parents, Rosie and Gus, through their childhood in the 60s and 70s. Each story (there are nine in total) follows the children and their adventures living in the upper-class

area of New England, but it does not fall short of showing the genuine issues that parents and children face as their ever-changing dynamic places pressure to create a loving household. The stories begin in a first-person narrative through the eyes of Sophie, one of the younger children in the pack of seven, and then gradually moves into the narrative of a random third person looking in from the outside. Right off the bat, the change in perspective throughout the stories is a wonderful attribute that few genres are able to incorporate other than the Short Story Cycle. Not only that, but the various perspectives given provide a difference in how the stories are told and may be an indicator of the stories themselves. Perhaps Minot had to detach herself from telling the stories as they became too much for her to relive. In doing so, she inherently (and, perhaps, unintentionally) offers a new look to the characters and evidence that these characters likely also detached from some of the events unfolding in their lives. This is a wonderful example of how the characters in Short Story Cycles are much more believable and less whimsical than those in other genres. The typical novel character may experience a setback within their timeline, but it is ultimately solved and quickly cleaned up to ensure a satisfying end for the reader (this may not always be the case, but it is a recurring theme). While the Short Story Cycle still provides a satisfying ending, it also aims for the development of each character to mimic that of a real-life person. Working through death, familial issues, divorce, children, fighting, and setbacks in general are hardly as pretty as the novel may display, and the changes within characters do not usually feel as dramatic. However, they are noticeable, and Short Story Cycles better portray this continuum without ever being able to directly tell the reader that it is happening.

Within the *Monkeys* collection lies “Hiding,” a story surrounding a trip to church and a prank played on Gus, the Vincent family’s father, by all the children and their mother (Rose).

The scene opens with Gus's denial of going to church with the family, an evident difference between their mother who is quite thrilled to bundle the children up and take them to service. Although this does not actively provide evidence to the divide between Rose and Gus, it does foreshadow potential issues that may follow the same theme. It also highlights the distinction between values for Rose and Gus. While Gus may not be religious like Rose, a day out with his family may have been something he looked forward to despite the circumstances of that meeting. However, it is clear that he does not feel the need to join his family in the festivities taking place, thus ultimately giving the reader a look into the mind of Gus himself. This one decision, one that the reader does not even witness take place, is already a large tell of the possible issues the family faces and the disconnect between Gus and the rest of the family. As this story continues and the family returns home from church, Rose attempts to play a prank on Gus with the children following closely behind in her antics. He is not at the home when they return because, as the reader later finds out, he has gone out to retrieve alcohol from the store. Rose and the children plan to hide in the upstairs closet in an attempt to scare Gus amongst his return home. However, when he walks through the front door to a seemingly empty house that should have seven children wallowing through it, the family finds that he merely heads to his room with the alcohol. No venture is made to find his children or wife even though he is fully aware that they are there. Following this, the family reluctantly exits the closet while a melancholy Rose comes to terms with her emotionally unavailable husband.

Although nothing within that story or that scene was overly eye-catching in terms of the situations they encountered, they were still bold enough scenarios for the audience to draw conclusions from. They were startling in a sense of relatability- something that quite a few people look at and inwardly scowl at because they witnessed the same thing happen in their

homes. Here is the evocation of feelings within the reader that other types of genres may have had to perform through wildly portrayed scenes. If not through harsh twists or surprise endings, the novel would have still had far more room to elaborate on the emotions, thoughts, and overall layout of the plot that unfolded in this short story. Not only that, but we were able to gather observations from this that altered our perception of the Vincent family and their internal dynamic. Gus is clearly someone who detaches from his family any moment he can and seems to value the downtime he has alone rather than that which he spends with his family. The fact that he does not begin wandering the house to see where everyone has gone and why there is no noise evident proves the idea that he is somewhat oblivious to the activities taking part in his home on a daily basis. He also does not seem to care about the wellbeing of his family and if they are unusually quiet for reasons that may have been menacing. Rose's disappointment with Gus makes it quite clear that this is not unwonted behavior coming from her husband. She is obviously hoping for a different outcome and seems to enjoy being a part of her children's lives despite her husband's neglect. The reader can tell, however, that Rose is becoming fed up with Gus and may feel, as she so physically is for most of this story, trapped.

Although the above paragraph is a strong tell of what a short story is like and how it may differ from other genres, it must now be talked about in tandem with the cycle itself. Another one of the stories in Minot's *Monkeys*, entitled "The Navigator," showcases the untimely death of Rose and the effect it has on all of the children. Later on in the series and with children that are much older than the previous story, we see how it would have looked had the reader found out her death from eavesdropping on a conversation. The topic is brought up in passing between some of the children in their home; Rose is killed by a passing train when she parks her car on the train tracks. The Vincent family seems to think that Rose did this on purpose and that her

death was a matter of suicide. Not only are the stories intertwined by the matching group of characters leading the plot, but also by themes seen earlier within the series. Rose clearly begins to give up on some of her aspirations as well as her marriage when she sees that they do not seem to be working out the way she had always envisioned. We saw this when reviewing “Hiding,” and it can be seen numerous times throughout the other eight stories. Although each story stands on its own and does not follow an exact timeline for the Vincent family, it should still be noted that every story follows a general guideline held similar to that of every other story (in the *Monkeys* series). If viewed improperly, this cycle may seem as if it jumps around too much- the hiatuses in between each story may result in disarray or frustration for the reader. However, because this is a Short Story Cycle, *Monkeys* is a perfect example of how short stories can come together to create a coherent, striking, one-of-a-kind story experience that cannot be found in any other genre.

Furthermore, I would like to depict the experience that I had when writing my own Short Story Cycle entitled “Yin and Yang”. To give a personal experience may further push the unique and unparalleled idea behind the Short Story Cycle and what it takes to create one. Not only that, but hopefully it provides some credentials behind me and my ability to discuss this topic in depth. My storyline included three separate narratives following May, the main character that finds herself questioning her motives after a string of unfortunate events. The recurring themes that each story possesses are meant to look at humanity, the argument between good vs evil, and how each choice that we make can ultimately lead to a brighter (or darker) persona. We are truly composed of the situations that happen to us and how we determine appropriate reactions to those specific situations. These themes and the overlapping characters follow the typical skeleton of a Short Story Cycle, but I also aimed to shakeup the quota by pursuing deeper elements of

poetry in my stories. While other Short Story Cycles may have focused on dialogue or character development done through actions of the characters, I wanted to focus on scene creation and the beauty behind weaving our way through life without having much knowledge at all. Short stories oftentimes have a plot that is quite easy to follow and somewhat relatable because the situations mimic those of everyday life. Mine performed a similar function, but it also brought in elements that are not as cut and dry as most stories included in the cycles. These are the poetic elements—the ones that question how our personalities develop and why certain situations permanently alter our state of mind. Where Susan Minot may have spent more time crafting a realistic character pool and capturing the exact moments she witnessed as a child, I looked at the wording of each story and how they could carry as much weight as possible when analyzed by the reader. This is not to say that either version is better or worse, but it does go to show that each author's voice is crucial in differentiating their story from others floating around within the genre.

In conclusion, the Short Story Cycle is one of the ancient gems we were able to carry into the current century. For years we have utilized this form of writing and praised it without ever truly knowing what it was, yet we have also managed to incorrectly chastise it when looking for traits that it does not carry. We so rudely underestimated and spoiled the name of the Short Story Cycle, allowing it to slip through the fingers of young authors that may prefer this form of writing. Susan Minot's *Monkeys* is a key example of how a properly crafted Short Story Cycle inevitably leads to a strong understanding of characters, themes, and plot points without having to directly tell the audience of these features. It is also a good example of how easily a piece can be pushed to the side if it does not follow the criteria we so heavily place on our literature. Without ever appreciating *Monkeys* or any of the pieces discussed in this paper for their elegant display of expansion, critics are quick to move straight into the territory that determines why a

piece should not be taken seriously. When those reading the independent stories within *Monkeys* stated that its downfall was in its episodic narratives, they failed to realize that the genre itself was not meant to fall under novels. Alas, the Short Story Cycle is not a poem, novel, nor a creative nonfiction piece, but instead is its own category, standing proudly amongst the genres that have proven their own worth throughout the years. A unique and utterly imperative form of writing, the Short Story Cycle will continue to win the hearts of those able to learn of its captivating mannerisms.

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