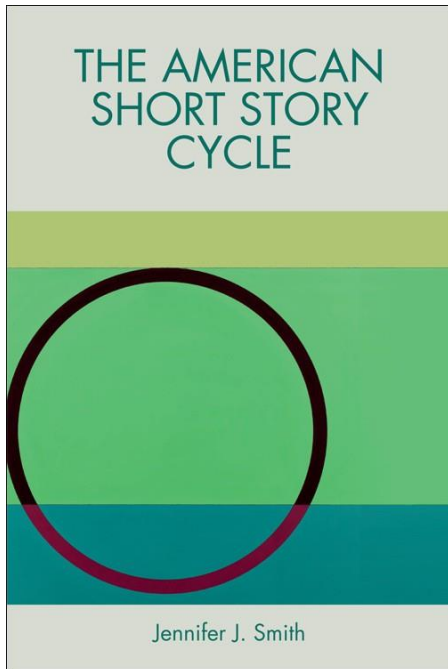




The American Short Story Cycle

Jennifer J. Smith

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 194



Review by Serena Demichelis*

Short stories, among the many literary genres which have often been analyzed according to their historical development and main features, have frequently been relegated to the role of ‘minor productions’. In this way, even in the case of stories written by major authors, they have sometimes received a not-so-favorable critical treatment. This perspective has gradually been abandoned since the early 1970s, when this form of writing experienced a “resurgence” (87) and was therefore acknowledged to have a status comparable to that of the novel. In *The American Short Story Cycle* Jennifer J. Smith embarks on a mission to define the origins, the main features and the development of a kind of narrative which “[...] is a persistent force in and on American fiction – before, during and after the height of modernism” (2). In her introduction, she admits the bias she had towards short stories when she began her study: “Cycles were a footnote on my way to more important works [...]. Moreover, it [the impression of cycles being of lesser importance] derived from a general consensus – hard to pinpoint but nonetheless powerful – that novels are harder to write and therefore more worthy of study” (10).

Defining genre always poses a problem in literary criticism, and this case is no exception: adopting a very simple perspective, Smith states that cycles consist of “autonomous yet interconnected stories” (2) usually collected in a single volume. Works included in a cycle make sense on their own, but they gain further meaning from being read together. The term ‘cycle’ has been the favored choice of a long list of scholars starting from Forrest Ingram’s study in 1971 (*Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*) and is recognized by the author as the “best descriptor for the genre” (2).

* Serena Demichelis graduated in European and American Literatures at the University of Pavia and is currently attending the PhD course in Foreign Literatures, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Verona. Her research project focuses on a linguistic and literary analysis of the characterization strategies within a corpus of short stories by J.D. Salinger.



Smith addresses the main aspects of this form of narrative in six chapters, structuring her analysis on the assumption that short story cycles achieve a sense of interconnection by sharing features of place, time and family (or identity) among their components; the shift in focus on such features is reflected in the topics of the different chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 deal mainly with the category of place (“Locating the Short Story Cycle”, “The Persistence of Place”); chapter 3 with time (“Writing Time in Metaphors”); chapter 4 is somewhere in-between the categories of time and identity (“Tracing New Genealogies”); chapter 5 focuses mainly on the issue of identity (“Resisting Identity”); chapter 6 offers an overview on the peculiarities of the modern short story cycle and defines it as an “Atomic Genre” which “gains explosive energy from individual stories” (143)

Because her work does not consist of a mere taxonomy of characteristics, Smith accompanies her theoretical arguments with examples of cycles, starting from the origins with works such as Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), all the way to contemporary fiction with authors such as Jennifer Egan. Cycles reflect the author’s intention to illustrate a chronology of the genre, ranging from what can now be considered to be ‘classic’ to new works by contemporary authors; moreover, some prove more effective in describing the link to the categories of place, time and family or identity, and are thus chosen as examples. Among the authors and books which Smith makes reference to are Anderson and Jewett, mentioned above, Banks with *Trailerpark* (chapters 1 and 2), Ray Bradbury with *The Martian Chronicles* and Louise Erdrich with *Love Medicine* (chapter 3), “ethnic American women writers” (88) like Jhumpa Lahiri (chapter 4), and Faulkner (*As I lay dying, Go down, Moses*, chapters 4 and 5). The chapters are followed by a coda devoted to “a vision for a new direction in the genre” (170): reconnecting her argument to what she states in the introduction about the fluid and changeable nature of literary categories, Smith envisions the future development of the short story cycle into what she calls “novellas-in-flash and flash cycles” (170), a form of narrative in which the traditional short story gives up some of its standard features to get closer to those of the fragment. Such works tend to have a stronger connection to the whole (hence the “novella in flashes” label) because they are the product of its breaking: fragments of events are mirrored in an equally fragmented form. Moreover, whereas the short story provides clues which gradually reveal characters’ features and settings, in the flash cycle much of the interpretative “onus” (176) is on the reader. A list of “Selected Short Story Cycles,” to function as further exemplification, closes the volume.

Smith builds her analysis by combining theoretical knowledge and insightful reading: in each chapter she provides extensive reference to a few cycles to exemplify the centrality of the above mentioned features, giving information about both plot and the main themes, and quoting directly from the text in order to give first-hand evidence of her assumptions and deductions. The three categories of place, time and family/identity do not correspond to three discrete units of analysis: despite the focus moving from one to the other in the various chapters, interconnection among stories comes from the overlapping of such features. To build her argument on the concept of place as a linking element, for instance, Smith focuses on the case of *Winesburg, Ohio* (chapter 1) whose title refers to an imaginary town in which the events of the short stories take place. Yet, sharing the setting does not suffice to define *Winesburg* as a cycle: the stress on the importance of the linking character George Willard anticipates the analysis of identity and family relations treated more extensively in the following chapters.

Together with other critics, Smith maintains that the structural peculiarities of the cycle make it particularly suitable for the narration of subjectivity and identity (5-6; 10; 33); hence, its link to narratives concerning issues of race and cultural belonging. Well aware of this link, Smith devotes a large part of the volume to its analysis: such is the case for the study of the three cycles quoted in chapter 4, all written by female authors with mixed cultural backgrounds (Amy Tan, Julia Alvarez and Jhumpa Lahiri), whose characters build their own selves in a dimension of multiplicity best analyzed through the lens of the short story. Different stories can and will deal with different aspects of the same, limited community or family and offer a multi-faceted picture which benefits from this kind of arrangement more than from a univocal, mono-tonal and teleological kind of narration. Short story cycles tend in fact to defeat traditional narratives according to which we have definite beginnings, definite endings and a definite identity. Instead, they give voice to a more modern perspective in which standardized dogmas like the chronological order of events are not necessarily respected: the chronology of a family line, for example, may be told from multiple perspectives at different moments in time, or the end may be revealed at the very beginning (as is the case of Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*, described in chapter 3 [79]).



Despite the strongly descriptive frame of the analysis, this study does not aim to give a closed definition of cycle and the author's awareness of current trends and changes in the literary panorama is evident, as is shown by the coda on the flash cycle or novella-in-flash: the inclusion of such a commentary at the end of the volume corroborates Smith's position on the mutability of genres and on the value of multiplicity and hybridization. Moreover, it reflects a phenomenon of institutionalization in that it proves how a label has gradually become an 'official' category in the literary community.

Problematization seems to be the engine behind the structure and the aim of the book: starting from the problem of defining what a short story cycle *is*, and ending with the problem of what the short story cycle *does*, Smith provides useful insight on what is already there and on the necessary tools to find out more about new works. Once presented with the 'theory and practice' of American short story cycles, one can approach the reading or re-reading of such stories with a heightened awareness, as well as the challenge to one's own assumptions on what narrative definitions are.