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Female expansion and Masculine Immobilization in the Short Story Cycle

Rachel Lister

- 1 As a versatile, provisional form, the short story cycle privileges plurality and openness. It contests boundaries and enacts the possibility of multiple beginnings and renewable identities. Forrest L. Ingram delivered the first detailed exploration of the form in 1971. In *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* Ingram illuminates the “duality” of a form that embodies “the tension between the one and the many” (19). He observes: “Every story cycle displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole” (19).
- 2 In recent years, critics have attended to the gendered dimensions of the form. In “Gender and Genre: The Case of the Novel-in-Stories” Margot Kelley observes that “about 75 percent of the current writers” of the story cycle are women, “often women who live in positions of double marginality as members of visible minorities” (296).¹ Kelley draws on Carol Gilligan’s research to illuminate the form’s gendered dimensions. Gilligan uses the images of the web and the hierarchy to figure the ways in which boys and girls approach conflict. Her studies of children reveal that where girls confront dilemmas through “a network of connection, a web of relationships sustained by a process of communication”, boys set up “a hierarchical ordering to resolve a conflict” (Gilligan 32, 33). These images represent the “contrast between a self defined through separation and a self delineated through connection” (35). The short story cycle enacts both sensibilities: it “suggests that a coherent or unified identity requires both autonomy and connectivity” (Kelley 304). Feminist theory posits that women are more likely to conceive the self in these terms. Feminist critic Rachel Du Plessis identifies the “both/and” vision as a “trait” of the female aesthetic: this vision signals “the end of the either-or, dichotomized universe, proposing monism ... in opposition to dualism, a dualism pernicious because it valorizes one side

above another, and makes a hierarchy where there were simply twain” (“Etruscans” 276). The short story cycle is a nonhierarchical form; it privileges this kind of vision.

- 3 As Kelley observes, the prevalence of female writers in the story cycle canon is hardly surprising (Kelley 304). This essay will illuminate how two women writers use the form as a site for female expansion and masculine immobilization. In particular, it will examine the masculine struggle to acquire the “unified identity” embodied by the form. My readings will investigate the representation of thwarted, immobilized men in Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples* (1949) and Joyce Carol Oates’s *All the Good People I’ve Left Behind* (1979). Both writers are celebrated primarily for their novels and short stories, but take particular pleasure in the versatility of the short story cycle. While writing *The Golden Apples* Welty found that the form relieved her of the “burden of the novel, with all that tying up of threads and preparing for this, that and the other” (Kreyling *Author* 137). Speaking to Oates in May 2005, I asked her about her experience of writing story cycles. She reflected that she has grown to “love the form” and that she regards it as a particularly useful tool for the young writer who may find writing the “unwieldy” novel “a difficult psychic experience” (“Seminar”). The gender politics of both writers furnish further affinities. Welty and Oates reject the feminist label but centre on female experience in their fiction. They seek to challenge gender boundaries and dramatize their effects. Speaking to Charles Bunting in 1972, Welty distanced herself from any feminist agenda, insisting: “I’m not interested in any kind of feminine repartee” (725). Oates remains skeptical about essentialist views of gender difference, attributing it primarily to social conditioning: “Though I don’t believe that there is a distinctly ‘female’ sensibility, I know, of course, that there has been a female fate” (“Review” 28).
- 4 Judith Gardiner contends that gender identity is more available to girls than boys; she perceives a troubling indeterminacy in the way that boys construe the self: “boys have more difficulty than girls in acquiring gender identity, and men exhibit more disturbances in gender identity than do women” (189). Similarly, Oates states that “girls and women are conditioned more conspicuously” (“Seminar”). Dominant models of masculinity pose a threat to healthy selfhood: “This is the era of Women’s Liberation, but I really must say that I think men have a far more difficult time, simply living, existing, trying to measure up to the absurd standards of ‘masculinity’ in our culture and in nature itself, which is so cruel” (Bellamy 20). According to Oates, these standards arise from the masculine preoccupation with isolation and containment. She writes of the “very masculine, combative ideal of an ‘I’ set against all other ‘I’s’” which “projects its emotions outward into everything, everyone, into the universe itself” (*New* 119, 260).
- 5 In *Feminine Fictions* Patricia Waugh observes that modern representations of the male hero have integrated elements of the “master-plots” of nineteenth-century history. They perpetuate the image of the male self “conceived in terms of containedness, difference, autonomy” (Waugh 17). This kind of subjectivity rarely prospers in the short story cycle, a form that frustrates “containedness” and undermines notions of centrality.² It has become the ideal space for representing the kind of subjectivity that is commonly associated with the female subject: a selfhood that develops from “relationship and dispersal” rather than “the maintenance of boundaries and distance” or “the subjugation of the other” (Waugh 22).
- 6 Several women writers have used the form to sideline these “master-plots”. In her reading of Sarah Orne Jewett’s cycle, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Elizabeth Ammons notes that Jewett marginalizes her questing hero, Captain Littlepage, by placing his

adventure narrative early in the cycle. Littlepage's story is a paradigm of the "solitary, climax-oriented, city-focused literature – significantly coming from a man and totally about men" (Ammons 48). Jewett presents the story at the beginning of her cycle because "It is to be confronted early on, appreciated, and then moved beyond" (Ammons 49). In her reading of Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* Janet Beer observes that Munro restricts masculine plots to "single episodes" in the cycle to mark the end of "male exclusivity" (126, 125). Welty and Oates use the form not only to contain certain masculine plots but to engage with the masculine dilemma concerning what happens next.

- 7 Following Jewett's Littlepage, the thwarted male quest-figure resurfaces in Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples*, a cycle of seven stories linked by recurring characters, including King MacLain, and the fictional setting of Morgana. Welty goes further than Jewett in her containment of the quest plot; she denies her hero the privilege of narration. She exiles King MacLain to the margins of the cycle by staging the process of fictionalization that shapes his identity.³ Determined to retain his autonomy, King spurns domestic boundaries and repeatedly leaves home to assert his ego boundaries through sexual conquests ("Myth" 74). Ostensibly, King commands his quest. Margery Hourihan notes how the conventional quest-plot moves "both towards concealment and towards disclosure, creating uncertainty and constantly promising the reader that all will be revealed" (46). The short story cycle complements this kind of plot. Characters move around the form, taking center stage in some stories, retreating to the margins in others, and often vanishing from the cycle altogether. With his sporadic appearances and enigmatic gestures, King enacts this structure. However, his strategy takes effect only if Morgana's storytellers respond. King's quest plot is a vehicle for the storytelling and sexual energies of Morgana's female watchers and waiters. For narrator Katie Rainey, the act of tracking King MacLain displaces unfulfilled compulsions: "Why do I try to figure? Maybe because Fate Rainey ain't got a surprise in him, and proud of it" (265). By mapping out his latest move and speculating upon his next one, Morgana's watchers and waiters move his plot forward.
- 8 Welty exploits the openness of the form to decenter King's quest narrative and engineer her own game of concealment and disclosure. She catches him out by capturing him in positions that betray his contingency. In "Sir Rabbit" King seduces a local girl only to become the unsuspecting object of her gaze: "With her almost motherly sway of the head and arms to help her, she gazed at the sounding-off, sleeping head, and the neck like a little porch column in town" (339-40). Welty subjects King to further infantilization in "The Wanderers", the final story in the cycle. When mortality catches up with him, King capitulates to the call of home. For the male quest hero, homecoming closes down the possibility of autonomy. The separation between self and other is no longer sustainable. The community gathers for Katie Rainey's funeral – the death of one of King's narrators is surely significant – and we witness him trying to assert his independence once more in a pathetic re-enactment of his early questing days; he creeps mischievously down the hall for food, "as if nobody could see him" (446). In a rare moment of articulation, King registers his loss of control over his story: he has, he tells Virgie, "ended up at the wrong end" of life (443). His vision is characterized by the either/or, dichotomized mentality: he is either heroic as the romantic quest-figure or defeated as the domesticated husband. A unified identity eludes the aging King.

- 9 Homecomings are a common feature of the short story cycle. They mark the moment when characters confront the tension embodied by the form. Where some characters resist the home and continue to guard their autonomy, others re-engage with their communities, no longer viewing the home as a threat to self. In the short story cycle, homecomings are generally more successful for female characters than male.⁴ Virgie Rainey is Morgana's female quest-figure. When she returns home, she achieves reconciliation between contingency and autonomy.
- 10 The reader first glimpses Virgie as a moving image of transgression; in "June Recital" Loch Morrison spies her leaping across a ditch with her sailor in full flight towards sexual consummation. For most of the cycle she appears only within the bounds of Morgana's consciousness; where the community mythologizes King for his defiance, it castigates Virgie for her air of self-sufficiency. Virgie is a member of an established if rather lowly Morganan family, yet she leaves home and returns at will, neither spurning the community nor defining herself through its norms. She elides the difference between inside and outside, disconcerting Morgana's boundaries. In "The Wanderers" she takes center stage and displays the kind of both/and vision defined by Du Plessis: a vision that dismantles hierarchy and polarization: "Virgie never saw it differently, never doubted that all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying" (452). Reflecting on her contradictory relationship with her piano teacher, Miss Eckhart, she embraces its duality: she accepts "the horror in love ... the separateness" (460). Virgie's "both/and" vision enables her to sit with the "old black thief" at the end of the cycle, "alone and together", physically enacting the duality of the stories themselves (Welty *Collected* 461). She embodies the kind of duality that is represented by the humming-bird, a recurring motif in the cycle. J. Gerald Kennedy outlines three types of sign as conventions of the short story cycle. The first of these is the "topical sign" which "includes all objects, images, and actions which readers perceive as 'symbolic' in the traditional sense" (19). Kennedy notes that such signs often reinforce the sense of duality or ambiguity that intensifies from story to story. In *The Golden Apples* the humming-bird is a topical sign; presenting itself periodically throughout the cycle, it figures the possible unity of opposites: it is "Metallic and misty together, tangible and intangible, splendid and fairy-like" (Welty *Collected* 308).
- 11 For Morgana's alpha males, spaces and narratives remain firmly gendered; the home is designated female and is shunned. Loch Morrison, the spiritual and perhaps biological heir to King, moves to New York and does not return to Morgana.⁵ Welty capitalizes on the provisional nature of the story cycle and closes down another quest plot; we hear only that Loch writes from New York and "likes it there" (449). Relieved of the pressure to tie up all narrative threads, Welty does not pursue his story. Welty decenters the male quest-figure but gives a voice to those men who balk at "absurd standards" of masculinity. In the fifth and sixth stories she dramatizes the struggles of the MacLain twins who are living in the shadow of King's legacy. Unlike their father, Ran and Eugene MacLain need boundaries: "You know I have to stay in Morgana" Ran tells his mother (157). Eugene escapes domestic borders for one day but fears their ultimate dissolution: "And at the same time it would be terrifying if walls . . . the walls of whatever room it was that closed a person in in the evening, would go soft as curtains and begin to tremble" (407-8).
- 12 Ran's voice narrates "The Whole World Knows" but other voices drown it out: Snowdie MacLain's maternal badgering, Miss Perdita Mayo's charged monologues, and the choral voice of the "Circle" (380). This discursive density threatens to dislodge Ran from the role

of narrator, mirroring his tenuous position as husband, father, provider and inheritor of King's legacy. Also inhibiting Ran is his ambivalence towards the discourses of interiority. In *Writing Masculinities*, Ben Knights illuminates masculinity's "deep suspicion of introspection, conventionally associated with dreaminess, passivity and hence with feminisation" (1). Uncomfortable with his subjectivity, Ran buries his most urgent thoughts in circumstantial detail; he tentatively disperses his petitions to his absent father throughout the narrative, curtailing them as if in fear of what Henry James terms "the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation" (xx James's italics). Verbal paralysis also afflicts Eugene in "Music from Spain": "It was a life-long trouble, he had never been able to express himself at all when it came to the very moment" (421).

13 Knights attributes this apprehension to hegemonic gender identifications: "the opposition of word and deed is tintured with a female/male opposition ... Ambivalence towards the feminising word marks the lore of deeds" (117). This opposition clearly informs the masculine narratives in *The Golden Apples*. King offers his deeds to the feminizing words of the town gossips. Ran's attempts to emulate his father culminate in desperate deeds: his bungled suicide attempt and the rape of his lover Maideen. Knights observes that the man who cannot emulate "heroic narratives" senses "a gap in his own consciousness: the rankling awareness of the disparity between the model and the actuality" (190-1). This "rankling awareness" haunts Ran's voice as he becomes increasingly conscious of the hiatus between his "ideal and real self." Knights identifies violence as one possible response to this "dissonance" (190). Violence signifies "an attempt to act out in however self-destructive a physical form the dominance that you believe you were promised but of which the world has cheated you" (Knights 190-1). Abortive fantasies of violence infiltrate Ran's fractured narrative as he seeks admission into "the lore of deeds": "I fired point-blank at Jinny - more than once. It was close range ... I saw her pouting childish breasts, excuses for breasts, sprung full of bright holes where my bullets had gone. But Jinny didn't feel it" (385).

14 Ran's story ends with bewildered speculation about other plots. He asks his missing father and brother: "What you went and found, was it better than this?" (392). Eugene has made a home in San Francisco but remains as dislocated as his brother. "Music from Spain" dramatizes his attempt to escape his daily routine and mobilize his identity. Like Ran, his deployment of violence proves fruitless. He begins his day by striking his wife, Emma, but the irrational assault leads only to disembodiment: "His act ... slipped loose from him, turned around and looked at him in the form of a question" (394). Eugene's internal dialogue betrays the disjunction in his mind between "the model and the actuality"; Welty italicizes the voice that encodes the masculine ideal, marking Eugene's estrangement from his "real self":

"Why not strike her? And if she thought he would stay around only to hear her start tuning up, she had another think coming. Let her take care and go about her business, he might do it once more and not so kindly" (395).

This macho discourse verges on the absurd. In reality, Eugene perceives female sexuality as a threat to self. Grottesque images of women taunt him throughout the day: the provocative mechanical dummy in the House of Mirth and the menacing vision of Emma's advance, her kisses assailing him "like blows" (417, 423).

15 When Eugene leaves the house, he realizes that "no familiar person could do him any good" and decides to "seek a stranger" (400). He wanders through the city with an enigmatic Spanish guitar-player. By diverting from his daily routine, Eugene moves

temporarily beyond gender identifications. He takes the “greatest comfort” in behaviors that are gendered female (Welty *Collected* 423): the “dreaminess” and “passivity” that, according to Knights, arouse masculine suspicion: “The now calming ocean, the pounding of a thousand gentlenesses, went on into darkness and obscurity. He felt himself lifted up in the strong arms of the Spaniard ... He was without a burden in the world” (423). Eugene returns home, exhilarated by his day, but remains estranged from his home environment. Emma has also seen the Spaniard that day and gossips with a neighbor about his impropriety in church, oblivious to her husband’s experience.

- 16 Eugene’s narrative is not gender-specific. He repeats the plots of fellow-Morganans Cassie Morrison and Nina Carmichael: young girls from Morgana who live vicariously through self-defining wanderers but ultimately retreat to known spaces. It is significant that Morgana finds roles for Nina and Cassie. Both step into preordained roles; Cassie fills Miss Eckhart’s position as the town’s spinster piano teacher. When we meet Nina in “The Wanderers” she is “Mrs Junior Nesbitt heavy with child” (443). There are no such roles available to Eugene, who eventually returns to Morgana to die of tuberculosis. We do not see Eugene again, but learn of his premature death from Virgie. She recalls that on his return Eugene remained unreadable to the Morganans whom he resisted to the end: “Sometimes he looked up in the town where he was young and said something strangely spiteful or ambiguous” (458). Like his father, Eugene sees his return as a defeat and guards his autonomy fiercely: “His light, tubercular body seemed to hesitate on the street of Morgana, hold averted, anticipating questions” (458).
- 17 With Eugene out of their grasp, the Morganans are doubly determined to make a hero of King’s remaining son. In “The Wanderers” we learn that they have woven their version of his scandal into Morgana’s tapestry of MacLain legend and elected him town mayor: “They had voted for him for that – for his glamor and his story ... for marrying a Stark and then for ruining a girl and the thing she did ... They had voted for the revelation; it had made their hearts faint, and they would assert it again” (433). Virgie recognizes Ran’s uneasiness with this role: “Ran knew that every minute, there in the door he stood it” (433). In the short story cycle, particular moments or revelations often achieve full significance only within the context of other narratives. By working backwards the reader might verify Virgie’s evaluation of Ran’s displacement. A single sentence in “The Whole World Knows” illuminates the absurdity of Ran’s ending: his rare self-revelation that, “To me, ambition’s always been a mystery” (382). Through Ran’s ensnared plot Welty reveals how men fall prey to patriarchal discourses and paradigms: “to collude with a system of power it is not necessary to be objectively a beneficiary of that system, only to be persuaded that you are a beneficiary” (Knights 6). Through her portrayal of Ran and Eugene, Welty challenges the viability of ‘heroic’ narratives and unveils the masculine “disturbances” highlighted by Oates and Gardiner. She uses her form not only to debunk heroic narratives but also to reveal the paucity of alternative plots for men.

* * *

- 18 Thirty years after the publication of *The Golden Apples*, Joyce Carol Oates published *All the Good People I’ve Left Behind*. Like Welty, Oates uses the story cycle as a site for feminine quests and masculine immobilization. She charts the development of wandering heroine Annie Quirt through a number of stories; dispersed among them are thematically linked stories about married couples. As the cycle progresses, the connections between the two

worlds emerge; Annie attended college at Ann Arbor with some of the couples. Annie shares Virgie Rainey's quality of otherness. The couples have lost contact with her but they remember her vividly. They speculate on Annie's fate just as the young Morganans ponder Virgie's destiny, already thinking of her "in terms of the future" (Welty *Collected* 291-2). One does not wish to suggest that Oates modeled Annie Quirt on Virgie Rainey, but that she, like Welty, perceived the form's utility for representing the heroine who moves beyond familiar scripts and finds the "other way to live" (Welty *Collected* 361).

- 19 Like many other heroines of the short story cycle, Annie achieves a unified identity by becoming an artist.⁶ In *Joyce Carol Oates: Artist in Residence* Eileen Teper Bender perceives a "double awareness" in Oates's identity as artist. Oates stresses both the "autonomy of the artistic process" and the "critical necessity of the self – whether artist, character, or reader – to take shape, to actualize." As an artist, Oates is "both self-erasing and self-reflexive" (Bender xii). This doubleness "gives shape to the paradoxical human journeys" dramatized in Oates's fiction, in which "failure and dislocation seem prerequisite for the fullest expression of human possibility" (xii). Annie Quirt enacts this process and achieves this kind of double awareness.
- 20 The first four Annie stories dramatize sexual relationships in which she veers precariously between independence and contingency. In response to one lover's query about her sexual history, she states: "I never think about the past ... I mean, what the hell? – it's all over with" (52). Tempering this complacency are her masochistic cries for help and bouts of hysteria and depression during which she yearns for stability and love. After experiencing failure and dislocation in relationships, Annie retreats to Quebec City and resolves to live "without boundaries and without the need to erect them" (123). At the end of "Walled City", the fifth Annie story, she listens as her lover Philip knocks at her door. Annie appears cured of her contingency: "She wondered how long, for how many years, she had been perfectly safe, perfectly alone, without knowing it" (144).
- 21 Annie orchestrates her isolation but she does not achieve healthy autonomy. In her study of Oates's fiction, Joanne Creighton identifies "the characteristic Oatesian woman" as the "unliberated heroine" who "sits around waiting for something to happen, or builds an impenetrable wall around the self so that nothing can happen" (Creighton 156). At the end of "Walled City", Annie appears to have succumbed to this fate. However, endings can materialize when least expected in the open terrain of the short story cycle. Oates opts to release Annie from the fate of the "unliberated heroine" by offering the reader one last glimpse of her in the final story of the cycle. "All the Good People I've Left Behind" centers on married couples: the Enrights and the Mandels. Fern Enright, one of the Ann Arbor wives, reports that Annie has become an artist and had a successful one-woman show at a gallery in Chicago. Through Fern's eyes Annie appears as part of a group, "coming out the Brass Rail with several other people, men and women both ..." (225). This fleeting reference reassures the reader that Annie's retreat into self was a transitional period. It is of course significant that Annie is surrounded by "men and women both." She is no longer alienating women by focusing her attention exclusively on men. She has achieved the balance between the contingency that drove her into the arms of unsuitable lovers and the autonomy she craved. In "The Myth of the Isolated Artist" Oates writes approvingly of "a few human beings, gifted with the ability to 'see' themselves as 'other,'" who are "not overly intoxicated with the selfness of the self" and who "devise works of art that are autobiographical statements of a hypothetical, reality-testing nature which they submit ... to the judgment of their culture" (74). Annie releases herself from the

bonds of solipsism by reconfiguring her identity and, through her autobiographical art, creating herself as “other.” She is both self-reflexive and self-erasing.

- 22 This “double awareness” eludes the male artists in *All the Good People*. Like Welty, Oates marginalizes men who enact the “combative ideal of an ‘I’ set against all other ‘I’s””. In “New Heaven and Earth” Oates berates her male contemporaries for enacting “the old, losing, pitiful Last Stand of the Ego, the Self-Against-All-Others, the Conqueror ... Namer and Begetter of all Fictions” (53). In *All the Good People* such men are satirized and dismissed. Before completing the final stage of her isolation in Quebec City, Annie has a brief relationship with Philip, a sculptor whose art manifests his obsession with origins and boundaries. Philip’s art does not allow for doubleness or paradox. He describes his pieces in terms of conquest and containment, asserting his position as the “Begetter” of his art: “everything was material, potentially ... It might begin by resisting but eventually it would surrender, if he chose to pursue it; otherwise it would be broken” (136). He derides Annie’s preference for post-Impressionist painters, rejecting any form of art that queries boundaries: “he had dismissed them contemptuously ... the post-Impressionists had failed to come to grips with the structures that underlay everything” (136).
- 23 For would-be novelist Ron Hammersly, success is contingent upon self-containment. At Ann Arbor he tells fellow students Ted and Alex of his plans to sequester himself while writing his novel: “He will retreat from active life” and “spend the next ten years on an immense ‘clockwork’ novel” which “will be proclaimed as a masterpiece, an epic, a work comparable to *Ulysses*” (148). Ron’s methodology manifests the masculine obsession with origins: he will take “dozens of books” with him but he will “thread together fragments” of these discourses along a “continuum of his own creation” (148). Oates completes her satire with Ted’s response; he derides these pretensions but later declares himself Ron’s inspiration when the novel is a success: “I suggested that he retreat from active life like a monk, like a mystic ... and give himself a dozen years or more so that he might create a real masterpiece: something like *Ulysses*” (224).
- 24 Like Welty, Oates devotes more space to men who venture beyond the quest for supremacy. In “The Tryst” John Reddinger is the centre-of-consciousness. Through his affair with Annie, John relinquishes his hold on the self, if only momentarily. The affair transports him into new territory; he yields control, “for once ... letting a woman take the lead” (51). At the beginning of the story John exhibits the masculine preoccupation with boundaries. He looks out at his street and draws fortification from its fixity: “Like beads on a string were the houses, solid and baronial, each inhabited, each protected ... he knew them and the knowledge made him pleurably intoxicated. He was Reddinger. Reddinger, John ... He was in charge of the world” (50). Annie disconcerts John’s gender boundaries. She embodies a thrilling conflation of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits; initially he is enchanted by her more ‘masculine’ qualities: her “haphazard, promiscuous life,” her lack of “shame or self-consciousness” (55). Annie’s “long restless rangy body” becomes the site for John’s experimentation with gender configurations (50): he is stimulated by the “tomboyish wag of her foot” and her “tough, ungiving” flesh (50, 49).
- 25 Relinquishing control is “a novelty, a delight” but it soon becomes “unnerving” (51). In her reading of female imagery in Faulkner, Yeats and Lawrence, Oates observes that men project any ‘deviant’ tendencies onto women to assert their command of the self: “A man’s quarrel with Woman is his quarrel with himself – with those ‘despised’ and muted elements in his personality which he cannot freely acknowledge because they challenge

his sense of masculine supremacy and control” (Oates “At Least” 35). Unease tempers John’s fascination as Annie begins to confront him with “muted elements” of his identity, causing him to look inwards. Like Ran and Eugene, John resists interiority, resulting in moments of disembodiment: “But I love you! I love you! – Had he said these words aloud? She looked so frightened, he could not be certain” (56). When his relationship with Annie begins to mobilize covert facets of his personality, John reasserts his supremacy. Annie attempts suicide and John sends her away, immediately resuming his stance at the window, mechanically reciting the names of his neighbors. Similarly, Ran MacLain projects his “quarrel with himself” onto Maideen. Through her speech Maideen enacts one of the “despised and muted elements” of Ran’s identity: his subjugation to communal discourses: “it was beingtold ... in the clear voice of Maideen where it had never existed ... just repeating, just rushing, old – the town words. Telling what she was told she saw, repeating what she listened to – young girls are outlandish little birds that talk” (378-9). The rape of Maideen is a physical enactment of Ran’s “quarrel with himself”.

- 26 Oates’s cycle abounds with images of masculine alienation and disembodiment. The male characters seem to be painfully aware of the “absurd standards” to which they must aspire. In “Blood-Swollen Landscape” Oates dramatizes the debilitation engendered by the masculine drive to compete. Martin is a young academic competing for coveted full-time posts. Like Ran MacLain, Martin indulges in fantasies of violence to channel his anxiety about measuring up. Realizing that the “containment of his former life” has begun to “shift out of shape”, Martin approaches a girl in the woods behind the campus who seems to be “Brain-damaged” (72). When she begins to run from him, he grabs her arm and is exhilarated by “a strength, concentrated in those fingers, that he had not noticed before” (74). Like Eugene MacLain, he hardly seems to partake in the act but rather sees himself commit the attack: “he saw the length of his own arm dragged out hard, he saw the bulk of his body out of the blinded lower half of his eyes” (75). He also returns home, “unreadable” to his wife (77). Martin does not appear in the cycle again; his is another truncated plot.
- 27 In the final story Oates presents husbands and established academics who are still struggling to form a unified identity. When Alex Enright attends a party he is inexplicably troubled by the number of guests. The narrator must serve as psychologist and explain his aversion: “(Since childhood he has been unable to tolerate the thought of being one individual among many – one cell lost in a vast indecipherable tissue – though he is not really aware of his feelings)” (146). The tension between the one and the many, identified by Ingram as the defining principle of the story cycle form, haunts other men in the cycle. In the park Annie sees “straggling, indeterminate figures, mostly male, who walked along the wide gravelled paths in utter isolation, like creatures blundering through a single, singular dream, which could not be shared by anyone else” (118). Connectivity eludes the men in this cycle.
- 28 Ted Mandel, another husband and isolated male, is unable to conceive of himself as a distinct identity: “When he thinks of himself he thinks of – of nothing at all: his face in his mind’s eye is dim, blank, empty” (152). At the end of the cycle Ted remains stranded. Divorced from his wife, he displays the desperation traditionally assigned to the mature, spinster heroine. He is at a stage that Annie has already lived through in “Sentimental Journey”, her fourth story. After several failed relationships, she takes refuge in an improvised romance narrative. She contacts Warren Breck, an old admirer from college. Aware that her words are “absurd and grotesquely sentimental” she nevertheless sends

him a letter and, when he arrives, throws herself into the hackneyed scenario (104). After a brief affair of awkward sexual encounters and frantic declarations Annie is forced to reclaim her identity when Warren, another immobilized male, refuses to leave her apartment. We leave Ted trying to write himself into a romance plot, contemplating affairs with Fern and Annie. He meets up with Fern but when she reports her sighting of Annie he remembers how he used to dream of “That tall-headed girl, the artist” and wonders: “Perhaps *she*, Annie, had been the woman meant for him all along” (225 Oates’s italics). Ted, like King, has somehow arrived at the “wrong end” of life.

- 29 Short story cycle writers and critics continue to celebrate the duality and openness of the form. Eudora Welty and Joyce Carol Oates, like many other women writers, use the short story cycle to open up narratives for the female quest-figure. In the final stories of their cycles, Virgie Rainey and Annie Quirt stand apart as women who have achieved the “both/and” status embodied by the form. However the openness of the short story cycle is itself double-edged; it enables writers to leave stories unfinished. By creating gaps, the story cycle writer indicates not only the possibility of freedom but also of immobilization. In *The Golden Apples* and *All the Good People I’ve Left Behind* it is the men who are particularly vulnerable to this fate. While women thrive in the form’s open terrain, men founder. Repeatedly, the male characters in these cycles find themselves stranded with nowhere to go. Welty and Oates close down the master plots that foster isolation, containment and control and engage instead with the “disturbances” that accompany the masculine search for an alternative identity.

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NOTES

1. Kelley writes that the short story cycle is “closely related” to the ‘Novel-in-Stories’ (304). However, she uses her taxonomy to refer to texts commonly identified as story cycles: texts such as Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. J. Gerald Kennedy provides an illuminating examination of taxonomies for the form in the 1988 essay, “Towards a Poetics of the Short Story Cycle”. In 1995, Kennedy edited *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, using Robert Luscher’s preferred term. In this article I will use the term ‘short story cycle’ as Ingram’s observations are particularly pertinent to my readings.
2. Story cycle critics often identify *The Golden Apples* as a paradigm for the form. Robert Luscher states that *The Golden Apples*, along with Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, “serve[s] as the midpoint” of a formal continuum which stretches from the “miscellaneous collection” to “the traditional novel”. He argues that both cycles “illustrate a balanced tension between the independence of each story and the unity of the collection as a whole” (163).
3. Welty’s satirization of the male quest-figure is well documented. In “Welty, Tyler, and Traveling Salesmen”, Carol S. Manning examines how Welty and Anne Tyler “undermine the male fantasy of the free-spirited hero” and “unmask and unhorse the romantic quester” (112).
4. Coral Ann Howells observes that Alice Munro’s story cycle *The Beggar Maid* is “obsessed with homecomings” (63). In *Lives of Girls and Women* Del transports the reader to a future time when she will make an imaginative return to her home town: “It did not occur to me then that one day I would be so greedy for Jubilee” (249). In Sandra Cisneros’s cycle, *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza longs to leave home but the women in her community predict that she will return to reconnect with her community.
5. Michael Kreyling writes: “Mrs. Morrison might be one of [King’s] partners; Loch’s Perseid behaviour clearly does not come from Mr. Morrison, father of record” (*Understanding* 123).
6. Munro’s Del and Cisneros’s Esperanza secure their autonomy and reconnect with their communities by becoming writers. Del reveals that one day she will “want to write things down” about Jubilee (249). After foreseeing Esperanza’s return, Aunt Lupe assures her: “your writing will keep you free” (61).

ABSTRACTS

Cet article étudie la thématique des personnages masculins paralysés dans le short story cycle. Il s’appuie sur la théorie féministe pour examiner d’une part les traits particuliers du short story cycle et d’autre part les raisons qui rendent ce genre si attractif pour les auteurs féminins.

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