

The Paradox of the Short-Story Composite:

An exploration of reading temporality in *Olive Kitteridge*

and *A Visit From The Goon Squad*

by

Melanie Fried

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree
with Honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Winter 2012

For Chelsea

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my advisor Nicholas Delbanco for his constant encouragement and his challenge to make this thesis my own, and to Jennifer Wenzel for her conversations, meticulous draft reading, and empathy.

To my family, thank you for putting up with me and understanding when my thesis had to be my priority. Special thanks to my Zayde for instilling within me a love for literature and learning, and to my Aunt Missy for sharing *A Visit From The Goon Squad* and many other great books with me.

And finally, thank you to Ralph for keeping me going and refusing to accept resignation throughout the past six months.

Abstract

This thesis explores a neglected literary form known by a variety of terms, including the short-story composite, the short-story cycle, and the novel of interlinked stories. Through an analysis of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, I examine the reading process that results from its structure, with its tension between the whole of the composite and its individual chapters.

The short-story composite is comprised of chapters that exist both as individual, self-sufficient stories and as parts that develop each other to create the larger composite. This paradoxical nature of the short-story composite's chapters provides a reading experience different from that of the novel and the short story, which the short-story composite seems to combine. As a result of its constantly changing settings and focalizing characters and its lack of chronology, the short-story composite contains more "frames," or storylines, than the average novel, yet is still more interconnected than the short story collection.

Chapter One will show how the short-story composite's structure creates a tension between the whole and the parts, as I argue that Egan and Strout exploit this tension to bolster theme through the act of reading itself. Chapter Two will demonstrate how the reader makes sense of and connects the parts to the whole through a dual-temporality, that of reading forward through the chapter and gaining a sense of closure while simultaneously looking back and synthesizing certain dimensions of the frame parts into whole frames—the latter which is a more "open" process. Although it is arguable that this process is also involved when reading other literary forms, I suggest that the existence of the dual-temporality is *exacerbated* by the structure of the short-story composite, and that it is required equally throughout the entire work, whereas in most stories and novels, retrospection is intensified at the end (Lunden 65).

In the conclusion, I will discuss the social and cultural implications of the reading process, positing that the process of reading the short-story composite trains the reader for the mode of thinking employed in daily life, but without the real-life consequences. I will also speculate that the short-story composite is more conducive to the reading habits of contemporary society—which devotes less time to reading and reads in shorter periods, such as while on a subway—as the short-term reading of the chapter requires less time but still creates a satisfying sense of closure for the reader. The short-story composite thus addresses both the decreased amount of time for reading literature and society's preference for the long-term reading process of the novel, meanwhile providing the real-life benefit of training us for how to think in daily life.

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Short Titles

Goon Squad: Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit From The Goon Squad*. New York: Anchor, 2010.

Stories of America: Lunden, Rolf. *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999. Print.

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Introduction

When author Jennifer Egan conversed with her editors about the cover of the work that would become her 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning “novel” *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, she proposed having the phrase “stories” as the subtitle. Aware that short story collections do not sell nearly as well as novels, Egan’s editors instead chose not to include any subtitle on the book’s cover. Egan attributed the hardcover edition’s lack of market success to the cover design, which featured a guitar and, she suggested, led potential buyers to believe the book was a non-fiction account of the music industry (Classroom visit, 2011). For the paperback edition published six months later, the editors decided to change the cover design as well as add the subtitle “a novel.” The paperback edition drastically improved the book’s market profits, with 260,757 units sold as of February 16, 2012, whereas the hardcover edition of the book had only sold 39,971 copies as of February 16, 2012.

Although the specific reasons for the greater success of the paperback edition cannot be confirmed, the anecdote reveals the difficulty in classifying the book’s genre. Whereas the author herself considered the work to be more akin to a short story collection, the editors refused to allow this phrase on the cover and instead deemed the work a novel. Regardless of its market definition, *A Visit From The Goon Squad* is written in a form to which scholars have given numerous names: short-story sequence, short-story cycle, short-story composite, composite novel, novel of interlinked stories. Each of these terms has been used to describe a literary genre that fuses aspects of the novel and the short story. The genre is rich with variation, but its one essential, underlying element is each story’s “simultaneous self-

sufficiency and interdependence” (Mann 15). Each chapter is autonomous but also works with the other chapters to develop meaning.

To understand the structure of the short-story composite, which I will call the form in this study, an examination of the concept album is useful, and indeed Jennifer Egan herself referred to the concept album structure in an interview about *Goon Squad* (*The Wire*, 2011). In “Concept Albums: Song Cycles in Popular Music,” an essay from *Word and Music Studies: Essays on The Song Cycle and on Defining the Field*, Martina Elicker defines the concept album in popular music as “an album by either one artist or a group which contains a unifying thread throughout the songs—be it musical, thematic, or both” (229). Individual songs related through musical qualities or lyrical themes thus comprise the concept album. In addition to the whole album that these songs create, the songs also act as self-sufficient, independent entities, or as Elicker describes, “These concept albums have also spawned at least one hit single, which shows that individual songs ideally are strong enough to stand on their own outside the realm of the concept” (235). Similarly, individual chapters related through imagery, character, and other elements form the short-story composite, but these chapters are also autonomous from the entire work. In fact, many short-story composites have chapters that were originally published as short stories in such magazines as *The New Yorker* before being combined into one work.

This thesis will explore the reading experience that results from the paradoxical structure of the short-story composite’s chapters through an analysis of Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit From The Goon Squad* and Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2011 and 2009, respectively. In addition to receiving the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, both books were written by white females in the middle of their literary

careers. They each contain chapters that take place over decades but are not chronologically organized and that are focalized through a multitude of characters.

A Visit From The Goon Squad is set throughout the world and from the 1970s through the future. Its chapters are narrated in a variety of tenses, from multiple perspectives, and in different forms, including a magazine article and a Powerpoint presentation. All of the characters are somehow connected to one another, usually through the character Bennie or the character Sasha, and must come to terms with transgressions they have committed. In addition to the connections between the characters, as Will Blythe astutely writes in his *New York Times* review of the book, "...everything hangs together, connected by a tone of simmering regret arising from love's wreckage and time's relentless devouring." The book comments on time as we experience it today, and the human connections that evolve—for better or for worse—over time and geography.

Olive Kitteridge is mostly set in the small town of Crosby, Maine and also takes place over multiple decades. Each chapter features the character Olive Kitteridge, although to different degrees; in some chapters she is the focalizing character while in other chapters she only makes a brief appearance. Through its close third-person narration, the book provides an overview of life in the small New England enclave, but more importantly, a multi-dimensional portrait of an extremely complicated woman—apparently stubborn and loud-mouthed yet also deeply empathetic and kind—as she struggles to be a mother, a wife, a friend, and a citizen of Crosby. The theme of human understanding and connection, or lack thereof, is thus also an important aspect of the book.

Because *Goon Squad* and *Olive Kitteridge* are written in the same structure, reading each book entails the same general temporality. The concept album metaphor is further

helpful for understanding the temporality involved in reading the short-story composite. Elicker reveals, “Very often it takes intent and repeated listening to reach a deeper understanding of the artists’ words and music, especially in places where the connections may be extremely subtle” (235). Her insight into the listening process is applicable to the reading process of the short-story composite, but whereas the repeated listening of a song is a physical re-listening, the re-reading of the short-story composite does not necessarily take the form of a physical re-reading of the text. Instead, each chapter provokes a re-reading in that the reader constantly alters his or her interpretation of previous content over the long-term process of reading the entire book. This retrospective movement, however, exists simultaneously with the short-term, forward-looking reading of the chapter itself, thus resulting in what I call a “dual-temporality” of reading. Although this temporality is evident when reading other literary forms, the degree of retrospection is exacerbated in the short-story composite, occurring to equal degrees at the end of every chapter, not to a greater degree at the end of the entire book, as is the case when reading novels (Lunden 65).

The first chapter of this study will look at how the short-story composite, as a result of its structure, creates a general tension between the parts and the whole. I will argue that Jennifer Egan and Elizabeth Strout exploit this tension to convey themes through the act of reading itself, as the reader must synthesize the parts into wholes.

The second chapter will focus on the dual-temporality of reading the short-story composite, the motion of simultaneously looking forward and backward to synthesize the parts into wholes, through an analysis of *Olive Kitteridge* and *A Visit From The Goon Squad*. I will argue that as a result of the change in focalizing character, setting, and sometimes even narrative form from chapter to chapter, there are many “frames,” or storylines, that close and

re-open throughout the short-story composite. When reading a chapter, the reader zooms in and focuses on one part of a frame, while also simultaneously working in a more long-term temporality of connecting the frame parts to the rest of the frame, or to other frames as well. The dimension of these frame parts that re-opens is not that of the specific chapter's plot. Instead the psychological and thematic frame dimensions, as well as that of the *relationship* of the event in the chapter to another event in a different chapter, re-open in later chapters, as the reader connects them to develop the larger frame. My analysis will draw on scholarship about the reading process, intertextuality, and narrative closure to show how this process differs between *Olive Kitteridge* and *Goon Squad*.

I will conclude by suggesting that reading the short-story composite trains the reader for thinking about and making sense of real life, but without the real-life consequences. I will also speculate that the form might be more conducive to modern readers, as overall contemporary readers devote less time to reading. The reader experiences a sense of closure in the shorter amount of time it takes to read one chapter, without sacrificing the long-term reading experience associated with the novel, which society seems to value over the short story and short story collections.

Chapter One

Structure

The Parts and the Wholes

I. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will examine the structure of the short-story composite and the tension it creates between the whole and the parts. I will first analyze scholarship that shows how the short-story composite often includes themes that deal with the individual and his or her relation to the community, arguing that such themes reflect the form's structural tension. I will then explore how this tension between the whole and the parts manifests in *Olive Kitteridge* and *Goon Squad*.

Through an analysis of these two works, I will demonstrate how the tension created by the structure provides a reading experience that revolves around the process of synthesizing the parts into the whole. In *Goon Squad*, the reader is required to synthesize the different episodes in characters' lives, while in *Olive Kitteridge*, the reader is required to synthesize the different perspectives of Olive. This reading experience parallels the theme of the effects of time in *Goon Squad* and the theme of human connection and understanding in *Olive Kitteridge*. I thus conclude that Strout and Egan use the structure's whole-part tension to express themes that the reader comes to understand through the act of reading itself.

II. THE COMMUNITY VS. THE INDIVIDUAL

In *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*, Susan Garland Mann argues, “the independent stories can promote philosophies that are different from what is expressed in other parts of the book” (130). Each chapter can be told from a different perspective, a different form of narration, and a different time period, creating a work of aesthetic and intellectual possibilities that clash and contrast with one another. The short-story composite offers a variety of attitudes and principles in a single work, as well as a variety of means for expressing such attitudes and principles, creating a tension among the chapters that distinguishes this literary form from the novel.

Scholars have suggested that this ideological tension amplified by the short-story composite reflects the complex nature of modern life. Mann simply posits that the “lack of continuity” between the chapters allows writers to stress the “fragmentary nature of life, especially in the twentieth century” (12). Some scholars develop the relationship between the structure and real life to posit that the form specifically reflects *American* life. In his book *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*, James Nagel writes, “The American experience is, after all, the process of making one out of many. If this analogy were to be pushed a step further, there could be said to be an equivalence between an analysis of the themes that unite the stories in contemporary cycles and the ideas that consolidate American society” (258). The structural relationship between the parts and the whole in the short-story composite resembles the diversity of American national identity.

It is only logical then that in her 2009 book *The Subversive Storyteller*, Michelle Pacht traces the evolution of the short-story composite in America. She organizes the development

of the genre in America into three phases, each of which reveal that “19th and 20th century American authors adapted and expanded the short story cycle to convey subversive or controversial ideas without alienating readers and endangering their positions within the literary marketplace” (1). For the purpose of this study, I will describe the thematic trends during each phase and how the structure bolsters these themes, rather than explore the supposedly subversive nature of the material and how it is concealed. Because scholars suggest that the form reflects 20th-century life, I will merely provide a brief footnote on the first phase.¹

The works in what Pacht considers to be the second phase, which begins in the 20th century, reveal “the isolated nature of the individual” and “disjointed communities” (Pacht 5, 37). Indeed other scholars have also noted the genre’s ability to communicate themes of isolation and loss of community. Mann offers the example of Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* as a work that demonstrates “estrangement and that meaningful contact is impossible,” as the protagonists in each chapter share an inability to connect with other individuals (13). Pacht categorizes this second phase as making use of “repeated metaphors, collective protagonists, and varied settings as a way of opening the scope of the genre beyond just one person in one location...” (Pacht 137). The multiplicity of characters and settings allowed by the form seems especially useful for expressing individuals’ sense of isolation and the resulting fragmented community or society.

¹ In the 19th century, writers used the short-story composite for “examinations of the historical, political, and cultural perspectives that define the times in which their authors lived” (Pacht 4). These works, including Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Legends of the Province-House*, often employed narrative frames, repeated characters, and single locations as explicit connections between the stories (Pacht 4).

Similar to the works of the second phase, the works of the third phase also explore the relationship between the individual and the community. Pacht offers Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* as examples of short-story composites that depict "those who do not fit comfortably into American society because of ethnicity" and "represent the marginalized experience" (89). Nagel too observes that this form is employed to explore issues of "immigration, acculturation, language acquisition, assimilation, identity formation, and the complexities of formulating a sense of self that incorporates the old world and the new, the central traditions of the country of origin integrated into, or in conflict with, the values of the country of choice" (15). The diversity of philosophies allowed by the independent nature of the chapters renders this form especially effective for conveying such concepts as the dual-identities of immigrants and the clashing of values that accompany such identities, as well as the "injustice, prejudice, and fear" (Pacht 139) that result from such experiences.

Given the use of the short-story composite to express the experiences of ethnic minorities in America, it is logical that Pacht suggests the form itself reflects "traditions where the culture's stories have always been told by a number of different voices, each adding its own knowledge to the larger tale" and that "fragmentation is a natural part of storytelling and, indeed, of life" in certain minority cultures (113, 114). In the third phase, therefore, the form ironically allows the sense of community that the second phase lacks (113, 114). This tension between the individual and the community is representative of a general tension between the whole and the parts, the one and the many, in the short-story composite. The thematic tension reflects the tension embodied in the structure between the chapters as

individual, self-sufficient entities that can stand on their own, and as parts that together develop the meaning of the whole composite.

III. Structure in *Olive Kitteridge* and *A Visit From The Goon Squad*

In the next part of this chapter, I will discuss how the whole-part tension persists in *Goon Squad* and *Olive Kitteridge*. I argue that the authors use the short-story composite structure—which embodies the friction between the whole and the parts—to bolster the books’ themes through the act of reading itself, which forces the reader to connect the parts to the wholes. In *Goon Squad*, Egan expresses her theme of the effects of time by having the reading process reflect how we experience time in real life, in episodes that we synthesize in order to understand. Similarly, in *Olive Kitteridge*, Strout communicates her theme of human understanding and connection by having the reading process resemble how we understand (or should understand) other individuals in real life, by considering all perspectives.

A Visit From The Goon Squad: The Episodic Nature of Time

In *Goon Squad*, the first sentences of each chapter begin with a sense of habit but vagueness as to the narrator’s specific location and time and his or her relation to other characters in the book. As an example, “Found Objects” opens with, “It began the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel. Sasha was adjusting her yellow eye shadow in the mirror...” (1), and “You (Plural)” begins, “It’s all still there: the pool with its blue and yellow tiles from Portugal, water laughing softly down a black stone wall. The house is the same,

except quiet” (84). At the beginning of the chapters, therefore, the reader is uncertain as to the setting and sometimes the focalizing character’s identity.

Through the lack of established settings at the beginnings of chapters, Egan seems to de-emphasize for the reader the importance of the numerical form of time, time in its most objective form. She does offer clues for the reader to determine the temporal order of the chapters; however, these clues are not necessarily provided at the beginning of the chapters, when they are most critical. Instead, the endeavor to map out the specifics of the chronology severely interrupts the reading process, requiring extensive re-reading and note taking. I have created a timeline of the chapters of *Goon Squad* and have discovered that there is no temporal pattern; therefore, even if the reader could construct a timeline without impeding on his or her reading experience, such work would not lead to any revelation. In addition to the reader’s inability to discern the temporal order while reading, the actual lack of chronology itself also suggests that time as a numerical unit is not as important. Further, most of the clues that Egan does indeed offer as to a chapter’s place in time revolve around the events that occur in the stories, not simply numerical dates or characters’ ages.

Instead, therefore, Egan presents time in “episodes” or events, with each chapter as a different episode, such as a family trip to Africa or a protagonist’s years as a college student in New York City. The reader defines time by the status of certain relationships between characters, relationships that are transformed by the episodes and events: Is Sasha still Bennie’s secretary? Is Bennie still married to Stephanie? Has the LaDoll party taken place yet? LaDoll’s disastrous party, for example, represents an important event that profoundly changes the characters and their relationships with one another. The relative temporal relationships between the episodes allow the reader to witness the evolution of the characters

and of their relationships with another, which are altered and transformed by the episodes, not by a numerical unit of time. While reading, the reader keeps track of time based upon a post- or pre-event logic.

A result of its independent chapters, which provide isolated episodes in characters' lives, the short-story composite thus "allows the writer to focus on only those people and incidents that are essential to character development" (Mann 9). Although this fact might seem counterintuitive, as the form does not provide a linear narrative, the short-story composite structure seems to be useful for displaying themes of growing up. The reader traces the events most crucial to the protagonist's development to understand their ultimate influence in the long-term scope of the protagonist's life. It is no surprise then that this theme of maturation common in the short-story composite parallels the broader theme of the effects of time in *Goon Squad*.

When reading *Goon Squad*, the reader must synthesize these disparate episodes—the parts—to understand the characters' lives and relationships—the whole. The structure bolsters the book's theme of the effects and shaping influence of time by having the reading process—in which one absorbs time in episodes and connects them to create a whole—reflect the way we naturally experience and understand time in real life. This process of synthesis, connecting the parts to the wholes, will be the focus of Chapter Two.

Olive Kitteridge: Human Understanding and Connection

In the short-story composite, the narrators often change between the chapters. In *Olive Kitteridge*, in which the narration takes the form of close third-person, the chapters are focalized through a variety of characters, such as a promiscuous piano player, a suicidal man,

and an unfaithful man. As a result of the changing narrators in the short-story composite, the reader receives insight into not only how characters view themselves but also how other characters view them.

Throughout *Olive Kitteridge*, the reader sees Olive from multiple perspectives and in multiple situations. While reading chapters focalized through Olive, the reader obviously becomes privy to how Olive feels. The reader witnesses, for example, her guilt and insecurity with regard to her relationship with her son Chris, whom she had treated harshly when he was a child. On the other hand, the chapters focalized through different characters allow the reader to see how other characters perceive Olive. A Crosby resident named Harmon, for example, is surprised when Olive shows sympathy for another person, as he had only viewed her as the woman who treats her son and husband harshly. As a result of the multiple perspectives, the reader becomes cognizant of why Olive appears to be a certain way to others. This tension between her true inner self and her appearance complicates the portrait of Olive that Strout paints for the reader. The change in narrator thus supplies the reader with an omniscient view from which to analyze the characters and their interactions.

Because of the lack of chronology between the chapters, the reader also maintains knowledge of a character that even the character himself or herself cannot have. As an example, in *Olive Kitteridge*, the reader is informed that Olive's husband Henry is dead, but the moment of the death does not actually occur until later on in the book. Between these physical pages in the book, therefore, the reader is aware that Henry will die but Olive does not have this knowledge because such pages take place in a time period before his death. The reader thus receives the effects of an event before the event itself, the aftermath of Henry's death before his actual death, and consequently he or she focuses on the process of what led to

this effect, how the death has changed Olive's life, rather than focusing on the isolated event of the death itself. Having this foresight adds to the understanding of Olive by permitting a more comprehensive view and comprehension of the implications of the events.

The reader thus must synthesize the different perspectives of Olive—the parts—to construct a complex and deep portrait of Olive—the whole. The structure enhances the theme of human understanding and connection by forcing the reader to consider all perspectives and the biases that accompany these perspectives. While reading, the reader is provided with the necessary information to understand a character that individuals often lack in life. Although this sense of omniscience and the lack of order in the text are not realistic, in real life, one must account for the mere existence of information of which he or she might not be aware to best understand and connect with other individuals.

III. CONCLUSION:

In this chapter, I demonstrated the tension in the short-story composite between the whole and the parts. I first provided an overview of scholarship on how the themes in the short-story composite commonly embody a friction between the individual and the community, which on a broader level reflects a tension between the one and the many, the whole and the parts. Through an analysis of *Goon Squad* and *Olive Kitteridge*, I illustrated how Strout and Egan utilize the whole-part tension to convey themes that the reader comprehends through the actual process of reading, which involves synthesizing the parts into the whole.

In particular, in *Goon Squad*, the reader must connect the individual episodes in characters' lives, bolstering the theme of the effects and shaping influence of time by having the reading process reflect the way we naturally absorb and experience time in real life. Similarly, in *Olive Kitteridge*, the reader must synthesize the different viewpoints and opinions of Olive, strengthening the book's theme of human connection and understanding by having the reader understand an individual as he or she would (or at least should) in real life. The process by which the reader relates the parts to the whole is what I have decided to call dual-temporality, a simultaneous forward and backward motion, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Dual-Temporality

Synthesizing the Parts into Wholes

I. INTRODUCTION

A result of its multiple settings and focalizing characters, the short-story composite consists of a greater number of “frames”—threads or storylines—than the novel. Each chapter contains a part of one or more larger frames that extend throughout the book, but these parts are not presented in chronological order. When one reads a chapter of the short-story composite, he or she zooms into a part of a “frame” (or parts of multiple disparate frames) and reads in a forward motion through it, from beginning to end. At the same time, the reader is also zooming out and moving backward through the entire frame to connect this part to the rest of the frame, or to synthesize the parts of the frame that have been provided in the book thus far, as well as to connect this frame to a different frame.

Chapter Two will explore this dual-temporality that is exacerbated when reading the short-story composite through an analysis of *Olive Kitteridge* and *Goon Squad*. It is important to note that I do not organize this chapter by temporality but by book, so as not to sacrifice the simultaneity of the temporalities and to make it easier for an individual who has not read the texts to follow. For each work, I will first explain how a chapter achieves a sense of closure and then will demonstrate the simultaneous “open” nature of the chapter,

considering the “intertextual” nature of connecting and synthesizing the frame parts and frames. I focus greater attention on the retrospective motion because its degree and location differentiate reading this genre from reading other literary forms (Lunden 65). Finally, for each book I will identify the implications of the dual-temporality in terms of the reader’s agency and the hermeneutical outcome of the dual-temporality.

II. MOTION OF THE FRAMES

The change in focalizing character and setting between the chapters causes the frames in the short-story composite to continuously open and close while one reads. Generally, each chapter has one major frame part, and once a chapter ends, one frame closes and a different frame opens, although as I will discuss later in this chapter, the frames in *Olive Kitteridge* and *A Visit From The Goon Squad* are organized slightly differently. Describing the differences between the novel’s chapters and the short-story composite’s chapters, in *Stories of America* Rolf Lunden writes, “...the implicit enjambment from one chapter to another so common in a novel is missing” in the short-story composite (77). The lack of causality between the end of one chapter and the beginning of the subsequent chapter also results from the change in focalizing character and the time that has elapsed between one story and that of the next chapter. This process of closing and opening is also exacerbated by the fact that the following chapter has its own distinct title. These titles usually have names that relate in some way to the content of the chapter, rather than mere numbers.

Lunden alludes to the effect of this constant opening and closing of frames on the reading process: “The reader must address a new context, maybe a new focalizer and new characters; he or she must, in short, familiarize him/herself with a new world...this reorientation demanded of the reader also reinforces his or her impression of closure in the preceding story” (77). While the gaps between chapters can frustrate the reader because he or she must constantly adjust to new characters, settings, and circumstances, they ultimately accentuate the frame’s sense of closure for the reader. The frame closure, however, is only temporary, as the frame will open again at some point later in the book, and in this way, the gap creates a pause in the frame.

While factors such as the chapter titles, lack of continuity, and change in setting and focalizing characters certainly reinforce the sense of closure, the chapter on its own achieves a sense of closure independent of its relation to the subsequent chapter. To examine the form of this closure and its role in reading the short-story composite, it is first important to explain what narrative closure means for the reader. In *The Sense of An Ending*, Frank Kermode emphasizes the reader’s need for narrative closure when he writes, “...we accept the knowledge that our inherited ways of echoing the structure of the world have no concord with it, but only, and then under conditions of great difficulty, with the desires of our own minds” (173). Narrative closure fulfills a human desire for something we cannot attain in real life. In “Narrative Closure” Noel Carroll refers to the reader’s need for a sense of completeness when he writes, “...narrative closure is the result of a narrative structure’s answering of all the pressing questions it has stirred in the audience” (15). The text thus raises questions for the reader throughout the reading process, and closure occurs when the reader feels that answers to these questions have been provided.

With this definition, closure seems to be a personal and varied sensibility that depends on the reader and his or her interpretation of the text. For the sake of this study, closure in the short-story composite satisfies a certain desire in the reader for resolution or progress, and this resolution can occur on multiple levels, which I will discuss below.

III. *OLIVE KITTERIDGE*: the psychological exploration of a protagonist and the portrait of a town

Frame Organization and Reading Motion in *Olive Kitteridge*

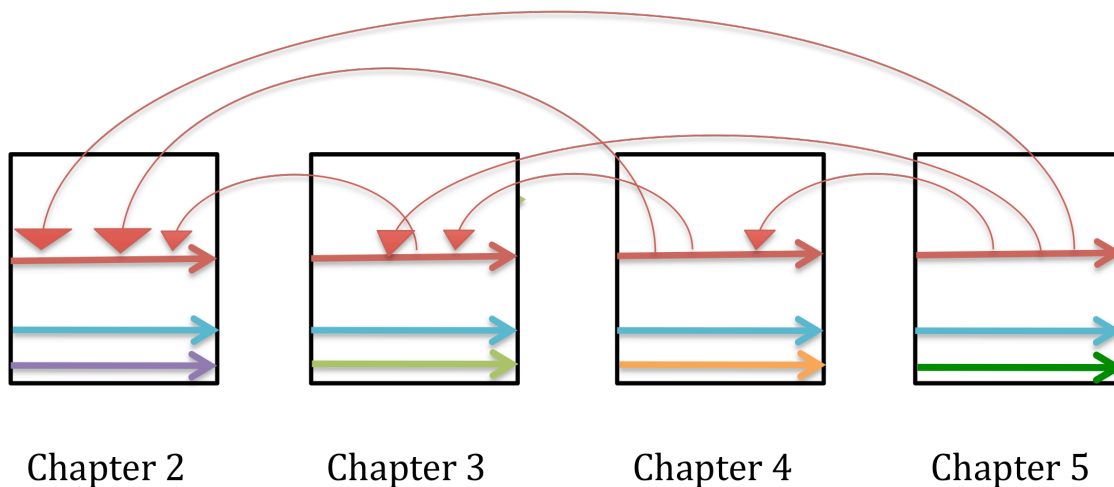


Figure 1: This diagram illustrates the organization of the frames in *Olive Kitteridge*. Each box is a different chapter, with gaps between them. The horizontal arrows within the boxes indicate the different parts of the frames, with the parts of the same frame indicated in the same color. The frame of Olive and the frame of the town of Crosby, Maine dominate in this book and re-open in every chapter, and thus the red and blue arrows represent the parts of these frames. The other colored frames represent the specific plots of the chapters, which never re-open on account of the lack of repeated characters and lack of continuity and chronology among the chapters. While the arrows within the boxes indicate a forward-motion reading through the chapter, the red arched arrows represent the motion of reading when connecting the parts of the red frame, as the reader must look back to all of the other red frame parts.

In *Olive Kitteridge*, most of the chapters take place in Crosby, Maine and include the character of Olive. As a result of these two constants, there thus seems to be two main frames in the book, that of Olive and that of the town, the former of which will be the focus of this analysis as I endeavor to demonstrate how one reads these frames.

In *Olive Kitteridge*, the chapter entitled “A Little Burst” takes place at the wedding reception of Olive’s son Chris and Suzanne, of whom she disapproves. In close third-person, Olive narrates from her son’s bedroom, to which she retreats to escape the wedding guests. Throughout the chapter she bitterly contemplates the new marriage, but discovers a solution for coping with Suzanne’s new place in their lives. Vandalizing Suzanne’s clothing and stealing one of her shoes, Olive thinks, “...it does help some, to know that at least there will be moments when Suzanne will doubt herself. Calling out, ‘Christopher, are you *sure* you haven’t seen my shoe?’ Looking through the laundry, her underwear drawer, some anxiety will flutter through her” (73). Olive’s solution is to make Suzanne feel as insecure as she now does. Just as John Boland writes in *Short Story Technique* that the end of the short story “contains the solution to the problem, although this does not necessarily mean that the central character has achieved his or her desire” (28), Olive’s desire to be rid of Suzanne completely cannot be fulfilled, but she ultimately finds a way to cope and accepts the reality of the marriage. By having Olive propose how Suzanne will react in the future, Strout ensures that there is closure. This closure may not be the happy, moral ending the reader expects or wants, but it is an ending nonetheless, a solution to the problem.

Only a certain dimension of this frame, however, will open again in subsequent chapters. In “Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meaning,” Menakhem Perry discusses the many dimensions of “temporality” involved in narrative. He argues,

“...elements of the text may participate in several temporal frames at once (the ‘natural’ sequence of an ‘external’ occurrence; the ‘natural’ sequence of a character’s consciousness; the sequence within a block of information transmitted from one character to another...)” (39, 40).² A text has multiple layers of temporal motion beyond the physical action that takes place. In “A Little Burst,” in addition to the wedding reception, there is also the frame of Olive’s consciousness, especially as most of the chapter is monologue. This “natural sequence of a character’s consciousness,” as Perry would call it, is evident in Olive’s psychological progress throughout the chapter, which provides insight into the true reason Olive is so dissatisfied with Suzanne as her daughter-in-law.

Initially, Olive claims that Suzanne’s cultural differences motivate her dislike; however, by the end of the chapter, she acknowledges that she feels threatened by Suzanne’s presence, a result of her insecurity with regard to how she treated Chris as a child. When she hears Suzanne mention Chris’s “hard” upbringing, Olive recalls the time she tried to teach Chris to play the piano and notes that “it was how scared he was of her that made her go all wacky. But she loved him!” (71). She admits that she might have seemed to act sternly toward her son, but she wishes to explain to Suzanne that “deep down inside there is a 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 closure of this psychological dimension of the frame is thus Olive’s disclosure and her ability to finally be honest with herself.

Together, the closure of the frame’s two dimensions—the plot and the psychological—provides a sense for the reader that although Olive has wrongly vandalized

² It is important to note that Perry’s definition of “frame” differs from the term used in this study.

and stolen Suzanne's possessions, her justification for such behavior is understandable. In addition, the reader feels that Olive's honesty represents a satisfying degree of psychological progress. Although the plot line of the wedding reception is complete, it seems Olive's solution can only be temporary, as there has been no resolution with regard to her relationship with her son, which we only hear about and do not actually see in this chapter. In the short-story composite, the dimension of the specific "external action" of a chapter ends permanently in a particular chapter, while the more psychological and thematic dimensions of that frame, or the *relation* of the specific plot to events in other chapters as I will demonstrate is the case with *Goon Squad*, re-open in later chapters. The way they re-open for the reader and continue to develop the reader's interpretation can be understood through a brief review of scholarship on intertextuality.

In literary study, the term "intertextuality" has been provided a variety of definitions and applications. Julia Kristeva officially coined the term in the late 1960s in her work *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, which drew heavily from Bakhtin's dialogism and Saussure's theory of signs (Orr 21). Still, in the essay, Kristeva defines the text as "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double" (66). Kristeva emphasizes society and history as "texts" that affect one's reading of the literary text. She explains that the text becomes "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text," in which "several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (36). The text thus cannot be isolated from its context; the reader and the writer and their social and historical backgrounds contribute to one's interpretation of the text and thus its meaning for a given reader.

Whereas Kristeva gives equal importance to the reader and writer's contexts, Roland Barthes's theory of intertextuality depends completely on the reader. For him, the author's intentions cannot play a role. In his 1968 essay "Death of the Author," Barthes writes, "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Clayton and Rothstein 21). In his work "Presupposition and Intertextuality," Jonathan Culler too stresses the role of the reader, but he limits the reader's agency to a degree. He suggests that the possible texts that the reader can use to develop interpretation are "logically or pragmatically suggested by the text one is studying..." (Clayton and Rothstein 24). Unlike Barthes, however, Culler is more concerned with the relationship between actual, physical literary texts.

Culler's focus on actual literary texts is more applicable for understanding the process of reading the short-story composite than Kristeva and Barthes's theories. In the short-story composite, each chapter in the book is a separate "text," as it can stand on its own, but the reader does not simply connect the chapter as a whole to other chapters. Instead, each chapter contains a part of one or more frames, and the reader must connect these frame parts to the other parts of that frame that are found in other chapters. In addition, the reader also connects the frames or parts of the frames to other frames or frame parts.

In the short-story composite, the author thus chooses the other "texts" to which the reader refers as well as the order of these texts. The book acts to limit the content the reader connects, but not *how* the reader connects such content and the conclusions he or she draws, creating a more open reading process than when reading the individual chapter but with guidance and boundaries. In this way, both the reader and the author maintain agency in the

intertextual process involved in reading the short-story composite.

To explore how this process works, I will return to the example of Olive. The frame of Olive re-opens in “Security,” when we see her relationship with her son. Olive visits an older Chris in New York, where he lives with a second wife. Here the reader sees a different “episode” in Olive’s relationship with Chris, which enriches his or her understanding of the previous episodes, as Chris finally confronts his mother and says, “...you can make people feel terrible. You made Daddy feel terrible... ‘I don’t know what I hated more—when you went after him and sided with me, or when you went after me’” (230). This frame re-opens as the reader refers back to “A Little Burst” and gains insight into Olive’s insecurities about her relationship with her son in that chapter. Similarly, when reading “A Little Burst,” the reader thinks of the first chapter of the book, which takes place when Chris is young and in which Olive acts harshly toward her family. In this way, the reader gradually comes to understand, over the long-term process of reading the entire book, their relationship at different points in their lives. The reader is given a limited set of references to understand this relationship and each new reference alters the previous interpretation.

The relationship between Olive and her son ultimately feeds into the book’s more encompassing frame of Olive’s psyche, which remains open throughout the entire book, as the reader witnesses Olive’s interactions with a variety of other characters, over many time periods, and through different characters’ perspectives. Her behavior in “A Little Burst” for example, complicates the reader’s perception of her in a subsequent chapter, “Starving.” The reader is privy to a far more sympathetic side of Olive in her reaction to an anorexic girl in “Starving,” whereas in “A Little Burst” she consciously desires to make Suzanne feel insecure and mocks her. While reading “Starving” the reader views Olive from the perspective of a

neighbor whose opinion is influenced by town gossip, but this view is altered for the reader as a result of the knowledge acquired from previous chapters. The neighbor Harmon does not expect Olive to react so empathetically to the anorexic girl; however, the reader knows from “A Little Burst” that Olive has deeper insecurities and thus is surprised more by the outward display of her empathy than by the existence of the empathy itself. The reader thus can develop Harmon’s perspective with knowledge from previous chapters that Harmon does not have, and this knowledge complicates the reader’s own view of Olive as inferred from reading previous chapters.

Olive’s psyche as a main frame of the book would be contested by Rolf Lunden, who in *Stories of America* suggests that no character can dominate in the short-story composite (100). There are, however, chapters in which Olive only appears briefly and we are not inside her head. Still, the form allows for the multi-dimensional view of Olive, rather than a less developed view of multiple and equally relevant characters. The short-story composite thus can allow the reader a nuanced view of a single protagonist by having the character viewed from multiple perspectives and at multiple stages in his or her life.

Frame-to-Frame Connection

In the short-story composite, the re-opening of frames also develops the reader’s understanding of other frames in the book. Motifs and images repeated among chapters also help the reader to hone and complicate the portrait of Olive. When Olive places her hand upon the anorexic girl’s head in “Starving,” for example, the reader is reminded of an image in “A Little Burst,” when Suzanne similarly places her hand upon the head of the flower girl, who at the last minute decides she does not want to walk down the aisle. Olive notes, “But

the gesture, the smooth cupping of the little girl's head...has stayed with Olive. It was like watching some woman dive from a boat and swim easily up to the dock. A reminder how some people could do things others could not" (64). This gesture signifies Suzanne's sense of understanding, as she consoles the little girl, rather than becoming frustrated with her as Olive might have with Chris when he was a child. In this way, Suzanne's gesture and Olive's reaction to it enable the reader to grasp the meaning of the gesture when repeated by Olive in "Starving." Strout's imagery emphasizes for the reader the drastic change in Olive's behavior, as she does not previously believe she is capable of acting so warmly toward another individual.

There are also parallels between Olive's relationship with her family throughout the book and focalizing character Harmon's relationship with his family in "Starving," each which help the reader to interpret the other. As an example, Harmon's disconnection with his children in "Starving" seems to exist as the manifestation of Olive's fear with regard to her threatened relationship with Chris during "A Little Burst." Harmon's sons have moved away and started their own lives, resulting in a weakened connection with their father, just as Chris is about to begin his own life with Suzanne, separate from his life with Olive. Harmon's insights deepen our comprehension of Olive's insecurities and immoral actions at the wedding reception. In addition, the relationship between Harmon and his wife Bonnie in "Starving" reminds us of the first chapter of the book, "Pharmacy," during which Olive's husband Henry depicts Olive as acting harshly toward him, similar to how Bonnie acts toward Harmon. As the reader becomes acquainted with Olive's psyche throughout the book, however, he or she obtains a greater awareness of the reasons for her insensitive behavior in "Pharmacy" and can apply this comprehension to Bonnie's character in "Starving."

The husbands' reactions to their wives' harsh attitudes in the chapters also offer new angles from which to understand the frame of the character of Olive. Whereas Henry cares for a younger employee when her husband dies and simply thinks of what might happen if he were to act unfaithfully toward Olive, Harmon indeed acts upon his feelings for a different woman and resolves to suffer the consequences of having an affair. In this way, Harmon acts out and shows the potential outcome of Henry's feelings in "Pharmacy," thus providing a potential justification for Olive's attitude, which might result from her suspicions of infidelity. The reader therefore can use relationships in other chapters to enrich his or her acquaintance with Olive, as well as use Olive to analyze other characters in the town, the two main frames of the work.

In *Olive Kitteridge*, therefore, the dual temporality allows for a multi-dimensional view of Olive and deeper understanding of her character, as well as all of the "characters" in a town, as the psychological and thematic frames close and re-open throughout the text but the specific plots of the chapters provide a sense of closure after each chapter (See Figure 1). Although the writer chooses the set of texts necessary to make the connections by simply writing the stories in one book and in a specific order but also by repeating imagery, for example, the process of interpreting and making these connections empowers the reader with agency. *Goon Squad*, however, supplies the reader with a lesser degree of agency, and in the next section I will examine how this process works differently when reading *Goon Squad*.

IV. A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD: filling in the gaps and constructing the character web

Frame Organization and Reading Motion in *A Visit From The Goon Squad*

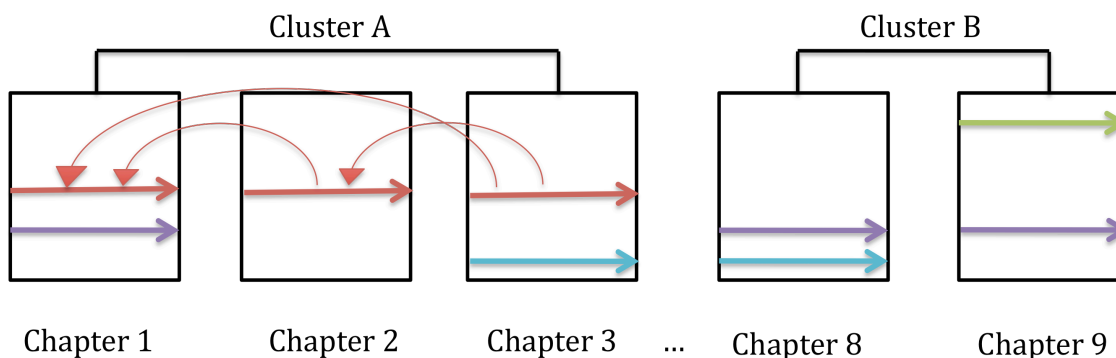


Figure 2: This diagram illustrates the organization of the frames in *A Visit From The Goon Squad*. Each box is a different chapter, with gaps between them. The horizontal arrows within the boxes indicate the different parts of the frames, with the parts of the same frame indicated in the same color. As demonstrated by the multiple different colored arrows that are repeated, there are more frames in *Goon Squad* than in *Olive Kitteridge*. To help the reader manage the many frames, Egan organizes them into what I call “clusters,” two or more consecutive chapters with parts that connect to the same frame. There are minor and major frame parts in a chapter, and the minor frame in one chapter will become a major frame in a future cluster, as indicated by the purple arrows. While the arrows within the boxes indicate a forward-motion reading through the chapter, the red arched arrows represent the motion of reading when connecting the parts of the red frame, as the reader must look back to all of the other red frame parts.

The dual-temporality of reading *Goon Squad*, on the other hand, has a slightly different outcome. While *Olive Kitteridge* has two major frames, that of Olive and that of the town of Crosby, *Goon Squad* features far more frames, with more dramatic changes in setting and narrative techniques and form. While *Olive Kitteridge* features the main character of Olive and an array of minor characters, *Goon Squad* has many characters that repeat or are at least mentioned multiple times. As a result of its many repeated characters, *Goon Squad* does not provide an extended, multi-dimensional psychological exploration of its characters. The reader does not see a certain character, as with Olive, from so many different perspectives and

in so many situations. No frame seems to dominate the book as that of *Olive* does, and instead the plot dimension dominates here, rather than the psychological dimension. The intertextual process is more rigid and less open to interpretation, as the reader is more concerned with connecting the complex web of characters and events and understanding their *relationships* to one another, and in order to do so, filling in the gaps between the chapters. In this way, the separate frames of the characters and events eventually comprise one major frame that is pre-determined by the author.

Like the chapters of *Olive Kitteridge*, the chapters of *Goon Squad* offer the reader a sense of closure and completeness. As a result of the great diversity of the chapters, told in a variety of tenses, from a variety of perspectives, and in a variety of forms, the way Egan achieves this closure varies among the chapters. Throughout the chapter “Ask Me If I Care,” for example, narrator Rhea feels increasingly distant from her best friend Jocelyn when Jocelyn starts to date Lou, a much older and successful record producer. Rhea narrates a conversation with Jocelyn: “Finally I go, You should’ve told me. Told you what? she goes, but I don’t even know. Then she goes, There’s too much, and I feel like something is ending, right at that minute” (54). When Jocelyn runs away to Lou’s house toward the end of the chapter, Rhea misses her friend but realizes that she must accept the new conditions of their friendship. While at the house of Alice, a girl whom Jocelyn and Rhea always socially neglected, Rhea wonders, “...if Lou’s house is near the ocean. Does Jocelyn look at the waves? Do they ever leave Lou’s bedroom?” (58). The physical separation between the two girls marks the beginning of Rhea’s independence, while the fact that she ends at Alice’s house demonstrates Rhea’s acceptance, or perhaps resignation, with regard to her changed relationship with Jocelyn. The chapter thus closes by showing the effects of Lou’s presence

on the girls' friendship and Rhea's psychological progress, similar to the closure on two dimensions—the psychological growth and the plot-based solution to the problem—in *Olive Kitteridge*.

The subsequent chapter “Safari,” however, provides a sense of closure in a way highly different from the chapters in *Olive Kitteridge* and “Ask Me If I Care.” At the end of “Safari,” the narrator projects into the future of the characters on the safari in Africa. As an example, the narrator reveals the detailed future of a particular character, who happens to be Lou's daughter: “Charlie doesn't know herself. Four years from now, at eighteen, she'll join a cult across the Mexican border whose charismatic leader promotes a diet of raw eggs, she'll nearly die from salmonella poisoning before Lou rescues her...” (80). The closure thus comes from outside of the world of the story, as the characters cannot yet be aware of these future circumstances. The reader feels closure because he or she is informed as to how characters end up, what their specific characteristics, as proposed earlier in the chapter, mean for their futures. With regard to Charlie, the narrator initially tells us that she dances promiscuously by the fire, like the warriors, to upset her father Lou, who has brought a younger girlfriend on the trip: “There's a charge for her in simply commanding the fickle beam of her father's attention, feeling his disquiet as she dances...” (60). The reader thus feels closure when he or she recognizes that, based upon Charlie's future, her feelings toward her father Lou continued to be manifested in increasingly destructive behavior beyond the time period of the safari. The closure of frames in *Goon Squad* thus can take various forms, although the closure typically includes some sort of change, whether psychological progress and an altered friendship in “Ask Me If I Care,” or the intensification of feelings and their influence far into the future in “Safari.”

Just as in *Olive Kitteridge*, in *Goon Squad*, while the frame dimension of a specific chapter's plot closes indefinitely, a different dimension of the frame re-opens in a later chapter or chapters. In *Goon Squad*, to help the reader manage and eventually connect the many parts of the frames, Egan sometimes "clusters" the chapters that comprise a frame. By cluster, I mean that two or three chapters with related storylines are consecutively placed in the book; the chapters each contain crucial parts of the same frame, although the chapters are not chronological (See Figure 2). One such "clustered frame" in *Goon Squad* is that of Rhea, Jocelyn, and Lou. The frame's first chapter, "Ask Me If I Care," takes place in the 1970s, when teenagers Rhea and Jocelyn bring famous music producer Lou to a rock concert given by their friends' band. The subsequent chapter rewinds to years earlier in Africa, where Lou takes his children on a safari, and then the third chapter in the cluster fast-forwards to decades after the concert, when Lou is dying, Rhea has a family, and Jocelyn is getting her life back on track after years of drug abuse. Each chapter in the cluster provides a sense of closure on the basis of the specific plot of the chapter, but the dimension of the relationship of this plot to other "episodes" in the cluster and the relationship of characters opens throughout the cluster. These chapters, clearly not chronological, must be re-organized by the reader so that he or she can fill in the gaps that exist between the stories.

This process of re-organization is understood through Seymour Chatman's definition of narrative as containing the "discourse" and the "story" in his book *Story and Discourse*. Whereas the story is the chronological order of the plot, the discourse is the order in which these events are presented. In *Goon Squad*, the reader thus must re-organize the discourse into the story to fill in the gaps and comprehend the relationships of the characters and the events. In the short-story composite, however, as discussed in Chapter One, time is not

defined for the reader in numerical units but by events and the status of certain relationships; therefore, the transformation of discourse into story instead is shaped by the relationships between the different episodes.

In “Safari,” the reader sees Lou's relationship with Rolph, his then-young son. Rolph is mentioned in the previous chapter, which is the first chapter in the cluster, for being close friends with Jocelyn. In the third chapter of the cluster, when Rhea and Jocelyn reunite to visit a dying Lou, Jocelyn finds out for the first time that Rolph committed suicide years earlier. There is no text that indicates what happened between Africa, when Rolph admired his father, and the suicide, and therefore the reader must fill in the gap using information from other parts of the cluster. The reader infers that Lou remained a poor father and selfish man, which we know from the first chapter in the cluster, in which Lou is in a relationship with the under-aged Jocelyn, and from “Safari,” in which his daughter harbors negative feelings toward him. In addition, the reader can imagine Jocelyn’s trajectory to becoming a recovering drug addict at the time of “You (Plural),” although we do not explicitly witness it, as well as why and how Rhea, who was not busy running away with older men like Jocelyn, ended up with a nice life and family.

This cluster structure also fulfills the reader's curiosity, as minor characters in one part of the cluster become major characters in another part of the cluster. In a classroom visit, Jennifer Egan herself even explained that it was curiosity about secondary characters in each chapter that informed the order of her chapters (2011). As an example, “Ask Me If I Care” is narrated from Rhea's point of view, so the reader does not know much information about Lou. In the subsequent chapter, however, Lou and his family take a trip to Africa and the reader learns more about his past, career, and family relationships. This translation of minor

characters into major characters in the cluster makes the connection process and the filling in of the gaps more short-term, especially if read in one sitting.

Although the three chapters that comprise a cluster are not chronological, they are physically consecutive in the book. The proximity makes it easier for the reader to configure the order of events in the cluster, to turn the discourse into story, as a means of understanding the implications of these events for the characters involved and thus of filling in the gaps. In this way, the reading experience is more short-term, as the author has created a defined web of characters and events for the reader to put back together. While the dimension of the relationships between the events in various characters' lives and in a character's own life re-opens in the subsequent chapters of the cluster, the specific plot of the chapter produces the sense of closure.

Frame-to-frame connection: non-clusters

The translation of minor characters into major characters also occurs among the clusters, and this process of connecting and filling in the gaps is more long-term because of the lack of physical proximity. As an example, in "Ask Me If I Care," one reads about the friendship between two main members of a band, Bennie and Scotty, but from Rhea's point of view, and in "You (Plural)," Jocelyn refers to Bennie and says, "We know him from a time when there was no such thing as normal people dying" (85). Whereas the dimension of Rhea/Jocelyn/Lou's life closes and we do not hear about these characters again in the book after the cluster, we do hear more about minor characters in the frame like Bennie and Scotty. Later, in "X's and O's," Scotty is a janitor divorced from his high school sweetheart Alice and Bennie is a famous record producer, leading the reader to conclude that the band did not

become famous. Similarly, in a chapter even earlier than “Ask me If I Care” called “The Gold Cure,” Bennie is divorced from his wife and struggling to remain active in his son’s life, implying that his career as a record producer might have impeded upon his marriage. The reader is better able to fill in this gap in a later chapter, which is told from the perspective of Bennie’s wife, who reveals that Bennie had cheated on her multiple times as a result of his fame. The minor character thus exists as a sort of frame part that will re-open in later chapters, with the character either remaining minor or becoming a major character. Meanwhile, the reader’s role is to turn the discourse into story to understand how the characters’ lives and relationships evolved.

The main aspect of reading *Goon Squad* involves keeping track of the “web” of characters and events and understanding how they are related, and in this way, the book acts as one big frame to be built by the reader. Although this frame is pre-determined and not open to interpretation, the reader must put forth effort to construct the frame, an experience that exists as the charm of reading the book. The long-term nature of this process requires sharp memory or re-reading on the part of the reader, as well as strategic repetition of events on the part of the author.

V. CONCLUSION:

While reading the short-story composite, the reader must look back and alter previous interpretations while reading forward through the chapter. The retrospection is similar to intertextuality in that the reader is given texts to refer to in connecting the different parts of

the frame as well as connecting the frames to each other, but the reader chooses how to connect and what conclusions to draw from the connections. It is important to acknowledge that all reading requires a degree of retrospection, but I argue that this retrospection is exacerbated in the short-story composite. In addition, there is also a difference in where the retrospection occurs. In the short-story composite, the reader looks back throughout, whereas most novels and stories are end-oriented and retrospection thus occurs far more heavily at the end (Lunden 65).

Instead, in the short-story composite, each chapter is end-oriented and the reader thus looks back after each chapter. The reader gains a sense of closure at the end of each chapter, and in *Olive Kitteridge* and *Goon Squad* in particular, the reader feels satisfaction that the protagonist has made some degree of psychological progress. Along with this psychological progress, the character's discovery of a temporary means to deal with his or her emotional predicament creates the story's sense of closure. In *Goon Squad*, this closure can take other forms, such as simply being informed as to the characters' futures.

The dual-temporality of reading the short-story composite can have different effects in different books. While *Olive Kitteridge* provides the reader with a multi-dimensional view of Olive and the town of Crosby, Maine, there is less psychological emphasis in *Goon Squad* because a variety of characters repeat. Instead the pleasure of reading stems simply from the recognition involved in filling in the gaps and connecting the web of characters and events.

Conclusion

The short-story composite is distinct from the novel primarily on account of the gaps between chapters, which create a tension between the whole of the composite and its component chapters. The whole-parts structure leads to the existence of many frames that close and re-open throughout the short-story composite, but while the dimension of a specific chapter's plot closes indefinitely, such dimensions as the psychological, thematic, and the relationship of the event in that chapter to events in other chapters, open again in later chapters.

In the short-story composite, the writer can exploit this tension between the parts and the whole to convey theme that the reader comes to understand through the process of reading itself. This process includes a dual-temporality in which the reader must look forward and backward simultaneously, connecting the frame parts to each other to synthesize the whole frame, or connecting the frame to other frames to synthesize some greater comprehension. While it is important to recognize that all literature in some way involves this motion of reading, I argued that the dual-temporality is exacerbated in the short-story composite, and, as Rolf Lunden informs us in *Stories of America*, the retrospection happens throughout the reading, not simply at the end of the book (65). The short-story composite is not end-oriented as a whole work, but the chapters are indeed end-oriented and provide a sense of closure for the reader.

The retrospective temporality of reading the short-story composite is understood through an intertextuality in which the author restricts the "texts" to which the reader refers as a means of guiding him or her toward the most pragmatic connections. The two texts

examined in this study, however, offer different degrees of agency for connecting the frame parts and the frames, as well as different effects of reading. In *Olive Kitteridge*, the dual-temporality provides the reader with a multi-dimensional and deep understanding of a single protagonist. The structure bolsters the book's theme of human understanding by making the reader connect the parts—the different perspectives of Olive—to the whole—Olive as an individual, similar to how one would (or should) understand an individual in real life. The reader succeeds in doing so through the simultaneous forward and backward motion of reading, the dual-temporality. *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, on the other hand, does not have major frames that dominate and instead has a multitude of frames with equal importance. Here, the reader simultaneously looks forward and backward to turn discourse into story, mapping out the web of characters and events in order to trace the evolution of the relationships, an act which reflects the book's theme of the effects of time. The pleasure of reading stems from the reader's recognition of characters and events and the connections he or she subsequently makes, as the reader begins to see the pre-determined web take shape.

These various effects of the reading process are testament to the diversity of the short-story composite. The two books share only their structure and the resulting process of reading; the tone, characters, settings, and other components and characteristics differ greatly between them. The short-story composite thus provides immense room for authorial experimentation, as well as exists as a structure that can be molded to fit all types of readerships.

I. THE VALUE OF DUAL-TEMPORALITY IN DAILY LIFE

In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks describes the use of reading when he writes, “Plot...comes to appear one central way in which we as readers make sense, first, of the text, and then, using the text as an interpretive model, of life” (19). This relation of literature and life, however, concerns the actual content of the text more so than the process of reading. In the short-story composite, the process of reading itself is especially valuable, as opposed to the text’s message or moral. The short-story composite’s benefits extend beyond the reader’s ability to relate to a character or to use a theme to enhance one’s understanding of life.

Rather than the value of a book’s content, Frank Kermode focuses on the structure of the literary text in his book *The Sense of an Ending*. He writes, “Novels, then, have beginnings, ends, and potentiality, even if the world has not.” (138). The structure of literature thus does not reflect the structure of the real world, and Kermode instead posits that literature reflects how we desire the world to be structured (173). We desire the sense of ending and closure and organization we lack in real life and use fiction to make sense of our lives and as a space in which we can experience sense and order.

Perhaps as Kermode suggests, the process of reading reflects how we wish life to be; however, more importantly, the dual-temporality of reading the short-story composite reflects how we *think* about our lives. In *Closure in the Novel*, Marianna Torgovnick writes, “In part, we value endings because the retrospective patterning used to make sense of texts corresponds to one process used to make sense of life: the process of looking back over events and interpreting them in light of ‘how things turned out’” (5). As when meditating on real life, while reading forward through a chapter, we also look back in the text to connect and synthesize the episodes of the past, present, and future, and to use each to understand the others, a process that I have argued is exacerbated in the short-story composite.

Morris and Dunn explain this idea quite elegantly in their book *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* when they write, “And this is, after all, a paradigm of how we live our lives: constantly shifting our focus from past to future to present, from others to ourselves and back again, with autonomy *and* interconnection, in fits and starts” (120). As a result of the whole-parts structure—the chapter’s simultaneous ability to be self-sufficient but also to develop meaning with the other chapters—the process of reading the short-story composite involves physically looking forward and backward to synthesize wholes and parts. In this way, by reflecting how humans think, the short-story composite reading process trains the reader for thinking about real life. This training, however, occurs within the boundaries of the reader-text world, and the reader thus does not experience the consequences. The short-story composite offers the reader a “safe space” to practice and exercise the mode of thought so crucial to daily life.

The similarity between the experience of reading the short-story composite and how individuals contemplate real life implies that the structure creates much of the value of reading the short-story composite. As a result of this relationship, one can infer that the reading process is more meaningful when reading the work as a whole, rather than simply the individual component chapters on their own.

II. THE VALUE OF DUAL-TEMPORALITY FOR READING CULTURE

The short-story composite allows us to read and feel a sense of closure in a short amount of time without sacrificing the benefits of the long-term reading process. In this way,

we engage in both the short-term reading experience of the short story and the long-term reading experience of the novel, our desires for closure but also for agency and interpretive freedom fulfilled in one book.

The short-story composite thus might be more conducive to modern reading habits, as individuals today devote less time to reading literature and often read during shorter periods, such as during a subway ride, for example. A study published in 2004 by the National Endowment for the Arts called *Reading at Risk* found that the percentage of adults who read literature declined 10 percent between the years of 1982 and 2002 (ix). The study discovered that the rate of decline from 1992 to 2002 had increased from 5 percent to 14 percent (x). Furthermore, for the years 1982 through 2002, the rate of readership decline for young adults, ages 18-24, was found to be 28 percent, which is 55-percent more than the 18-percent readership decline in the entire adult population for those years (xi).

In *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st century*, Albert Greco et al address this decline in readership and reading time: “Clearly, consumer-based book publishing was whipsawed by the seductive array of media and entertainment options, ranging from satellite and cable television to iPods and the Internet” (97). The decline in literary reading thus has resulted in part from competition from other media and advances in technology. Per I. Gedin explains the cultural shift that has led to the publishing industry’s need to compete with entertainment industries in his book *Literature in the Marketplace*. He argues that “culture no longer has an important status, as it did during the bourgeois period” and instead mass culture has replaced high culture (179). The literature an individual reads is no longer a sign of his or her wealth, but instead wealth “manifests itself materialistically in the acquisition of luxury houses, yachts, airplanes, clothes” (Gedin 180). Literature thus once

served a cultural purpose but has become solely a form of entertainment that must compete with other forms of entertainment.

Over the years, this cultural change has conflicted book publishers. Greco et al reveal that “by the late 1990s, books were, in the minds of most consumers, a consumer product that had to be packaged, priced, and promoted. To some industry leaders, these views were heretical. Books were cultural icons, the repositories of wisdom and truth, and precious objects to be read, reread, and prized” (45, 46). The book publishing industry’s need to compete with other forms of entertainment naturally led to an “emphasis on sales” and the economic potential of a book (Greco et al 186), yet this focus has not reversed the erosion of the American readership.

The increasingly less time today devoted to reading literature is especially daunting considering the real-world benefits of reading discussed in the previous section. Greco et al consider the decline in reading to be a “veritable blight on the cultural, intellectual, and economic landscape of this nation” (216), while the 2004 NEA study found a strong correlation between literary reading and civic participation, with 43 percent of adult literary readers performing “volunteer and charity work” and only 17 percent of adult non-literary readers participating in such activities (xii).

Perhaps the publishing industry should look to the short-story composite in its response and hopefully eventual solution to declining readership. Using the music industry as an analogy, one can recognize that contemporary society has come to value the hit song over the album. Yet it has been proven that short stories do not sell nearly as well as novels, and thus one can infer that individuals prefer the reading experience that accompanies the novel, which may not be the case with the successful hit song. The short-story composite addresses

both the decreased amount of time for reading literature as well as the preference for the long-term reading process of the novel, meanwhile providing the real-life benefit of training us for how to think in daily life.

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