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Fractured Glass:
J.D. Salinger's Glass Family Stories as a Story Cycle

In a 1961 review of J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, John Updike claims that Salinger was obsessed with the stories' subject: the fictional Glass family. Updike writes, "Their invention has become a hermitage for him. He loves them to the detriment of artistic moderation" (52). Updike describes the Glass family as a "hermitage" for Salinger; a fixation preventing him from moving on to new subject matter. Updike's analysis was shared by a plethora of well-respected writers and critics, among them Joan Didion and Mary McCarthy, who agreed that the stories were repetitive and self-indulgent (Malcolm 1). These critics' opinions had a lingering effect, discouraging scholarship on the series and diminishing the stories' reputation for years to come. These negative reviews were even echoed in Salinger's obituaries, which generally mentioned the Glass stories as an aside; a flawed set of works only worthy of mention because they were written by the canonized author of *The Catcher in the Rye*.¹ However, looking at the specific criticisms the stories received reveals that many critics' complaints stemmed from their reading the stories with the expectations of the wrong genre – interpreting individual stories or groupings of stories as novels. Reading the series as a part of a different literary tradition – the short story cycle – the Glass family does not seem to be

¹ *The Washington Post* referred to the Glass family as "a neurotic and oddball clan" (Barnes 1) while *The Economist* magazine describes the stories as "increasingly weird," published by the "in the ever- and over-indulgent *New Yorker*" ("Jerome" 2).

an obsession, rather, the repetition of character and theme in the stories seem a necessity of genre.

It is difficult to blame Salinger's critics for misunderstanding the Glass series. When Updike wrote his review in 1961, Salinger had published nothing but Glass stories for six years. Salinger provided no hint as to how the separate stories were intended to fit together or what direction the series would take. There were also a number of complicating factors that made it unlikely that a critic would recognize the stories' genre. Although a number of well-known authors had written story cycles, there was not yet any scholarship identifying it as a unique genre or describing its characteristics. Consequently, the story cycle genre was more obscure while Salinger was publishing than it is today. The Glass series is also an unconventional story cycle, which makes its genre even more difficult to recognize. Published over the course of two decades, their style varies wildly – from the concise, carefully crafted “A Perfect Day for a Bananafish” (which was included in *Nine Stories*) to the sprawling, metafictional “Hapworth 16, 1924.” The later stories are so long and experimental that they push the boundaries of what can be considered a “short story” – the story “Zooey” alone is more than 150 pages. To add even more confusion, midway through the series, narrator Buddy Glass claims authorship of the Glass stories, drastically changing the meaning of some earlier stories, which had previously been presented as if narrated by an objective, omniscient narrator. Salinger also never compiled the stories into a single volume, which means that they were read piecemeal. Therefore, by the time a new story was published, the details from previous stories would have faded from memory, making it unlikely that critics would recognize the intricate and sometimes subtle connections between the stories.

Despite the complicating factors that make the series unusual, it contains a number of traits characteristic of the short story cycle. The stories are both independent and interdependent, meaning they may be read individually, but the stories enrich each other when read together. The stories are linked by character, setting, theme, narrator and set of past events that are referenced throughout. The series also employs two key conventions of the cycle form, developing character through a series of intermittent glimpses (rather than progressively as a novel would) and telling different stories from the perspectives of different characters. These techniques are used in many of the most well-known story cycles, such as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and John Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven*. The Glass series also contains the cycle's episodic structure and its characteristic openness, meaning the stories often leave details unresolved, rather than reaching the type of closure expected in a novel. Reading the series as a story cycle, the Glass series' fragmentary form makes sense with Salinger's subject matter, the story of a family. In the same way that a cycle is an entity made up of separate pieces, a family is a whole made up of individuals. The cycle's disjointed structure allows Salinger to examine the nature of family as a similarly fragmentary entity. Overall, regardless of how Salinger would have classified the stories, the Glass series is best read as a story cycle, which makes sense of the series' structure, its openness and its subject matter.

A Misunderstood Series, A Misunderstood Genre

Reading any work with the expectations of the wrong genre will make that work seem flawed. If one were to read *The Great Gatsby* expecting a one-act play, the novel would seem convoluted, wanting for dialog and absurdly long. If one were to read T.S.

Eliot's "The Waste Land" expecting a sonnet, it would seem disjointed and rambling. As simple as this idea may seem, this is precisely the type of treatment many short story cycles have received. Story cycles are commonly criticized for lacking a central plot or climactic ending, for being repetitive, static, fragmentary or inconsistent – all expectations of a novel rather than a story cycle. Salinger's Glass family series – an unconventional story cycle whose stories were never collected into a single volume – has been particularly maltreated, receiving a great deal of negative criticism because its genre has not been recognized. The individual stories have been read separately as novels and criticized as being "shapeless," "static," "repetitive," and full of "gaping holes,"² all criticisms commonly used to describe story cycles read with the wrong set of genre expectations. The stories' initial negative reception has had far reaching effects, resulting in critical neglect of the later stories and of the series in its entirety. Consequently, the series has been consistently misinterpreted and undervalued.

J.D. Salinger's Glass Family stories began with 1948's "A Perfect Day for a Bananafish," which tells the story of Seymour Glass' suicide. "Bananafish" was followed two months later by "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" and a year later by "Down at the Dinghy." All three were originally published in magazines and later included in Salinger's short story collection, *Nine Stories*. The only hint of the stories' connection is a scene in "Dinghy" when four-year-old Lionel drops a pair of goggles into a lake and his mother, Boo Boo, says, "[Those] once belonged to your Uncle Seymour" (84). The significance that Boo Boo places on "Uncle Seymour's" goggles suggests that this may be the Seymour who committed suicide in "Bananafish." In the ensuing years Salinger continued the Glass series with "Franny," "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,"

² Steiner 361, Updike BR1 and Glazier 250 and French 94 respectively.

“Zooney,” “Seymour – An Introduction” and finally 1965’s “Hapworth 16, 1924,” which would be the last work published in his lifetime.

Although the Glass stories contain all of the story cycle genre’s main characteristics, including the cycle’s unique episodic structure and its use of multiple perspectives, the series has rarely been identified as a cycle because of a number of complicating factors. One problem is the obscurity of the genre, which, although it remains an issue today, was far worse in the 1950s and 1960s when Salinger was writing the series. At that time although a number of major authors had written story cycles (Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner among them), there was not yet any scholarship identifying the genre and its unique characteristics. Forrest Ingram’s book *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*, the first major analysis of the genre, was not published until 1971; six years after Salinger published his last story.

The problem of the genre’s obscurity was compounded by Salinger’s decision not to compile the stories, which made it even less likely that the series would be recognized as a part of the cycle genre. Lacking compilation, the Glass series’ genre would only be apparent to a reader familiar with the story cycle form – a rarity for such a little-known genre. For the few readers aware of the genre, Salinger’s decision not to compile the stories made the series more difficult to interpret. Lacking the fixed order of publication, the stories can be read in a variety of orders, which can change a reader’s impression of the meaning of the series as a whole. For this reason, story cycle scholars, who in other cases have championed the process of reevaluating past misunderstood story cycles and argued the case for their artistic merit, have ignored the series in favor of more traditional

story cycles.³ Finally, without compiling the stories, Salinger narrowed his readership by creating added work for his reader. Whereas the traditional short story cycle already involves a very active form of reading, requiring readers to compare and contrast the individual stories to figure out the meaning of the work as a whole, readers of the Glass series have yet another added task, as they must collect the works. This is not necessarily easy, considering that the series' final story, "Hapworth," has never been published in book form and until recently was only available in old issues of *The New Yorker* (where the story was originally published).⁴ By narrowing his readership and writing in an obscure genre, the likelihood of readers recognizing and appreciating the series' overall design was improbable at best.

The Glass series is also unusual in the span of time in which the stories were published. Most cycles are written all at once, perhaps published separately over the course of a few years and then collected. Salinger wrote the Glass series over the course of decades, beginning with "Bananafish" in 1948 and continuing through "Hapworth" in 1965. The length of time that Salinger took to write the Glass family series meant that the stories' style would not be uniform, but would reflect Salinger's evolving style as a writer, which changed dramatically during those two decades. Consequently, the earlier Glass stories are in the concise, carefully crafted mode of Salinger's early short stories, while the later Glass stories are longer works that are more digression-prone and

³ In the book *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* Ingram mentions the Glass stories, saying that although they contain features of the genre, he chose not to include them in his analysis of the genre because they were not compiled into a single volume. He instead chose focus on more "representative" or traditional story cycles, such as James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (16).

⁴ In 2009 at the beginning of my research for this project, "Hapworth" was available for free online at <http://freeweb.hu/tchl/salinger/hapworth.html>. However, since Salinger's death in January 2010, the story is only available electronically through *The New Yorker*'s digital archive for a fee.

technically experimental. The difference in the stories' style and length pose another obstacle potentially preventing the stories from being recognized as a part of a larger, consistent whole.

For his part, Salinger did little to help critics understand his work; on the rare occasion when he spoke publicly, he referred to the stories as a "narrative series," ("Salinger's Dust Jackets") refusing to place the stories into any formal genre category. Consequently, individual components within the series have been described as novellas or novelettes (Hassan 5) or compilations of stories such as *Franny and Zooey* (two separate but strongly linked stories published together in book form) have been mistaken for novels (Way 1). Some have even speculated that the Glass stories are a first draft for a novel, citing Salinger's publication of short stories about Holden Caulfield, which were later expanded into *The Catcher in the Rye* (Alsen ix). In all but a handful of cases, the stories have been evaluated with the wrong set of genre expectations, resulting in the series being misinterpreted and underappreciated.

The Glass series is not the first story cycle to be misunderstood by critics. Lacking the plot, linear character development and resolution of novels, these works often appear flawed to critics unfamiliar with the genre. The list of well-known story cycles that have been misunderstood is virtually endless; Louise Erdrich's story cycle *Love Medicine* was condemned for having "structural problems" because, according to one critic, it lacked the "sustained action of a novel" (Nagel 19), while Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* was said to be anticlimactic by a critic expecting a climactic conclusion more characteristic of a novel (Cox 165). Similarly, a critic of William Faulkner's cycle *Go Down, Moses* commented that the book was "not

sufficiently unified to be termed a novel, nor diverse enough to be regarded as separate stories” (qtd. in Dunn and Morris 150), complaining that the work did not fit into the categories of either novel or short story collection. In all of these examples, the works were judged with the expectations of the wrong genre. Critics who do not recognize a story cycle or do not understand the genre’s conventions tend to expect the unity and plot development of a novel, thereby mistaking the cycle’s fragmentation for a structural flaw, or if they view a cycle as a collection of discrete stories, they overlook the patterns of cohesion and unifying factors that do exist in the work.

Considering the negative critical reception that story cycles generally receive, it should come as no surprise that J.D. Salinger’s Glass family stories, an unconventional story cycle that was never collected, has been misunderstood by critics. Returning to Updike’s review of *Franny and Zooey*, in addition to calling them a “hermitage” for Salinger, he also calls the stories, “dangerously convoluted and static”(BR1), criticism reminiscent that the ending of Gloria Naylor’s story cycle was unsatisfying and anticlimactic (qtd. in Cox 165). In both cases the reviewer complains that not enough happens – expecting a type of climax or plot progression more characteristic of a novel than a short story. Updike repeats his evaluation of *Franny and Zooey*, claiming, “These two stories, so apparently complementary, distinctly jangle as components of one book” (BR1). Updike misreads the book, asserting that the two stories “jangle” or are discordant together, expecting the two stories to provide the kind of cohesion and resolution characteristic of a novel. He fails to recognize that the book is made up of two separate short stories, which, although collected together in book form, are a part of a larger whole – the Glass family cycle. To be fair, “Franny” and “Zooey” do have some obvious

differences. “Franny” is concisely written in the mode of Salinger’s earlier, more conventional short stories, while “Zooney” is a longer, more experimental and philosophical work. However, besides length and stylistic differences, when reading the stories with the expectations of a story cycle, the stories work well together. The two works share a narrator – Buddy Glass – who takes careful note of the character’s small gestures, like the food the characters do not consume and the details of cigarettes smoked.⁵ The stories mirror each other, both beginning with characters rereading old letters – “Franny” opens with Lane rereading a letter from Franny, while “Zooney” begins with Zooney rereading an old letter from Buddy. The plots of the two stories coalesce nicely; “Franny” tells of Franny’s nervous breakdown, while “Zooney” tells of Zooney’s attempt to restore Franny to health. In addition to working well together, both “Franny” and “Zooney” are carefully linked with the other Glass stories: Franny mentions her brothers in “Franny” (28), while in “Zooney” the Glass family apartment receives its most detailed description, and provides insight into the various family members’ reactions to Seymour’s suicide. Rather than “jangling” together, these stories fit together well, successfully fulfilling their triple role, working as individual stories, as companion pieces and segments of a larger cycle.

In a 1965 essay Lyle Glazier repeats Updike’s mistake, reading the story “Seymour – An Introduction” as a novel rather than a short story within a cycle. Glazier writes that the story, “States a theme already stated less directly (and therefore better for the purposes of art) in *Franny and Zooney*, ‘Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,’ and ‘A Perfect Day for a Bananafish’” (250). Glazier correctly recognizes the links between

⁵ Although Buddy never explicitly claims to have written “Franny,” as he does the other Glass stories, considering the intricate linkage of “Franny” and “Zooney” and Buddy’s narration of the story “Zooney,” it seems fair to conclude that Buddy is also the author and narrator of “Franny.”

“Seymour” and the other Glass stories, noting their shared themes, but views these links as a flaw, rather than a feature of the works’ genre. One of the unique features of the story cycle is its ability to go over the same events again and again, gradually revealing nuances or different angles of a problem, rather than moving forward in the linear fashion of a novel. “Seymour” is not carelessly repetitive, but is an example of the type of circling back that is characteristic of the story cycle. For example, although readers learn of the close relationship between Buddy and Seymour in a number of stories, “Seymour” reveals a new layer of complexity to the relationship. In the story Buddy tells readers that he viewed Seymour as a mentor, calling him his “cher maître” or dear master (171), while at the same time he admits to harboring feelings of jealousy toward his brother. He says, “I find it dreadful – in fact, sinister – even to have to wonder whether I may occasionally be nosing him out in popularity on the page” (168). Buddy’s admission that he wonders about his “popularity on the page” compared to Seymour’s is the first time that Buddy discloses any such feelings, illustrating the mixed feelings of love, admiration and jealousy he feels for his brother.

The negative reception of the Glass stories as they were published would impact public perception of the stories for years to come. Although early in his career Salinger’s work had been the subject of a plethora of scholarly articles– a phenomenon critic George Steiner termed “The Salinger Industry” – there is relatively little scholarship on the later Glass stories. Janet Malcolm describes critics’ reaction to the final story of the series, “Hapworth,” saying it was met with “unhappy, even embarrassed silence” (1). The fact that the later Glass stories received far less scholarly attention than the early ones in turn resulted in a dearth of scholarship examining the Glass series as a whole. This is

particularly damaging to a story cycle – a work made up of individual components that enrich one another when read together. Ingram describes the process of interpreting cycles, saying that to understand a story cycle one must recognize, “Not only that the stories have some kind of loose unity, but the precise nature of that unity” (147).

Understanding a story cycle is dependent upon understanding the specific ways that the stories work together and considering why an author may have chosen the fragmented story cycle form. Failing to analyze the work in its entirety ensures that the intricate connections between stories would be overlooked. Unfortunately, the few scholars who have attempted to examine the Glass series in its entirety have made the same mistakes as previous scholars. Ihab Hassan describes the later Glass stories as “novelettes” (5), while Warren French complains that the series as a whole is comprised of “fragments” out of which it is impossible to assemble a “coherent history” (94). Neither critic picks up on the series’ episodic structure or attempts to understand why Salinger chose the fragmentary form. Instead, they look for the unity more characteristic of a novel – either in the individual stories or in the series as a whole.

What is a Story Cycle?

One of the main reasons for the Glass series’ critical misinterpretation is the obscurity of the story cycle genre. Although criticism of this genre is relatively young, it has not received the kind of recognition one might otherwise expect, in part because of critics’ failure to reach a consensus on a name and how to define the genre. In addition to the name “short story cycle” these works have also been termed novels-in-stories, short story sequences, short story composites, short story compounds, composite novels and

linked stories.⁶ Although scholars are well-intentioned in trying to accurately name and define the genre, I believe the name of a genre is relatively unimportant. After all, the term “novel” only conveys that the form was once deemed a “novelty.” That virtually every short story cycle critic weighs in on the genre’s name means that much of the literature on the subject circles back around the same information, hampering steady strides forward. It also deters new research on the subject, as students must track down all of the various names for the genre to conduct thorough research. Finally, as a little known and often misunderstood genre, scholars’ failure to reach a consensus on a name also prevents the form from becoming recognizable to readers and critics, making it likely that future story cycles will be misunderstood in the same way as their predecessors.⁷

Although most scholars studying the genre agree that the story cycle is distinct from either the novel or the short story, they are not always in agreement about the nature of these differences. Some emphasize the importance of juxtaposition among stories, while others emphasize the genre’s ability to convey numerous perspectives; still others emphasize the reader’s experience. Although all of these are important aspects of the story cycle, none of these issues alone adequately defines the genre. Instead, I will propose defining the story cycle as a set of stories that are both independent and interdependent, written by a single author, a definition that emphasizes the structure of the work and the relationships between the stories.

⁶ For use of these terms, see respectively, Kelley, Kennedy, Lundén, Luscher and Dunn and Morris. The term “linked stories” is most commonly used by publishers on book covers to designate the form to potential readers.

⁷ For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen the term “short story cycle,” as it is the term that has gained the greatest consensus among scholars.

The difference between a novel and a short story cycle is similar to the difference between a week-long vacation and a series of weekends away to a single place. A week-long stay allows time for a traveler to become comfortable and for the new place to begin feeling familiar, while the weekends away place a person briefly in an unfamiliar place, and although she returns multiple times, the breaks in between ensure that she never becomes fully accustomed to the new place. The same is true of the novel and the short story cycle. The extended length of a novel allows the reader to become absorbed in a new place, getting to know the people and places. In contrast, the short story cycle drops the reader into a different time and place with each new story, requiring her to repeatedly become reoriented. Whereas the novel develops characters progressively, showing them changing over time, the story cycle reveals characters intermittently, through glimpses in separate stories. Consequently, the novel lends itself to allowing readers to get to know a small number of characters in-depth, while the story cycle provides a greater breadth of knowledge about a larger number of characters. In the same way that a week-long vacation allows the traveler to settle into a new routine away from home, the novel tends to provide a “slice of reality,” approximating everyday experience by virtue of its very length (May 24). On the contrary, short stories tend to focus on the extraordinary; moments that challenge everyday reality, illustrating moments of crisis or situations that force characters to make decisions or come to new realizations. Therefore, being comprised of individual short stories, the story cycle tends to jump from extraordinary episode to extraordinary episode – like the weekend away, they remain distinctly out of the ordinary – leaving no opportunity to settle in. The fragmented structure of the cycle tends to make the conclusions reached in a story cycle feel more tenuous; there is an

inherent openness to the form, a feeling that one does not fully know the full weight or consequence of the events described in the text. On the contrary, the single, unified experience of a novel tends to create the feeling of conclusiveness, that a solid understanding of the people, the place and what happened has been reached.

There are things that each genre does well. The unified experience of the novel allows for a single story to be told in-depth, for characters to be developed in detail, and in the case of novels told from the first-person, the reader comes away feeling as if she has been taken into the narrator's confidence. Conversely, the short story cycle takes the short story's tendency to reveal a single character at a single moment, and multiplies the experience, providing a series of moments, encouraging juxtaposition and forcing the reader to consider how each new incident sheds new light on the previous ones. The story cycle lends itself to telling about groups of people, communities or families, allowing access into the thoughts and perspectives of a number of characters rather than just one or two as is the case with the novel.

Although the story cycle is adept at handling specific types of stories, what qualities in particular make it a story cycle? The scholar who provides the most inclusive definition is Peter Hadju, who writes, "The cycle is a set of autonomous short stories selected by a reader and connected in some aspects of their content" (53). Hadju's definition includes any two stories written by any author in which a single reader finds a connecting element. Hadju's definition is problematic in that it makes literary criticism of the cycle seemingly impossible, since two readers would never be working with the same set of texts. Such an open definition is especially dangerous for the story cycle, a genre that already lacks critical acceptance and public recognition. Hadju justifies the

inclusiveness of his definition arguing, “Anything we read necessarily modifies the experience of every text we previously read” (51). Although he makes a valid point, as everything we read does impact our impression of the things we subsequently read, Hadju’s definition fails to articulate the specific, common elements of the story cycle genre. If the story cycle is analogous to a series of short trips to a single place, Hadju’s definition would conceive of the cycle as a series of brief vacations anywhere in the world. Hadju emphasizes the individual traveler’s experience, and the subjective parallels the traveler draws, rather than the type of fragmented, breadth of knowledge gained from glimpsing the same people and a single place over time. That Hadju does not require the stories within a cycle to be written by a single author is especially problematic in that unlike a vacation, in which the traveler has a measure of control of her overall experience or the reader who chooses two texts at random, the cycle is a form that is specifically designed by an author who structures the work with a set of overlapping qualities intended to produce a specific impact. The story cycle author deliberately creates certain comparisons and chooses the fragmented cycle form to create a specific effect, while the individual reader selecting any two texts at random will come up with a subjective set of comparisons based on his or her own tastes and experiences. However, Hadju’s gesture toward an inclusive definition of the genre is not entirely flawed. Although I disagree with his assertion that a cycle can be comprised of texts written by more than one author, I agree with his resistance to requiring the stories be compiled in book form. Other than making the stories easier to interpret, I see no reason why it should be a formal requirement of inclusion in the genre – if the text contains the type of fragmented

narrative structure characteristic of the cycle, why should formal compilation be a requisite for the genre?

A scholar who does require the cycle to be compiled is Gerald Kennedy, who defines the short story cycle as, “All collections of three or more stories written and arranged by a single author” (ix). Kennedy’s requirement that the stories must be arranged by a single author stresses the relationship between stories placed immediately beside one another in a volume; this emphasis is made more apparent considering his preferred name for the cycle genre, the “short story sequence,” which again calls attention to the sequencing of the stories rather than the dynamic connections established throughout the whole. If we think of the cycle as a series of short vacations to the same place, although the trips that chronologically follow one another will be the easiest to compare, each trip will add to a person’s overall impression of the place. Similarly, although the juxtaposition between individual stories in a cycle is important, the ways the stories in a cycle enrich each other extend beyond the stories positioned immediately beside one another. However, Kennedy’s definition does make an important distinction, requiring that the stories within a cycle must be written by a single author, emphasizing the author’s deliberate design. The flaw in his definition is his omission of the stories’ complex relationship. In doing so, Kennedy’s definition is not specific enough, as his definition can include virtually any short story collection, even those in which the author does not claim to have linked the stories.

One theorist who does tackle the dynamic relationship between stories in a cycle is Karen Cox, whose essay examines the use of the story cycle to portray entire communities. Cox proposes the following definition for the genre, “A story cycle must

contain text-pieces discreet and whole as singular works of fiction but together creating a fictional universe larger than any single narrative, centered in a multiplicity of characters and perspectives that belie a singular textual vision” (153-54). Cox defines the story cycle as comprised of “discrete and whole” text-pieces, which come together to create a larger “fictional universe.” Unlike Kennedy, Cox does not require the stories be arranged by the author; instead she emphasizes the relationship between the stories. Cox also includes the restriction that the work must “belie a singular textual vision,” suggesting the need for a single author’s overall vision or design. However, Cox adds the restriction that the cycle must be “Centered in a multiplicity of characters and perspectives.” In doing so, her definition only includes one type of short story cycle – those linked by setting or community. Although this is undoubtedly the most common type of story cycle, including cycles such as Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and John Steinbeck’s *The Pastures of Heaven*, in which each story focuses upon a different character within a single community, there are other types of story cycles. Some cycles depict a series of episodes primarily centered upon a single protagonist, like Melissa Bank’s *The Girl’s Guide to Hunting and Fishing* and Julie Hecht’s *Do The Windows Open?* There are also cycles connected by theme, such as James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, which is linked by the theme of paralysis, Dublin as the setting, and a complex organization of the stories mirroring Homer’s *Odyssey* (Ingram 34). There are a number of ways a story cycle can be linked, so although illustrating multiple perspectives in a single community or family is the most common organizing principle used in short story cycles, it is not the only one, so it should not be considered a requisite for the genre.

Interestingly, one of the best definitions of the genre is also the oldest, written by Forrest Ingram, whose work is cited by virtually every other scholar writing on the subject. Ingram defines the story cycle as, “A set of stories linked to one another in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit” (15). Ingram’s definition allows room for interpretation as to what a “set of stories” might be, while acknowledging the tension between independence and interdependence of the stories. Unfortunately, he adds to his definition the following footnote, “Stories could be in prose or verse, by one author or more, collected or uncollected. They could be tales, anecdotes, fables, Märchen, epic episodes, gestes, or formal short stories. They could even be novels” (15). Ingram’s amendment to his initial definition broadens it to the point of losing effectiveness; it could include series of novels, or anthologies, and like Hadju, it could include stories written by more than one author. In order to limit the types of cycles he will tackle in his book, Ingram provides a second definition, “A book of short stories so linked to each other by their author so that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (19). Ingram’s second definition is more restrictive, emphasizing the reader’s experience rather than the qualities inherent in the text and requiring the stories to be collected and published within a book.

Drawing upon all of these observations, I sought to create a definition that would be both broad and inclusive, but also restrictive enough to illuminate the key similarities and characteristics of this unique genre. To that end I offer the following definition: a short story cycle is a set of stories that are both independent and interdependent, written

by a single author. I draw upon Ingram's initial definition, which emphasizes the balance between the needs of the individual stories and those of the larger unit, Kennedy's and Cox's restrictiveness, requiring a single author, and Hadju's open approach, looking at the qualities of the text rather than a dogmatic requirement that a cycle be collected in a single book. I leave the question of what a "set" of stories includes intentionally ambiguous. It could mean stories collected in a single book, or an uncollected set of stories linked in some meaningful way (such as setting, protagonist or theme). Whereas Ingram uses the term "stories" in his initial definition and goes on to open it up to possibly mean novels, fables and anecdotes, I use the term more restrictively – meaning a work of short fiction. The questions of how "short" a short story can be, or where the line is between the short story and the novella are beyond the scope of this paper. I emphasize that a story cycle must be comprised of short stories to delimit the genre, to exclude novel series like *Harry Potter*, or essay collections like David Sedaris' *Naked*. These types of works share some features of the story cycle, such as the recurrence of characters and setting, but they are not comprised of short stories and do not contain the cycle's fragmentary structure.

The Glass Cycle

If Salinger conceived of the Glass series as a cycle, why did he leave the stories uncollected? Did he give up publishing before he finished the series? Was he deliberately avoiding the restriction of any formal genre? Did his fervent need for privacy finally outweigh his desire to make his work understood? It is impossible to know why Salinger declined to compile the stories, but the fact remains that despite being uncollected, the Glass series contains the structure of a short story cycle along with a number of the

genre's other characteristics. The stories are both independent and interdependent, as they may be read individually but enrich each other when read together; the stories are set within a single narrative world, sharing characters, setting, themes, a narrator and references to past events. Characters are developed through a series of intermittent glimpses rather than the single progressive motion of a novel. The series uses the cycle's characteristic fragmentary structure, jumping from episode to episode, forcing the reader to become reoriented with each story. Comparing the Glass stories to *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Nine Stories* makes the series' genre all the more apparent, illustrating the different techniques Salinger used to achieve each effect. With the Glass series Salinger departed from the novel and single short story forms to create a different kind of work; and although he never placed the series into any definite genre, the series contains all of the story cycle genre's major characteristics and is best read as a story cycle.

Had Salinger compiled the Glass stories into a single book, the series would be far easier to interpret and its classification as a story cycle would not be debated. It would have answered lingering questions, like which works did Salinger consider part of the Glass series? Which events in the series did he consider most important? Would he have included early stories like "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" and "Down at the Dinghy," which focus on minor characters and are less obviously related to the events of the other stories? Would he include works like "Teddy" and *The Catcher in the Rye*, which do not feature any members of the Glass family but which Buddy claims to have authored ("Seymour" 111, 176)? What about the unpublished Glass stories referenced in the introduction to "Hapworth" and on the dust jacket for *Raise High the Roof Beam*,

*Carpenters and Seymour – An Introduction?*⁸ Readers would also know which stories or events Salinger viewed as most important, as placing certain stories at the beginning and end would give them greater weight. It would give greater indication on how we should interpret Buddy's position as narrator – if Salinger ordered the stories chronologically readers would not learn that Buddy authored the entire series until story seven, "Seymour – An Introduction," but if he put this story first it would foreground Buddy's dual role as character and narrator. Lacking formal arrangement, all of the stories are equally weighted and it is possible to construct more than one idea of the series' main themes based on how the reader orders the stories. Had the series been compiled, all of these questions would have been resolved, the work would be easier to interpret and the Glass series would read more like a conventional story cycle. Even the later stories longer length would not have been a problem, as a number of well-respected story cycles feature stories that are not uniform in length.⁹ Lacking compilation, the series is an unconventional cycle, whose genre is made apparent through a close examination of the text.

The Glass series contains a number of features unique to the story cycle; most importantly, it contains the key characteristic identified in the last section, that the stories are both independent and interdependent. In the Glass series each story may be read individually (all were initially published separately in magazines), but they enrich each

⁸ In the introduction to "Hapworth" Buddy claims to have written but decided not to publish a "long short story" about a "very consequential party" that he, his parents and Seymour attended in 1926 (p. 1). Similarly, on the dust jacket for *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour – An Introduction* Salinger claims to have collected the two stories together "in something of a hurry" in order to avoid "unduly or undesirably close contact with new material in the series" hinting that more stories were forthcoming ("Salinger's Dust Jackets").

⁹ Ernest Hemingway's cycle *In Our Time* features the two-part story "The Big Two-Hearted River" which is significantly longer than any of the cycle's other stories. Similarly, William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* contains the story "The Bear," which is more than twice the length of any other story in the cycle.

other when read together. For example, in the story “Bananafish,” Seymour’s wife, Muriel, telephones her mother while vacationing in Florida with Seymour. Muriel and her mother, Mrs. Fedder, engage in a long conversation, speculating on Seymour’s mental stability. Mrs. Fedder mentions that her husband spoke to a psychoanalyst about Seymour’s past suicide attempts and that the doctor warned, “Seymour may completely lose control of himself” (6). Mrs. Fedder cautions that Seymour’s condition is serious, suggesting that Muriel return home. The story “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” set several years before “Bananafish,” provides added perspective on this passage, as Seymour writes in his diary, “Her mother thinks I’m a schizoid personality. Apparently she’s spoken to her psychoanalyst about me, and he agrees with her” (70). When read along with the passage in “Bananafish,” Seymour’s statement reveals that the Fedders consulted psychoanalysts about Seymour a number of times and that the family harbored concerns about Muriel’s involvement with him even before the two were married. This may explain Muriel’s laissez-faire attitude toward her mother’s warning that Seymour may “completely lose control” since the warning was likely repeated for a number of years. The passage also reveals that Seymour was aware of his in-laws’ opinion of him, illustrating tension within the family of which readers were not previously aware.

Reading the two stories together also brings into focus another theme that runs throughout the series, a general distrust of psychiatry. The psychoanalysts discussed in “Bananafish” and “Raise High” treat Seymour’s mental condition as small talk; the doctor the Fedders consult makes his diagnosis without even meeting Seymour, while the doctor Muriel consults discusses Seymour over drinks in a loud hotel bar. Muriel reports to her mother that the doctor was unable to give her advice because, “We could hardly

talk, it was so noisy in there” (8). In both cases psychoanalysts take approaches that cannot possibly reveal the true nature of Seymour’s problems. The theme again recurs in the story “Seymour” when Buddy calls the entire psychiatry profession a “peerage of tin ears.” He continues, “With such wretched hearing equipment, the best, I think, that can be detected... are a few stray, thin overtones...coming from a troubled childhood or a disordered libido” (104). According to Buddy, psychiatrists do not understand their patients’ problems because they do not truly listen. The repeated discussions of the failures of psychiatry suggest that Salinger did not intend for readers to dismiss the Glasses’ problems in the way of an analyst, blaming childhood or the libido, but to look for something deeper; a greater conflict between the family’s ideals and the expectations of society. Although these stories may be read individually, by reading them together the repeated themes and the complexity of the family dynamic becomes clearer, precisely the type of independence and interdependence that is characteristic of the story cycle.

In addition to being interdependent, the stories are told from a variety of points of view, another key characteristic of the cycle form. As is common in the genre, the Glass stories feature what Karen Cox terms a “roving narrative voice” (158) in which different stories are told from different characters’ perspectives. The characters Seymour, Buddy, Franny, Zooey and Boo Boo each have stories told from their perspective. A character that appears as the protagonist of one story may reappear as a minor character in another story; Franny does this, appearing in the stories “Raise High,” “Seymour” and “Zooey,” but taking center stage in the story “Franny.” This technique is used in a number of other story cycles, including the seminal story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio* in which Sherwood Anderson introduces Kate Swift as a minor character in “The Strength of God,” but she

becomes the focus of the following story, “The Teacher.”¹⁰ In *Winesburg* as in the Glass series the narrative focus shifts from character to character, providing a panoramic view¹¹ of a community – or in this case, a family – rather than centering upon the struggles of just one character.

Centering the stories in a variety of characters’ perspectives, Salinger develops his characters using another technique distinctive to the cycle, through intermittent glimpses, which is distinct from the type of character development found in other forms. A short story like Salinger’s “Teddy,” provides a focused look at a single character – in this case, the story’s protagonist, Teddy. Due to the compressed length of the form, there is little space for Teddy to grow as a character. Rather, he is shown at a specific time and place – while on vacation with his family, just before he is involved in a horrific accident. In contrast, a novel such as *The Catcher in the Rye* shows the story’s protagonist, Holden Caulfield, growing and changing over time. Rather than witnessing a character in a single moment of crisis in the mode of a short story, in *Catcher* Holden is developed at length, as the reader stays with him over the course of several days. The length of the novel along with Holden’s first person narration gives the reader access to Holden’s thoughts, his actions and his observation of others’ reaction to him, overall a much greater depth of knowledge than a short story could possibly provide.

In contrast to either the novel’s progressive character development or the short story’s focused look at a character in a particular moment, in the Glass series Salinger develops his characters through a series of intermittent glimpses. For example, readers

¹⁰ Evidence of Salinger’s familiarity with the story cycle form can be found in his admiration for author Sherwood Anderson (Hamilton 53). Salinger also mentions Anderson as one of Buddy’s favorite authors in the story “Seymour” (138).

¹¹ I borrow this phrase from Mann, 10.

first meet the eldest Glass sister, Boo Boo, in the story “Down at the Dinghy.” In the story Boo Boo is a young housewife whose four-year-old son, Lionel, has run away from home. Boo Boo’s empathetic nature is shown when she discusses Lionel’s behavior with two other women; whereas Boo Boo states that she wants to understand why Lionel is unhappy, the other women laugh, dismissing Lionel’s emotional pain because of his age (79). When Boo Boo finds Lionel, she is kind, empathetic and patient, speaking to him with respect rather than speaking down to him because he is a child. In addition to being compassionate, the story also shows Boo Boo to be a dreamy and romantic figure, whistling and at times staring off at the horizon, seemingly preoccupied with her thoughts (82). The next glimpse of Boo Boo occurs in the story, “Raise High,” in which she is a twenty-two-year-old Navy Wave serving in World War II. She writes to Buddy, asking him to attend Seymour’s wedding, saying, “*Please* get there, Buddy. [Seymour] weighs about as much as a cat and he has that ecstatic look on his face that you can’t talk to” (9). Boo Boo senses that Seymour may be in distress, noting that on top of his diminished weight, he seems “ecstatic” or overwhelmed with emotion. Her presentation in this story builds upon our brief impression of her in the story “Dinghy,” which had already established her as an unusually sensitive and compassionate character; in “Dinghy” as in “Raise High” Boo Boo is the first to notice a family member is in distress and go about trying to help. Boo Boo also appears briefly in the story “Seymour,” in which Buddy describes her doing a soft-shoe routine while holding an infant in her arms (146), a detail that adds to the reader’s impression of her as romantic and spontaneous, an aspect of her personality glimpsed in her whistling in “Dinghy.” As is characteristic of a story cycle, Boo Boo appears in the series through a succession of intermittent glimpses. Although

readers see Boo Boo change over time, the effect is different than that of the novel; readers receive a breadth of information about her – with glimpses of her life from when she was roughly age four until she was forty – but the depth of what we know about Boo Boo is limited. Also distinct from a novel, her development as a character is fragmented – the details are never overtly connected. Rather, Salinger leaves it to the reader to collect the scattered facts about her to construct an idea of who she is and what her life has been like.

Besides containing the fragmented character development typical of the cycle, the Glass series also features the genre's episodic structure. This is distinct from a novel, which tends to tell a single story in-depth. For example, *Catcher* tells the story of Holden's nervous breakdown and how he came to end up in an institution. In the book's introduction Holden says, "I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy" (3). Holden tells readers from the first page that this will be the story of the "madman stuff" that happened prior to his nervous breakdown, creating a clear map for the reader of where the story will go. Like the person on a week-long vacation, the reader can relax and become absorbed in the story that follows. Conversely, as a story cycle the Glass series is told in episodes, rather than the single, unified narrative of a novel. The series jumps from Seymour's suicide in 1948, to his sister, Franny's, nervous breakdown in 1955, to Buddy's experience at Seymour's wedding in 1942 ("Raise High"), to Seymour's experience at camp in 1924 ("Hapworth"). The episodes are not told chronologically, but jump to key moments in the lives of the various characters. Unlike *Catcher's* clear narrative path, the Glass series is unpredictable; the reader is never

certain when or where the next story will take place. The reader must repeatedly reorient, figuring out how each story relates to the previous ones and watch for the recurrence of characters, themes, situations or images.

The fragmentary narrative that results from the story cycle's episodic structure creates an openness not often found in other genres. The short story – the story cycle's basic unit – tends to be an open form, ending abruptly and leaving details unresolved. This is demonstrated in *Nine Stories*' "Teddy," which ends with a scream, leaving readers unsure whether Teddy has fallen into an empty swimming pool. Similarly, "Uncle Wiggly" ends with Eloise weeping, trapped in a loveless marriage, still mourning the loss of her first love, with no apparent resolution in sight. On the contrary, as a novel *Catcher* provides a strong feeling of resolution – in the final chapter Holden states that he will soon be released from the hospital and plans to return to school (276), which makes it clear that Holden has recovered from his breakdown, thus resolving the story's major conflict. Unlike a novel, the story cycle takes the short story's lack of conclusiveness and amplifies it, jumping from unresolved story to unresolved story. For example, the story "Zooney" ends with Franny poised to regain her health, but the way the story ends, there is no definite answer to whether she leaves her boyfriend, whether she becomes an actress as she planned, or if she makes a full recovery from her breakdown. Similarly, the story "Bananafish," ends with Seymour shooting himself while Muriel sleeps beside him, but the reader never learns what happens to Muriel, or the long-term impact of this traumatic event. The fact that the larger narrative continues after each individual story ends means that any feeling of conclusion reached in each story is tenuous, as it may be challenged by the next story. The continuation of the narrative also tends to call attention to the

details left out. Considering the abrupt and violent end to “Bananafish” the question of what happens to Muriel may escape the reader, but because Muriel appears in the subsequent stories “Raise High” and “Zooney,” the issue of her fate – and how little we know about it – becomes more apparent. It is precisely this quality of openness that critics unfamiliar with the form take issue with. As previously mentioned, Warren French said the Glass series was “full of gaping holes” citing a number of plot points that are left unresolved (94). Although it is true that the plot contains “holes,” these holes are not flaws, but a unique feature of the story cycle genre, not requiring the kind of forced resolution found in other genres.

Why A Story Cycle?

Why would Salinger choose such an unconventional form to tell the Glass family’s story? Perhaps not surprisingly, the question of what the series’ form reveals about its meaning has been all but ignored by critics. The only scholar to attempt to tackle the question, Eberhard Alsen, writes-off Salinger’s choice as anomalous and dismisses the fragmentation of the narrative as a flaw (236). On the contrary, choosing the cycle form to tell the story of a family, Salinger made an astute choice. The series’ form mirrors its subject: in the same way a story cycle is a whole comprised out of many, a family is a single entity comprised of individuals. Rather than the single, linear narrative of a novel, Salinger chose a form that would allow him to examine the nature of family, which is comprised of separate relationships, a shared, yet sometimes contradictory set of memories and individual moments that reflect who the family is and how its members feel about one another. A story cycle also lacks the expectations of resolution and finality found in other genres, allowing questions to be raised without

requiring that they be fully answered, or that the narrative ever offer a single, definitive notion of what happened and why. In writing the Glass family's story as a cycle, Salinger chose a form that would allow him to investigate the very nature of family, showing it to be an entity both fragmentary and unified, its members independent and interdependent, much like the story cycle form itself.

In his book *Salinger's Glass Stories as a Composite Novel* Eberhard Alsen proposes the idea of reading the Glass series as a short story cycle. Although the book provides new insight into the series, Alsen views Salinger's use of the genre as anomalous. Alsen writes, "The characters in [most story cycles] are defeated by the forces of disorder, and this is reflected in the deliberate lack of unity of the short story cycles." He continues, "The disjointedness of Salinger's composite novel therefore seems to be at odds with the wholeness of its vision of life" (236).¹² Alsen accepts without question the notion that story cycle form is best-suited for handling the subjects of estrangement and isolation, and argues that Salinger's use of the form is "at odds" with the series' meaning, which he views as a life-affirming, spiritual and encouraging engagement with one's community.¹³ Although there are a number of cycles that deal with isolation, the cycle genre is capable of handling other themes. In the Glass series Salinger uses the cycle form to show both the closeness among the characters as well as the distance between them.

¹² Alsen uses the terms "short story cycle" and "composite novel" interchangeably in his book.

¹³ The notion that the cycle form is best used for reflecting isolation has been made by a number of scholars, including Susan Mann, who writes, "[The cycle form] is well suited to handle certain subjects, including the sense of isolation...or indeterminacy that many twentieth-century characters experience" (11).

The stories provide a number of examples of the family's closeness. In the story "Zooney," Les, Bessie and Zooney each offers to help Franny recover from her nervous collapse in his or her own humble way. Bessie serves Franny chicken broth, calls her older children for advice and considers calling a psychoanalyst (106). Les, the Glass family patriarch, is the most perplexed, offering only a tangerine as consolation (160). Zooney is the one who ultimately restores her, recognizing Franny's problems to be spiritual, rather than psychological or physical. He speaks to her several times, finally helping her to recognize that withdrawing from the world is a form of cowardice. Throughout the series there are a number of other examples of the family acting out of love. Franny reads Buddy's translation of Seymour's poems, checking them for accuracy ("Seymour" 130). Boo Boo urges Buddy to attend Seymour's wedding ("Raise High" 8). Seymour flies into a rage when a camp counselor yells at Buddy ("Hapworth" 10). In the Glass series the only people the characters can really count on are each other. The notion of family as a redeeming entity is a theme that runs throughout Salinger's work. It also appears in *Catcher* as Holden's little sister, Phoebe, is the only character who is able to persuade him to come home (268). Salinger shows family to be a nurturing unit that can help and understand problems where outsiders cannot. In this way, the cycle form mirrors the theme of the series – in the same way that a cycle's stories are independent and interdependent, so are the members of a family. Each is a distinct individual, but they rely upon one another to get through their trying times.

Although family is shown to be a nurturing entity in the series, Salinger also makes clear that the relationships in these stories are not simple. The relationship between Bessie and Zooney is prickly, as Zooney snaps at his mother and calls her stupid

("Zooney" 101). Yet, the closeness between the two is undeniable as they engage in a lengthy conversation while Zooney soaks in the bathtub, demonstrating their intimacy. Buddy's relationship with these two characters is also described, as Bessie views him as the member of the family most well-versed in psychological and spiritual disturbance, saying, "[He's] the one person who is supposed to *know* about all this funny business" ("Zooney" 84). Yet when Bessie calls for advice about Franny's breakdown, Buddy does not respond to the messages Bessie leaves at his office. Consequently, he is not there when the family summons him for help. Buddy and Zooney's relationship is also far from simple, as Zooney blames older brothers Buddy and Seymour for making him and Franny into "freaks" by taking charge of their education and training them to be so critical of non-spiritual people that both find it difficult to get along with people outside of the family ("Zooney" 103). Buddy is aware of Zooney's feelings, writing him a letter saying, "As one limping man to another, old Zooney, let's be courteous and kind to each other," showing that he wants to make amends ("Zooney" 69). Buddy also weighs in on Zooney's treatment of their mother, saying, "Be kinder to Bessie, Zooney. I don't think I mean because she's our mother, but because she's weary" ("Zooney" 57). Buddy instructs Zooney to be kinder, but he makes a distinction, noting that he says so not out of sentimentality or obligation (because she is their mother), but out of compassion, because she is weary. In showing these separate relationships in detail, Salinger shows family to be made up of separate relationships, all of which are complicated. Although these three characters obviously love one another, at times they fail each other: Buddy is absent when Bessie calls him and Zooney is unkind to his mother. In this way, family is not any one single thing, but a variety of things. Family can be a redeeming and nurturing entity, but at

times, the family also fails one another. In the cycle form, these two facts can coexist without having to be reconciled.

By examining a family through the story cycle, Salinger illustrates the complexity and fragmentation of family. Buddy introduces the story “Zooney” as, “A compound, or multiple, love story, pure and complicated” (49). As a series about a family, the entire Glass series can be read as a love story. Told in the episodic cycle form, their story is a “compound,” comprised of multiple segments, perspectives, relationships and actions that reflect how they feel about one another. At the same time, Buddy qualifies his statement, saying that this love story is “pure and complicated.” The feelings these characters have for one another are not always simple, but are intense, contradictory, and fluid. The family is no single thing – in the way that a novel or a lone short story tells a single story, a family cannot be summed up in such a straightforward manner. The story cycle is the perfect form for Salinger to use to tell the Glass family’s story, as by its very structure it mirrors its subject: a family is independent and interdependent in the same way that the stories in a cycle are.

In Conclusion

Before he began the Glass series, J.D. Salinger was known for two things: *The Catcher in the Rye* and his concise, carefully crafted, short stories, which appeared in *The New Yorker*. When he shifted his focus exclusively to the Glass family and his style gradually changed, critics responded with hostility. Janet Malcolm describes their response, writing, “I don't know of any other case where literary characters have aroused such animosity, and where a writer of fiction has been so severely censured” (2). The stories were met with contempt, in large part because the stories’ genre was not

recognized. If the critics read the separate stories as novels, the stories seemed static; if they read them as discrete short stories, they overlooked the intricate connections between the stories. Nearly all critics overlooked a third option, reading the series as a story cycle.

Although Salinger declined to place the series within the confines of any formal genre, reading the series as a story cycle makes the most sense. It explains the series' fragmentary, episodic structure, the breadth of information he gives about a number of characters and his telling of different stories from different character's perspectives. Reading the series as a cycle, its form mirrors its content, as a set of stories independent yet interdependent in the same way that a family is.

In the 1980s during legal proceedings related to a lawsuit, Salinger admitted in court that he continued writing after his retirement from the public eye (Hamilton 202). It is speculated that much of his unpublished writing may be Glass stories. The beauty of the cycle form is that its openness allows it to accommodate additional episodes. Whether Salinger wrote one more Glass story or a hundred, they could be read as a part of the Glass cycle, as long as he maintained the independence and interconnectedness of the stories.

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