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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my professor, Tanya Perkins for the unwavering support and incredible editorial comments during the writing process of this essay. None of this would be possible without her.

‘Everything’s Waiting for You’: The Importance of the Short Story Cycle

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Abstract

This essay includes an analysis of my creative process original short story collection *Go Your Own Way*. A short story cycle is a collection of short stories that often contain the same characters or characters whose storylines overlap or connect in another way but create a larger, more powerful storyline when combined. The analysis explains my main male characters’ personalities, motivations in their romantic relationships, and their “gray area”, or moral ambiguity, surrounding their decisions. I reveal my reaction to my peer review workshop members’ surprising unmet expectations of the characters’ personalities and decisions. Then, I describe the similarities between fan expectations of *Avengers: Endgame*’s conclusions and my peer review workshop response. The essay concludes with a personal take on the “gray area” and the short story cycle importance to literature.

Keywords: Short story cycle, Avengers: Endgame, Gray area, Moral Ambiguity, Writing process, Creative process, Peer Review, Workshop, Creative Writing

For many readers, it is vital to understand all sides of a story. The short story cycle is a great approach the overall plot and character development. Susan Garland Mann states that stories in the short story cycle can be read separately as individual narratives, but reading all the

stories together creates an arc that cannot be accomplished with a single story¹ (Mann 1988). Short story cycles are usually done in multiple stories interweaving within each other. The stories are sometimes connected by using the same family, as seen in *Monkeys* by Susan Minot or a family linked by affairs and tragedy as shown in *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich. Each story in the cycle enhances the others, creating a predominant arc showing the greater storyline. Without every story included in the short story cycle, the plot and characters would lack vital details, making the story incomplete. In this essay, I will explain my creative process for my original short story cycle, *Go Your Own Way*, how the “gray area”, or moral ambiguity, drives realism and relevance in a fictional story, and how the storyline expected by fans usually is not the plot the story should take.

In my short story cycle, *Go Your Own Way*, instead of several short stories, the characters’ stories are told through three separate narratives, focusing on the two main male character. Although they live in the same town, they really connect through a lost wedding ring, which brings all of the characters together to improve themselves and their relationships. Harvard English professor Jocelyn Chadwick states, “great characters speak, even shout relevance and realism” (Chadwick, 2012). *Go Your Own Way* shows the main male characters’ flaws and their improvement on behalf of their girlfriends is a realistic and relevant occurrence in many, if not all, relationships. During the peer workshop session in my Advance Writing Fiction class, not all of my peers understood the way of the story and the male characters’ traits and personalities, immediately marking them off as “awful” before uncovering their true nature and motivations. The short story cycle expands the storyline with believable, developed characters. This way, readers may understand each characters’ motivations by reading other characters’ individual narratives. Readers may not always recognize and understand storylines but seeing the

overall plot in the short story cycle allows them to understand the characters' motivations and arcs.

Telling the story of *Go Your Own Way* primarily in David and Henry's perspectives, this allows their decisions and motivations to be thoroughly explained. Oftentimes, their motives are thought to be selfish, but they believe their choices will benefit everyone, even if they were not agreed upon prior. It is important for readers to remember that Henry and David are not bad people — they believe their decisions will benefit everyone, especially their loved ones. Therefore, clouding their judgment of their loved ones' desires. This is where some readers do not see the weakness in their behavior. People, especially friends and family, do not tell their loved ones that there is an issue in their behavior until the situation goes too far, or the other person cannot bear it any longer. The most important aspect to note is that the characters are not bad nor irredeemable people — they simply do not see the error in their behavior. For example, David did not see an issue with selling the lost ring. He believed that if the owner dropped it in his tip jar, they did not want it any longer, possibly taking pity on a cheap college student. Every person has flaws that their loved ones accept. They may not be fond of these flaws, but they understand that is part of their personality. However, it is important to kindly point out these flaws if it impedes on their relationship or their loved ones' everyday lives. *Go Your Own Way* shows that love is not allowing a loved one continue making life and a relationship difficult because of their flaws but to bring awareness to issues in their flaws and work together to improve them.

My creative process for *Go Your Own Way* was quite different from my previous creative processes for other work. I wrote the entire first draft of the first short story in one sitting where I discovered parts of the story that I did not intend to include. For example, David's girlfriend,

Tess, was not in my original drafting plans — she appeared during my writing session and proved to be an essential part of the story. I also had never written in the male perspective before this short story cycle, so using two male characters to lead the story was a challenge itself. To overcome this challenge, I modeled David and Henry after the men in my personal life. This tactic helped me to overcome the task of creating believable characters. After much thought and several drafts, the meaning behind the story was unveiled — oftentimes, one’s motives are thought to be selfish, but they believe their choices will benefit their loved ones, even if they were not agreed upon prior. As shown in Appendix A, Henry believes changing his fiancée’s original date plan will satisfy them both but does not understand that breaking his promise, no matter how excellent the new plan may be, still hurts her. *Go Your Own Way* is inspired by real people that I personally know. They are not bad people, just flawed. However, like Henry and David, they can be redeemed.

It is important for readers to note that Henry and David are not bad people — they believe their decisions will benefit everyone, especially their loved ones, so they chose to execute their own plans rather than the agreed idea. Since I was seeking to create realistic characters, I did not want to paint them in an entirely negative light, so I decided I would delve into why they would break promises or cancel plans. People, especially friends and family, do not tell them that there is an issue in their behavior until the situation goes too far, or the other person cannot bear it any longer. The most important aspect to note is that the characters are not bad people — they simply do not see the error in their behavior. For example, David did not find an issue with selling the lost ring, believing that the owner did not care about it enough to throw it in his tip jar. It took some convincing from his girlfriend, Tess, to even consider finding the owner. Even then, he attempted to pawn off the ring until his friend persuaded him to consider

listening to Tess. Like David, every person has flaws that their loved ones accept. Like Tess, they may not be fond of these flaws, but they understand that is part of that person.

When I submitted one of the stories in the cycle for peer review in my Advanced Fiction Writing class, I intended for my classmates to learn and understand the “gray area”, or moral ambiguity, where David and Henry believe that their way is better than the agreed or alternative plan. However, I discovered that the gray area is not often understood. Some of the most surprising reviews I received were “It’s okay if [David] is bad. You don’t have to redeem him” and “I am starting not to like Henry at all! He sounds awful”. This was shocking for me since it was similar to the backlash characters received in *Avengers: Endgame*. The ending was unexpected but in character, especially in Captain America’s case.

In *Avengers: Endgame*, the reunion between Steve and his best friend Bucky after many years of war and separation leads fans to believe that their friendship will continue throughout the rest of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Steve and Bucky reunite once more before Steve time travels a final time to return the Infinity Stones to their proper timeline. Upon returning, this time an old man, Steve admits that once he completed his mission, he found his long-time love Peggy Carter in the past, married her, and spent the rest of his life with her in an alternative past. He returned to the present day once his life in the alternate past was complete. This time though, he is an old man. Steve hands Sam a new shield and the title of Captain America. Sam takes the shield with the promise that he will do his best to uphold the title of Captain America. I believed that Steve’s arc came to a proper conclusion. His friends and the world are safe after years of fighting to secure them, so he marries the girl of his dreams, a simple life that took a long time to achieve. It is the perfect “happy ending” I wanted as a fan. However, many fans disagreed, claiming that the conclusion was out of character, bad writing, and not what fans desired.

Similar to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the short story cycle allowed me to explore my own characters and their development, something that could not be done through individual, stand-alone stories. Each story contains reasons why David and Henry act the way they do, choosing their own decisions than the ones their loved ones decided on together. Once readers complete the entirety of the short story cycle, David and Henry's motives and choices are completely explained, similar to how the Captain America trilogy and the Avengers movies explain Captain America's complete arc. Overall, the full short story cycle is needed to explain their own motives and choices.

This is a similar attitude to the reviews I received during the peer review for *Go Your Own Way*. Since I was so shocked by the peer reviews, I wondered if I had made a mistake in the storytelling. I thought my intentions were not very clear, despite that the story was still in progress. I considered editing the entire story or even starting a new one since others did not understand the characters' motivations, even after a majority of the story was written. These comments nearly derailed the story. I knew that the way these characters are written is how they should be. If they stayed the same and stayed "bad", it would not be the correct story to tell, or worse, there would not be a story to tell. I decided that these characters were being written the way they should be written, and any other way would be wrong, so I allow them to manifest themselves in the way they see fit. I knew that this story was theirs, so I could not control how they want to act and what decisions to make. Their truth is the story, so I must honor that by telling their story, not controlling it or altering it to fit readers' desires.

Telling David and Henry's full story included adding more details into why David and Henry are unknowingly selfish. There needs to be a comprehensible picture of their motives and their reasons for their behavior. Their motives are not always easily understood, but when

explained through their actions, dialogue, and past experiences, they are clearer to readers. The well-intended reviewers may not see these characters' true nature, but the complete short story cycle reveals it.

It made me realize that many readers do not study character traits or storytelling, believing that fan desired plotlines and conclusions are better since the original ending or arc is not what the majority of the fanbase would want to make canon. Oftentimes, what fans want is not what characters should do. Fan-desired endings or storytelling usually goes against the storyline, so what my peer reviewers stated — although they have a right to their opinion — is not how David and Henry's arcs should continue. Their arcs have a finale — their stories will end. Stories have a determined end, ones that the writers may not know while writing, but they know that the stories will carve themselves out as they continue to write. For *Go Your Own Way*, there would not be a story if David and Henry's behavior never improved. Their story is of their willingness to improve themselves for their loved ones.

No matter what readers may want to see in *Avengers: Endgame* or *Go Your Own Way*, the characters' story is still their own. A predictable ending, one often conceived by fans, is not a satisfying conclusion. Any other desire implemented would disrespect their character development and storyline. The story should be told the way it needs to be told.

The short story cycle is a beneficial genre for these types of stories. Unlike individual, stand-alone short stories, the characters are greatly explored. Their motivations are explained not only through each respective character's background, but through the other characters' backgrounds and plots as well. The connections within each story strengthens the cycle, creating a complex arc that would not be as convincing without the other pieces.

I knew when writing *Go Your Own Way*, the ring would be the main connection. A wedding ring symbolizes the covenant of marriage, the joining of two people in love. Every story in *Go Your Own Way* shows the impact of the ring, and how it is not limited to a symbol of marriage. There is a lot to unpack within that single item, but the wedding ring not only connects the married couple, it connects the David, who found the ring; Tess, who convinces David to defy his flaws and find the ring's owner; Henry and Laura, his fiancée, who end up getting married and using the ring; and their daughter, Lindsay, who accidentally throws the ring into David's tip jar. By mere accident, this ring ties all of these characters together. It reminds them who they chose to live life alongside them, and who cares for them deeply. This small, simple object opens an entire storyline, covering interesting characters who may seem irredeemable at first glance but learn to improve themselves for their loved ones.

This story's lessons do not end in the fictional world — the short story cycle should let readers relate the characters and events to their reality. Although fiction is not reality, there is truth to every fictional story. This story may help readers continue to help their loved ones until they understand that seemingly harmless decisions may cause more hurt than they realize. This is a lesson and a comfort that I hope *Go Your Own Way* extends to readers as well.

Short story cycles may also open the mind of the writer. As mentioned earlier, this story was inspired by men I know personally. Even after some of them were no longer in my life, *Go Your Own Way* helps me understand their “gray area” and come to terms with their actions. Like David and Henry, they are not bad people, just misguided. This story and these characters came to me in my brightest times and comfort me in my darkest ones. Both the stories and characters give me faith, hope, and encouragement that times may change and that events may be explained one day.

The short story cycle genre allows for the expansion of a short story, creating a powerful arc as a whole. The short story cycle is important to literature since it is a lesser known genre but an interesting and curious one, a unique way to expand a story and discover characters' personalities and traits that would otherwise be avoided for the sake of brevity. There is always more to be desired in a story, so the short story cycle is an attractive and beneficial genre to those readers and writers who want to see an extension of a story, to see the characters' motivations and if characters redeem themselves or fall short. Through my short story cycle, *Go Your Own Way*, I explore the "gray area" of the main male characters that portray relevance and realism. My creative process allowed me to see the course of the story and to defy what my peer reviewers expected to read, creating a natural line. Through the characters' flaws and decisions, the genre allows readers and writers to understand not only fiction but their reality as well and encourages them to explore more about their characters and stories beyond the limit of one or several individual narratives.

Excerpt of Original Short Story, “Everything’s Waiting for You”, from
Original Short Story Cycle, *Go Your Own Way*

Everything’s Waiting for You

May 1977

“I think we should break up,” Laura said, staring straight through the windshield at her garage door.

Henry turned to her, clinching the steering wheel. “What?”

“We need to break up.” She didn’t look at him. Instead, she twisted her engagement ring around her finger again and again. Henry wanted to know why she just wouldn’t look at him, especially for something like this.

“Would you like to tell me why?”

“The fact that you even asked is enough.” She still didn’t look at him.

Henry ran his hands down his face. “Can you just tell me what’s wrong?” He had no idea what lead to this. It was a good night. They watched that new comedy, *Smokey and the Bandit*, and ate at Pizza King like always. She didn’t seem to be bothered by anything all evening. Why now?

Laura snapped her head up. “This night didn’t go like you said.”

“What are you talking about?” Henry asked. “We made plans Monday. We talked about them last night.”

“You made the plans,” She jabbed her finger at him. “You didn’t ask me what I wanted. I had to tell you. In fact, I had to call you since you didn’t call me.”

“You said you wanted to go the movies!” Henry said.

“Yeah, I wanted to see *Star Wars*! You said we would.”

Henry sat in the driver seat for a moment, rewinding back to last night's phone call. He couldn't remember exactly when he agreed to seeing some dumb space movie. "I don't remember saying that, but we went to Pizza King like we always do."

Laura returned the silence, staring at him like she does with her younger sister when she acts immature. "We agreed on Kunkle's. Do you not remember that?"

Now, he does remember agreeing to that detail, but thought she wouldn't mind eating a Cowboy pizza again. She never complained before, at least not from what he remembers. During their dinner, she talked like she would normally — the usual dental office drama (her boss is likely sleeping with the receptionist), how her parents plan on taking a week vacation somewhere. However, she did twist her ring frequently, something he hadn't notice before. She didn't say anything when he purchased the tickets- she just stood there next to him with her arms crossed, and she stayed that way the entire movie. Henry leans back in his seat. "You're being dramatic over nothing. I don't see why this is a big deal."

"Because you changed plans on me for the thousandth time!" Her shriek resonated through the Henry's LTD. "You don't follow through with your promises anymore. I've brought it up several times."

He groaned. "Really, Laura? You're going to generalize every date?"

She went rigid. Closing her eyes, Laura said, "You did this last week and the week before that and the week before that. The last time you've followed through with your promise was a few months ago. You did this before the proposal, and we talked about this afterwards. I thought it would change once you asked me to marry you."

"What? You expect me to change for you?" They've been dating since junior year. They were 20. Both of their careers were established — she was a dental assistant and he was a

mechanic — and they were ready to take the next step. Laura didn't have a problem with his personality or habits before. He never really considered himself selfish, just practical. He had different ideas, but she shouldn't be too upset with that. The night was perfect, at least Henry thought so.

“Yes!” Laura said, nodding. “It's like you have permission to be inconsiderate because I'm stuck with you. I've brought this up countless times, but it never changes. It makes me wonder if I made a mistake being with you at all.”

The car was silent for a moment interrupted by the engine's hum. Henry stared at Laura, his breath in his throat. She searched his face for something to click, but it doesn't. After their engagement dinner, right before she got out of the car, Laura told him that she wanted him to become more considerate, to ask her opinion on things. He doesn't remember what it was about that told him he would try. It could've been the adrenaline of her saying “yes”, or maybe he did consider agreeing to her terms, but he when he tried, he found it more inconvenient for him. He didn't think it affected her this badly.

End of Excerpt of Appendix A

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