Altering Olive: A Look at HBO's Adaptation of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the HBO adaptation of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge,* with a focus on revealing the level of depth and nuance that gets lost in the translation from short story cycle to mini-series. By analyzing the cycle form, this paper considers the risks involved in neglecting the form of a source text during adaptation. While the author ultimately refrains from commenting on the quality of the mini-series as its own entity, she does conclude that as an adaptation, the mini-series is disappointing in its replication of the source text's complexity.

In 2014, Home Box Office (HBO) released a miniseries adaptation of Elizabeth Strout's short story cycle, *Olive Kitteridge.* The series, also called *Olive Kitteridge*, takes the form of four hour-long episodes, all of which inherit their titles from stories in the cycle. In terms of critical accolades, the show was received quite well, racking up eight Emmy Awards, two Critics Choice Awards, and a handful of others from associations like the Writers Guild of America and the Director's Guild of America ("*Olive Kitteridge* (Miniseries)"). It is also worth noting that HBO has an illustrious reputation for creating high-quality television. For many, this series upholds that reputation. This considered, the point of this paper is not to debate whether or not, as its own entity, HBO's *Olive Kitteridge* is a "good show." Such matters are far too subjective and exceed the scope of this paper. What I do wish to point out, however, are the many ways in which the series fails as an adaptation of its source text and the disadvantages that manifest as a result. In essence, I will be arguing that the HBO miniseries does not reflect the cyclical nature of Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*. As a result, the show pales in comparison to Strout's level of nuance and complexity.

To start building my argument about the cyclical nature of Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, it is important to give a general overview of what a short story cycle is. In order to do this, I will begin by referencing the introductory chapter from Forrest Ingram's book, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre.* It is worth noting that Ingram is largely revered as a foundational scholar on the subject of short story cycles. While the definition of anything related to an assemblage of short stories is likely to be debated, Ingram's explanation of cycles seems to stand the test of time. According to Ingram, "a story cycle is a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others" (13). In other words, a short story cycle is a collection of stories that "work" on their own but, once read in tandem with their neighbouring stories, become significantly altered. By reading the individual pieces in a cycle, one starts to notice the patterns working in service of the unit as a whole. Ingram describes this notion as "the dynamic patterns of recurrence and development," contending that:

Recurrence and development usually operate concurrently like the motion of a wheel.

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> …The motion of a wheel is a single process. In a single process, too, the thematic core of a cycle expands and deepens as the elements of the cycle repeat themselves in varied contexts (20-21).

Essentially, as images, themes, phrases, characters, etc., start to repeat themselves within the individual stories, threads of unity become illuminated, and thus, a grouping of stories starts to function as a cycle.

To expand on this further, it is worthwhile to consider work by a few more scholars. In Robert M. Luscher's article, "The American Short-Story Cycle: Out From the Novel's Shadow," he points out significant formal differences between the short story cycle and the novel. To showcase their differences, Luscher first addresses the similarities between the forms, noting how readers of both must engage in similar tasks, such as "comparing/linking characters, constructing networks of symbols and recurrent motifs, [and] refining an idea of overall themes" (358). Luscher then adds that in a cycle, however, this is done "without the secure casual and temporal spine the novel provides" (358). Or, in the words of a different scholar, cycles are ultimately "unburdened by the demands of narrative continuity" (Yoshikawa 22). To elaborate, chapters in a novel and stories in a cycle are not the same thing. Integrally, with cycles, there is a disunity at play between its components. Each story has its own beginning, middle, and end. Each story offers its own unique degree of closure. When read in tandem, the reader will certainly start to make connections and discern unifying principles between the stories, but they will not be left with a singular, linear plotline. They will not be left with a story one could neatly summarize from point A to point B, as is the case upon completing a novel.

With consideration of the discussion above, I will now move into my analysis of what makes Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* a cycle. Of course, there is the obvious: it is comprised of thirteen short stories, all penned by the same author. That said, there is far more to unpack. Many who read *Olive Kitteridge* are inclined to label it as a novel. In fact, some of the scholars discussed later on are guilty of this misstep. The urge seems to stem from a few textual features. One is that all of the stories are set in the same fictional town, Crosby, Maine. Unlike, say, James Joyce's cycle *Dubliners*, in which every story is set in Dublin but follows a different set of characters, Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* features several recurring characters. Some characters only show up again in the background of another story, but others can play a more significant role. No one's recurrence, though, is more noteworthy than the cycle's eponymous character, Olive, who appears in some way in all of the stories. This seems to be a second reason for inaccurately deeming the cycle as a novel; about half of the pieces are focalized through Olive. Her impact, whether small, like a mere reference to something she said once ("Ship in a Bottle"), or large, like being an unlikely confidant in the face of grief ("Basket of Trips"), can be felt throughout the entirety of Strout's text. That said, though Olive is absolutely a unifying link, it is inappropriate to interpret her continuous presence as meaning Strout wrote a novel about the life of a character named Olive. One of the key features that sustains the text's cyclicality is that while half of the stories are focalized through Olive, half of them are *not*. As Ingram points out, "in cycles, 'minor' characters collectively receive as much, if not more, attention than do the 'major' protagonists" (22). The insertion of what one could call "non-Olive"

stories serves as a chance to utilize the cycle form. The “non-Olive” stories disrupt any sense of linearity, and they challenge the reader to dig deeper when detecting the unifying features shared by the stand-alone textual units. There are many “dynamic patterns of recurrence and development” that go beyond the mere presence of Olive in a story (Ingram 20).

Regrettably, these features of the cycle become significantly diminished in HBO’s adaptation of it into a miniseries. In her paper “Age and Gender in the Miniseries Adaptation of Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*,” Delphine Letort states that “scriptwriter Jane Anderson …restructures the novel into a four-part miniseries that brings the novel’s eponymous character …to the forefront on screen” (86). Disregarding Letort’s miscategorization of the source text as a “novel,” she is correct in pointing out how the television series shifts Olive from eponymous to protagonist. In the show, most of the stories that are focalized through characters other than Olive have been cut. The stories where Olive is not the focalizing character that do make it in the show are ones that still feature her heavily, examples being “Pharmacy” or “Incoming Tide.” HBO goes to great lengths to make room for Olive to become the centre of every episode and, consequently, the centre of the story as a whole. It is worth noting that I can even claim she is “the centre of the story.” This statement highlights how HBO seemed to see Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge* not for its cyclical brilliance but for its novelistic potential. Like a novel would, the HBO adaptation shapes the stories into a linear plotline. Letort summarizes it well when she says that “the miniseries’s four-episode structure outlines a time frame that spans twenty-five years [and traces] different stages of aging” (87). The HBO series is, at its core, the *progressive* story of Olive’s life, whereas the cycle is a collection of instances that jump between times and people. As stated in the introduction of this essay, this does not make HBO’s *Olive Kitteridge* a bad show, but does make the series a disappointing adaptation. Many of the “non-Olive” textual details foster the cycle’s impressive use of form and sophisticated representation of difficult topics. To dispose of this and instead prioritize one character’s life journey seems misguided.

To expand on this idea, I will be looking at the third story in Strout’s cycle, “The Piano Player,” which is not focalized through Olive. This story is focalized through a character named Angela “Angie” O’Meara, a pianist for a local restaurant and lounge called “The Warehouse.” Here, Olive’s physical presence is quite insignificant to the story’s events. She does not propel the narrative in any way, and the narrative has no effect on her. Olive is dining with her family at the restaurant where Angie is playing, but they do not interact. In fact, it is explained that the Kitteridges “tended to come early and did not sit in the lounge first but went straight to the dining room” (Strout 51). Olive can likely hear Angie’s playing from the dining room, but they are not really sharing any proximity, physical or otherwise.

The story then follows Angie's realization that “the way of life” must be “to get something figured out when it was too late” (60). This insight comes to Angie after she spontaneously ends a twenty-two-year-long affair with the town selectman, Malcolm, and after reminiscing on her complicated relationship with her mother. The final sentence of this story provides another revelation—this time, however, for the reader:

> Tomorrow she would go play the piano in the church, stop thinking about the bruises on her mother’s upper arm, that thin arm with its slack soft skin, so loose from the bone

> that when you squeezed it in your fingers, it was hard to imagine it could feel anything (60)

What this concluding sentence unearths is the fact that Angie has been secretly harming her mother, who lives in a senior care facility. Throughout the story, Angie makes reference to a suspicious bruising on her mother's arms. She even expresses an awareness of how shocking it is that someone would harm a vulnerable elderly person (60). It is quite disconcerting to realize, then, that Angie is actually the one perpetrating her mother's abuse. However, it is not entirely shocking, as earlier in the piece, we learn about the trauma inflicted upon Angie during her youth at the hands of her mother. At the age of fifteen, Angie was scouted by a man from Chicago who ran a music school. Ultimately, Angie's chance to leave Crosby and pursue her passion was stolen from her by her mother, who selfishly told the man that Angie could not go, "she's mommy's girl" (56). Despite not attending the school, Angie fantasized about it for years to come:

> She would be taught by kind men and women; she would learn to read music. All the rooms would be heated. There would be none of the sounds that came from her mother's room, sounds that made her push her hands to her ears at night, sounds that made her leave her house and go to the church to play the piano (56).

Angie's fantasy reveals everything we need to know about her reality. This passage, and the passage above considered, it seems that Angie is experiencing difficulty coming to terms with the trauma inflicted upon her by her mother. As a result, now that her mother's health is declining and Angie is forced to step into a caretaker role herself, she mirrors her mother's behavior by responding to the circumstances in an abusive and unhealthy way. She also cannot bring herself to be honest about it, as Angie subscribes to the belief that, when it comes to profound or complex issues, one should try not to make sense of them (54). In not processing her trauma, Angie falls victim to a vicious generational cycle of hurt people hurting people.

This "vicious generational cycle" is present in more than just Angie's story. In fact, Angie's behaviour is very similar to the way that Olive carries the trauma of her father's suicide. Throughout Strout's text, various stories offer glimpses into the life of Olive's son, Christopher, as he matures into adulthood. One of the continual tensions present in the cycle is an emotional (and later physical) distance between Olive and Christopher that is largely ambiguous. Though Olive can be discernibly nettling to Christopher, the extent of his coldness provokes a suspicion that there is something readers do not know. Rebecca Cross discusses this idea of absence in her paper, "Yearning, Frustration, and Fulfillment: The Return Story in *Olive Kitteridge* and *Kissing in Manhattan*." Cross defines absence as "elements of the text which are not physically present but which, regardless of their lack of presence, have a noted and significant effect on the cycle as a whole" (par. 2). She explains how this "absence" causes the reader to experience feelings of "yearning" and "frustration," and how these feelings often get replaced with "fulfillment" comes the last story in the cycle, otherwise known as the "return" story (par. 1). The return story should, according to Cross, send the cycle "spiralling back in on itself," and should illustrate connections to the other stories in a way that alters the reader's initial understanding of the individual pieces (par. 1).

> When the return story is reached, the contrast created within it directs the focus back to the previous stories, effectively drawing together the individual stories so that they are conceived of as a cohesive whole. (Cross par. 2).

The final story in Strout's *Olive Kitteridge,* "River," is the only story where Olive admits that she physically abused Christopher in his childhood—"not just spanked. Hit" (269). She is confronted by Christopher about it in "Security," where he states that "these days, they'd send a social worker right to the home, if a kid showed up that way," but Olive will not hear him, she responds by saying "what are you talking about? All your life I have loved you" (232).

Like Angie, Olive has been traumatized by a parental figure and struggles to acknowledge how it shaped her not only as a caretaker, but also as a person. Both Strout's Olive and Angie yearn for kindness from authority figures, with Angie fantasizing about being "taught by kind men and women" (56) and Olive "[falling] in love with the big security fellow, who said kindly, 'there you go ma'am'" (202) at the airport. Further, both characters cannot admit to the abuse they have perpetrated until the last second. Therefore, when Olive confesses her behaviour only in the last story, Angie's revelation in "The Piano Player" becomes even more poignant, or "fulfilling," because it really "must be the way of life to get something figured out when it was too late" (Strout 60). This theme can also be seen in "Ship in a Bottle," where Julie's parents realize she has run away only after it is too late to stop her, or in "Starving," where the death of Nina is what makes Harmon realize that he is in love with Daisy, and wants to leave his wife for her. It is threads like these, shared between the "Olive stories" and the "non-Olive stories," that showcase the power of the cycle form to be subtle yet profound, or, as Luscher puts it, "the ability to be comprehensive without relating all" (371). Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* is about so much more than Olive's life or aging.

It is disappointing, then, to find that the HBO show does not uphold this sentiment and that all of the stories mentioned above, "The Piano Player," "Ship in a Bottle," and "Starving," disappear to make more room for Olive. Angie does appear in the series, but her story is not even alluded to. We see her playing in the restaurant a few times, but that is the extent of her relevance. It is also worth noting that, during every scene that takes place in the restaurant, Angie's playing can always be heard. A significant moment in "The Piano Player" is when Angie uncharacteristically takes a break from playing to call Malcolm and end their affair (Strout 53-4). The show's lack of musical pause denies that this break and phone call ever occurred, which is a catalyst for the short story's concluding events. Additionally, it is said to be Christmas time when Angie's story takes place, but in the show, she is seen playing during the Summer and the Fall. This is another obvious erasure of her story, ensuring that, on top of not being shown in the series explicitly, even the suggestion of Strout's "The Piano Player" taking place has been removed.

It is also worth noting that, in the show, Olive slaps Christopher less than twenty minutes into the first episode ("Pharmacy" 00:18:37), instantly dissolving one of the main recurring tensions in Strout's text. Notably, the return story, "River," does make it into the last episode of the HBO series ("Security"). However, its impact is arguably weaker than the text's, as viewers have not had to endure any mystery around whether or not Olive was abusive to

Christopher—the slap answered that question—making her confession far less "fulfilling" (Cross par. 1). The show also opens with a scene from the last episode ("Security") where Olive is about to commit suicide, which does not happen in the cycle. The rest of the show, then, becomes about tracing the steps that got Olive to that point and finding out whether or not she decides to go through with it. In making the episodes into one overarching story (tracking Olive from point A to point B), all of the stories that were once part of a complex infrastructure of meaning now hand over their thematic weight to the protagonist.

The effect of this is that a new agenda is born, and Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* gets converted into a statement on challenging Western media's "stereotypical views on age and gender" (Letort 87). In her paper, "*Olive Kitteridge* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2014), Quality Television and Difficult Women: Female Discontent in the Age of Binge-Viewing," Jodi Brooks discusses how Olive is an "unlikely protagonist" for a television series due to her age and generally harsh demeanor. She also discusses how the miniseries came out during a time when a movement to showcase "difficult" female protagonists was on the rise (947). Ultimately, the adaptation chooses to focus on the representation of aging, a theme that is present in Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* but not its defining feature. This seems to be in service of providing a spotlight for the stories of an underrepresented demographic.

While HBO's pursuit of representing aging, and specifically, aging women, is a noble cause, Strout's cycle accomplishes this and more. Because the cycle is not linear and instead offers glimpses into multiple times, perspectives, ages, situations, etc., it is able to cover a wider range of issues and cultivate a deeper sense of nuance. Brooks points out that the miniseries form "falls somewhere between feature film and short-season television drama" (944). I find this ironic, as the cycle falls somewhere between short story collection and novel. Given that both of these forms share an "in-between" quality, the miniseries should have been the perfect medium for bringing Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* to the screen. Of course, certain stories or textual details needed to be cut, and there was likely an abundance of constraints put on the production team that are beyond my awareness. That being said, I see no reason why there could not have been a few "non-Olive" episodes in an attempt to replicate what the cycle does. There is no episode in the series where Olive acts just as a background character. It is unfortunate that HBO did not decide to take this route. Though it perhaps would have been more challenging, it might have been more rewarding, too. Yoshikawa notes how, when it comes to short story cycles, the best part is finding out how everything links together (22). Though HBO's *Olive Kitteridge* is a fine show in its own right, it is a shame that HBO did not capture the source text for what it is. The show was ultimately limited in its extension of the source text's complexity, making it a disappointing adaptation.

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