THE EMERGENCE OF GLORIA NAYLOR'S SHORT STORY CYCLE *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

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Abstract

The paper is concerned with Gloria Naylor's choice to write this book in the form of a short story cycle, a fictional mode which implies a set of narrative and structural principles meant to provide unity and coherence quite distinct from those specific to other fictional modes.

Keywords: Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place,* short story cycle, textual gaps

Gloria Naylor's choice to subtitle *The Women of Brewster Place* "A Novel in Seven Stories," indicates that her work should be associated with two literary genres, although in an interview she declared that for her this book is not a "real novel [but it is] made up of interconnected short stories" ("A Conversation", 582). As a result, a better understanding of the book is that of a short story cycle, a fictional mode whose conventional form is that of a volume made up of a number of texts which can be comprehended and felt as complete when taken independently, but which form a unified whole because they are published together and have at least one clearly established criterion: the same setting, and/or fictional world, and/or set of characters, and/or themes, and/or patterns of imagery.

Why did Gloria Naylor opt for the fictional mode of short-story cycle? First, we should take into account the age she was writing the volume at – her early twenties, when she was clearly an aspiring writerin search for her voice and artistic recognition. By choosing this mode she clearly opted for the association of her young writerly self with a long and valuable list of European and American male writers,such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Franz Kafka, Washington Irving, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson,John Updike, Tim O'Brien, Robert Olen Butler etc.,who had many times chosen to write story cycles rather than novels.

A second reason she might have had is in direct connection with the period of time she wrote the book in: the 1970s – 1980s,still a period of hectic and incoherent life dynamics,the height of the Western postmodernist movement. One of the characteristic features of postmodernism isthe celebration of the fragmentation of the world/self/genre etc. (as opposed to modernism which mourned the same condition). To opt forthe episodic mode of literature in this period meant to choose a method that reflects the psychology of postmodern life (limited time resources, short attention and patience span, the need for immediate gratification etc.) much more accurate than would the lengthy flow of fiction characteristic to long prose.

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Thirdly, her choice of genre had to do with the fact that the short story cycle was a vibrant fiction mode for writers of minority origin in the 1980s, especially female writers, such as Louise Erdrich the author of *Love Medicine* (1984) depicting a Native American perspective, Sandra Cisneros portraying the Latino society in Chicago in *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Jamaica Kincaid with *Annie John* (1985) describing the coming-of-age experience of a girl living in the Caribbean, and Hisaye Yamamoto with *Seventeen Syllables* (1985) exploring issues of second-generation Japanese immigrants to America. There is little doubt that Naylor aspired to belong to this trend of hyphenated-origin women writers who chose to write story cycles instead of novels because they belonged to an ethnic and gender environment in which the oral tradition of tale telling is a familiar and natural form of expression.

On the one hand, Gloria Naylor, a writer of African-American origin, also studying at the time for a master degree in African-American studies made it her aim to explore and depict stories in the style and the vein of the community she was so fond of.There is a special significance of cycles to black culture identified by James Snead according to whom while repetition is a pervasive and necessary condition in all cultures, the black culture particularly emphasizes cycles in every aspect of life(biological, agrarian, ritual, and artistic)and cherishes the balance such repetition brings and the foregrounds the value of a new and abrupt start in the middle of things. By contrast, the Europeans tend to emphasize linearity and teleological progress. Thus, according to Snead:

> black culture highlights the observance of such repetition, often in homage to an original generative instance or act […] In black culture, repetition means that the thing circulates […][that] there is an equilibrium. In European culture, repetition must be seen to be not just circulation and flow but accumulation and growth. In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is 'there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it.' If there is a goal in such a culture, it is always deferred; it continually 'cuts' back to the start, in the musical meaning of 'cut' as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental da capo) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series" (qtdKelley, xviii).

This distinction of Snead offers an explanation to why there is a propensity towards repetition cycles in African-American, and therefore it is relevant to our understanding of Naylor's choice.

On the other hand, we should not forget that we are dealing with the literary production of an African-American *woman* writer, who has no choice but to delve into the complex interactions ofethnicity, gender and individual identity, and she does it so by appropriating the female oral tradition of bonding and inclusion, in the form of quilting tales, fireside stories, lullabies etc. One more reason for Naylor's attraction and choice for the fictional mode of story-cycle.

Finally, biographical and book market circumstances also determined the choice for a short-story cycle: Gloria Naylor's first book *The Women of Brewster Place*(1982) is built uponand came out after the successful publication of two stories. The first piece, a short story titled "A Life on Beekman Place", was published in March 1980 in *Essence* magazine,

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while Naylor was a Brooklyn College undergraduate; the second short story, "When Mama Comes to Call" appeared in the same magazine two years later, while Naylor was doing graduate Afro-American Studies at Yale University. It was easier for Naylor as a young writer to establish herself by writing stories for magazines and then to assemble them in order to create a cycle.

Adopting the fictional mode and convention of short story cycle provided Naylor with a set of narrative and structural principles andcharacteristics[2]quite distinct from other fictional modes.Because a story cycle contains anumber of text-pieces that are whole if taken as individual works of fiction but together create a larger imagined universe and a more comprehensive and complex textual vision and narrative structure, the story cycle entails a number of deviations/experimentsin form and content from what either a novel or an individual story involves. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*fully allows all of them, as we will see further.

The most conspicuous deviation from the norm of a conventional book-length narrative is in the text's chronological pattern. Where the conventional novel follows the direct causality pattern of the events featured, mimicking real/objective time experience, and moving forward toward a conclusion, the story cycleexperiments with narrative chronology, abandoning linear order progressingchaotically and nondirectionally, going forward and backward with every text it includes. Gloria Naylor too with the arrangement she decided on defies linear structure in exchange for a chronology of events that is, not necessarily random, but less discernible. Apart fromthe first character story ("Mattie Michael") and the last two short stories ("The Two" and "The Block Party"), which clearly depict the very first and the very last events in all the cycle, the rest of the sub-plots do not have either the time or the order clearly stated and, in general, could have occurred in any other order, in other words Naylor'sjuxtaposed arrangement does not suggest an overt organization.

Another deviation is in connection with closure and denouement. A conventional novel is wound-up once at its end, while in a cycle each text-piece has its own mid-bookend in that it reaches a denouement which provides a certain level of closure. In addition, the story cycle requires that some larger design lingers unsettled, so that the individual stories act like pseudo-chapters of a novel and thus propel the reader forward to the very end of the volume which provides closure at a grander level. With Naylor too this deviation is observable. Alltext-pieces have their own satisfactory closure. All seven women depicted by Naylor find themselves, at the end of their individual story, defeated (and resigned)in the last place that life will take them: the slum tenement building on the dead end street of Brewster –Mattie Michael has lost her home to her much loved, but errant son; Etta Mae Johnson has wasted her life in numerous dead-end affairs; Kiswana Browne, a middle class offspring,has chosento live in Brewster Place in a failed attempt to make a contribution to the welfare of her fellow Afro-Americans; Lucielia Louise Turner

[2]Karen Castellucci Cox in her Magic and Memory in the Contemporary Story Cycle: Gloria Naylor and Louise Erdrichoffers an excellent explanation of story cycle particularities, and so does Ian Reid in The Short Story.

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has lostthe will to live, after losing one pregnancy to an abortion and her remaining toddler to a tragic accident, while making a chain of compromises to save her marriage (she seems to be the only one away from the place at the end of the book); Cora Leehas isolated herself from her family and community conceiving child after child; "the two" (Lorraine and Theresa) have had their lives destroyed in the process of trying to work out a life together closeted from the homophobic world. It is the hope that there is an end to the pain and suffering represented in each story of the cycle that propels the reader's interest forward, but the general story culminates with only afalse fulfilment of this hope: a dream vision of the community healed and rebuilding itself; this isnot the actual end of the cycle – the conclusion of Naylor is that in her imagined world the poverty is crushing and the personal tragedy is overwhelming.

A third deviation is the breadth of gaps and the necessity of bridges in order to negotiate them. In a traditional novel, readers are conditioned to discover through careful reading the cause of any given event or detail. With story cycles readers may never find answers and satisfaction on particular points, and then the reading task entailsnegotiating gaps between stories, where unifying elements are either scarce or absent and where there are abrupt shifts in time, place, and perspective. In general, breaks affect unity and coherence and force readers to generate significance:

> We must learn to read associatively, looking for meaning in each discrete story which can add to the whole but which need not follow the same narrative rules as other pieces of the text. Yet it is this urge to 'author' the elusive blank spaces and thus neatly connect all the stories that makes reading a story cycle feel at first foreign and disjointed, until we have freed ourselves from the impetus to organize and can allow the gaps to co-exist with the story. (Cox 158)

Depicting seven equally important characters, *The Women of Brewster Place*only catches fragments of their lives rather than whole pictures and entails numerous textual gaps. Naylor brings into focus each character briefly only to move on to another character in the next unit of the book andthus she bombards readers with a multitude of experiences. She shifts place, time and perspective completely without providing all the answers, without allowing readers to experience minutely the life of a certain character. It is no wonder then that readers end up having multiple unresolved questions, such ashow the lives of Basil,Lucielia Louise Turneror Theresa came about (as these disappear from the text without warning). The fact that there are significant gaps readers must negotiate in moving further to encompass the growing group of characters, experiences, and perspectives, would have made the experience of reading *The Women of Brewster Place* more akin to that encountered when reading a story collection, if Naylor had not decided to add a number of bridging elements (such as the character of Mattie Michael, as the backbone of the community, or the theme of lost dreams and the dream motif) or had not wished to make the book circular and then close the aesthetic circle by providing some final connection between the characters and the loose plot, in adding three texts to the book "Dawn", "Dusk" and The Block Party."Thus, she reconciled openness of experience with

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the formal necessity of roundness and coherence, and that causes us to invest interest in the community of Brewster Place as a whole rather than in any of its individuals.

Fourthly, a major deviation from the norms of a typical novel is narration. Story cycles make use of "multi-faceted narration" in which eitherseveral characters do the storytelling in turn or a third person narrator shifts character alliances with every new character it introduces. Either way, upon turning to the next story in the sequence, readers are to deal with not just a shift in time or place but a new narrative conscious (and voice). For that reason, a story cycle tends to reflect many individual consciousnesses at once. "Story cycle expeditions into the consciousnesses of many characters require new textual structures that borrow from the genres of the short story and the novel, while reformulating those models in unrecognizable configurations designed to upset the systematic codes readers apply to order fictional worlds." (Cox 160)

As far as narration technique is concerned, in *The Women of Brewster Place* a noncharacter (heterodiegetic) narrator reports the elements of the hectic narrative world and, in the words of James Phelan, such narrator acts as our "lens on the story world" (116) providing their own slant (angle of reporting and set of attitudes), which ultimately influences how audiences perceive that world (115). However, more often than not the narrator chooses to offer the angle of vision of the protagonist and not only, the narration leaving the narrator's perspective for the characters' (i.e. there is a focalization shift) and then the audience get to hear the voices of the focalizers. By shifting focalization, what Naylor achieves is a balanced view of the course of events, but her ultimate goal with the overall treatment of every topic is to manipulate her audience into sympathizing with every character. Moreover, Naylor's handling of narration technique with everything it involves (discourse, focalization, voice etc.) is meant to gain full control over the effects of the narration on the axis of ethics and evaluation. She controls how these women comes across.

To conclude, by rejecting the norms of streamlined narrative where all events are accounted for and adopting a random structure and a roving narrative voice, any writer taking up the cycle structure has found that it is much freer, as the form which breaks out of an individually focused narrative to mirror an oral tradition of communal - and thus participatory - storytelling, is better furnished to inscribe and revise various public and private stories. They employ the story cycle form to articulate new ways of imagining historically fixed narratives, freeing their fictions to tell a different story about lost lives. Naylorherself has stated that her text fulfilled a desire to make visible those whom society keeps invisible (Matus 51). She has also explained that "when black Americans and women found their way into the institutions, we realized that there was another history, other meanings... What is so rich about it, I think, is that the black woman brings both her history as a black person and her living reality as a female" (Carabis37). Naylor's choice to write a short story cycle was also determined by the fact that her stories do not encounter a reading community that wholly reflects her background or cultural tradition,

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and the hybrid construction of the story cycle helps to guide a diverse audience through the vagaries of cultural interpretation and of historical revision.

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