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"Traits Don't Change, States of Mind Do": Tracking Olive in *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout

Chloe Harrison ⓘD and Marcello Giovanelli ⓘD

Department of English, Languages and Applied Linguistics, Aston University, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* consists of thirteen interrelated chapters, each one involving to some degree the novel's eponymous character. Readers are presented to Olive both mediated through other characters' viewpoints, and with more seemingly direct access into Olive's mind and motivations. The novel's chapters move across different time frames and thus present its characters in various stages of change. Strout's narrative style means that the reader, as Guaccero (""Standing in the Spaces" with *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout." *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* 7, no. 2 (2010): 411–415, 412) suggests, is required to keep track of "the sense of multiple self-states that unite to form her [Olive's] continuity and coherence over time". In this paper, we explore the process of tracking Olive by integrating several cognitive stylistic frameworks to examine how multiple representations of Olive and her life are processed in reading the novel. Drawing explicitly on the concept of mind-modelling, we provide, to our knowledge, the first stylistic analysis of character across a short story collection. We further argue that tracking Olive is a process that places particular demands on readers: Strout shifts our attention across numerous iterations of events and characters in a way that invites constant readjustment of our understanding of Olive and the significance of her actions and relationships with others.

1. Introduction

Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (2008) is a collection of interrelated stories about the life of the eponymous character, who lives in a small seaside town in Maine. Somewhere between a short story collection and a fragmented novel, and much like Jennifer Egan's fellow Pulitzer Prize winning text *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), this book can be labelled as a "short story cycle" in that it "most accurately captures the recursiveness central to the genre and privileges the short story as its formative element".[1] Smith argues that "[i]n cycles, stories can be read singly but gain meaning together, drawing on both the power of particularity and the explosive energy of

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CONTACT Chloe Harrison ✉ c.harrison10@aston.ac.uk
[1]Smith, 4. See also Ingram.

fusion".[2] *Olive Kitteridge* invites readers to incrementally build up a picture of the fictional seaside town of Crosby, and to piece together facets of Olive's character. She is a (retired) local maths teacher, a mother, a wife, a friend, a local busybody, to name a few roles, and while readers are given direct access to her thoughts through focalisation in nearly half of the chapters (6/13), readers are also invited to view her through external focalisations, such as through her husband Henry ("Pharmacy", chapter 1), her friends Harmon and Daisy ("Starving", chapter 5), as well as other more peripheral acquaintances in the town, such as the minister's daughter, Rebecca ("Criminal", chapter 12) and Angie, the "Piano Player" (chapter 3) of the local bar.

In this paper, we examine how readers may construct a comprehensive mental model of Olive's character, and crucially the workings of her mind, across the chapters in the interconnected stories that make up the novel. We draw explicitly on work in contemporary cognitive stylistics that has examined how readers engage with characters through specific textual features that give rise to rich *mind-models*[3] in order to demonstrate how readers are positioned to track and respond to Olive's character. Our paper offers new research in cognitive stylistics in two distinctive ways given that it provides, to our knowledge, both the first literary linguistic analysis of Elizabeth Strout's writing and the first sustained stylistic exploration of characterisation across the short story cycle form. In examining a specific genre, we also provide new ways of considering the genre-specific processes by which readers mind-model and track characters and the linguistic features that prompt them to do so.

Our paper is organised in the following way. In the next section, we introduce the style, structure and form of *Olive Kitteridge* as a short story cycle. In Section 3, we summarise previous work on characterisation in stylistics and introduce the concept of mind-modelling. In Section 4, we examine a set of online reader reviews from *Goodreads*, in which readers outline their experience of emotionally connecting with Olive. In Sections 5 and 6, we analyse three of the stories in the collection, two in which Olive is framed through external narration, and one in which the reader is provided with a more direct access into Olive's thought processes. In our conclusion (Section 7), we examine how these multiple representations of Olive converge as the text progresses to provide an intricate mental model of her character, which both forms a cohesive thematic link across the collection and also contributes to the emotional resonance experienced by readers.

2. Reading *Olive*

In her book on *The American Short Story Cycle*, Smith outlines stylistic features that are distinctive to the short story cycle genre in addition to the recursiveness and repetition that is essential in driving the cycle. These include but are not limited to:

- Representations of multiple (narrating) perspectives;
- Non-linear, fragmented and episodic narratives;
- Absence of resolution;
- Linking thematic structures of place, time and family.[4]

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[2]Smith, 5.
[3]Stockwell, *Texture*.
[4]Ibid., 1–11.

The use of place provides an overarching structure for the stories in the collection and both location and characterisation work in tandem in *Olive Kitteridge*. The fictional seaside town of Crosby works as a background to the narrative events, contextualising, grounding and familiarising the storyworlds of the collection. These physical spaces and locations are foregrounded in the story titles, through references to particular locations such as "Pharmacy", "River" and "A Different Road"; temporal information is also highlighted through both more superordinate seasonal references, such as "Tulips" and "Winter Concert", and the more specific time of day, as in "Incoming Tide". Some of these locations are seen to have a metaphorical role in the stories: Cross, for example, discusses the final, "return" story in the collection, "River", and considers how the "imager of clearness and blueness" of this story contrasts with Olive's bleaker emotions of the earlier chapters, characterised through "prevailing imagery of blackness".[5] Discussion of other recurring metaphors in the collection continues in Sections 5 and 6.

While Crosby contextualises the narrative action, the layering of viewpoints, on the other hand, works to create "a picture of identity in process; [meaning that] subjectivity attains a kind of flux and restlessness".[6] Consequently, short story cycles are said to put forward what Smith terms "provisional identities"; "that is, flexible, dynamic identities that emerge within a story or a series of stories but which are neither rigidly defined nor fixed".[7] It is this "multinarrative structure" that, as Letort argues,[8] makes it ideally structured for contemporary television series, which similarly contain episodic narratives which build towards a more superordinate story arc. As the analysis in this paper will explore, this concept is one that is central to *Olive Kitteridge*: readers engage in a dynamic, cumulative process of meaning- making in order to fill out and conceptualise Olive's changing character across the course of the narratives.

Olive is undoubtedly a "round" character; one who is fully developed, "capable of surprising",[9] and ultimately flawed and multi-faceted. While of course characters are text-based phenomena, readers engage with fictional entities in a similar way to how they might do so with real life people and consequently "in the process of reading characters take on a life of their own in the reader's mind to a greater or lesser extent".[10] Olive's ability to take on a life outside the ontological parameters of the book is acknowledged both by Strout, in her reflections on the writing process, and also by readers, as this next section explores. In an interview with *The New Yorker*[11] before the publication of *Olive, Again*, Strout describes the move to revisit Olive's life as something initiated by Olive herself:

> I never intended to return to return to Olive Kitteridge. I really thought I was done with her, and she with me. But a few years ago I was in a European city, alone for a weekend, and I went to a café, and she just showed up. That's all I can say. She showed up with a force, the way she did the first time, and I could not ignore her. This time, she was nosing her car into the marina, and I saw it so clearly – felt her so clearly – that I thought, Well, I should go with this.

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[5]Cross, 5.
[6]Smith, 6.
[7]Ibid., 7.
[8]Letort, 86. See also Nelson, 24.
[9]Forster, 81.
[10]Stockwell and Mahlberg, 130.
[11]Strout, in interview with Treisman, *The New Yorker*.

The idea that characters can assume a life of their own and take on autonomy independent of their creators is explored by a team of psychologists,[12] who found that 92% of surveyed novelists considered their characters, at least in part, to be "independent agents not directly under the author's control".[13] It seems that Strout may also belong to this group of authors. During a talk as part of the *Olive, Again* tour,[14] Strout mentioned how a fan of the first book had written to her to say that she and a group of friends regularly met to share recent "Olive moments" they had experienced. In such accounts, Olive's character not only transcends the barriers of the page, but also suggests that her personality is in part performed and acted by readers: the schema built up for Olive's character is so rich and well developed that the women in this group all share an agreed understanding of what an "Olive moment" would look or feel like. In other words, and as we examine in the next section, readers construct a model of Olive's mind and anticipate how she might react in a particular situation, even outside of the fictive situations described in the text. Indeed, this familiarity is signposted in the title of the sequel where her more formal surname is dropped, and she is re-introduced on first name terms only: *Olive, Again*.

3. Characterisation in Stylistics

Whereas structuralist models of characterisation tend to emphasise the difference between characters, viewed simply as textual patterns, and real people, cognitive approaches argue that we draw on similar processing methods to build constructs of characters in fiction as those that we use when we interact with others in our everyday lives. In doing so, we draw on a variety of input stimuli that combine with stores of encyclopedic knowledge to develop rich character schemas, mental constructs that are dynamic and fluid and can be developed over the course of reading and re-reading texts and discussing them with others.

Culpeper provides a model for "comprehending character" that has been widely adopted by cognitive stylisticians. His model outlines how readers construct representations of characters by synthesising "top down" (prior knowledge) and "bottom up" (textual phenomena) processes. Readers construct meaning, "our sense of what the text is about"[15] in a "situation model" which brings together prior knowledge and textual features to provide an online, dynamic sense of character. This process is governed by a "control system",[16] which acts as a regulator and is related to the reader's goals, so that, for example, a reader of literary fiction assumes a particular kind of readerly stance and set of expectations compared to a reader of non-fiction. Crucially, readerly constructs of characters in the situation model are not only shaped by textual input and literary top-down knowledge (such as knowledge of genre) but also by knowledge of real people.[17] In other words, we draw on knowledge from our everyday lives to make sense of characters in literary fiction. This latter point underpins Stockwell's notion of mind-modelling, a process whereby readers build up a rich sense of both a character's

[12]Taylor *et al.*, 366.
[13]Ibid.
[14]Strout, book tour 2019.
[15]Culpeper, 36.
[16]Ibid.
[17]Ibid.

mind and their entire consciousness, lifestyle, ideologies and so on.[18] As with Culpeper's model, mind-modelling relies on readers drawing on more general text-external templates for making sense of the world. As Stockwell explains:

> The key to understanding a fictional character is understanding what a person is. In your own mind, you have the prototypically best example of a person – and it is you. In the most basic sense, you know what it means and feels to have a conscious awareness, and subconscious thoughts, moods and inclinations. You know what emotions feel like and the sorts of things that cause them. You know what it is to inhabit a human body and a life in this world and interact with other people, and exist in a social community.[19]

Mind-modelling is also dependent on the meaning potential of the text and its particular textual patterns which evoke specific attributes of a character. Indeed Stockwell argues that there are five specific kinds of stylistic patterning that may, singularly or in conjunction with others, support the construction of rich mental models as opposed to more "shallow" mind-modelling that might result in a sense of flat, uninspiring characters. At its richest, "impersonation"[20] may occur when a character retains a resonance long after a text is finished and has a profound impact on its reader; this is precisely the kind of effect that we report in Section 4 where we outline how readers reflect on their reading of the novel. The five stylistic patterns proposed by Stockwell are:

(1) direct descriptions of physical appearance and manner, gestures and body language, explicit narratorial direction;
(2) the presentation of speech for an apparently autonomous sense of characters' personality, mood and perspective;
(3) the representation of thought, beliefs, and intentions as if you as a reader have telepathic ability;
(4) the reactions of other characters (including the narrator), who can serve as counterparts for your own reading response;
(5) social relationships defined by deictic markers and social register, defining and sustaining all the divergences of characters' viewpoints from your own.[21]

We now provide an example of each pattern, in turn, taken from *Olive Kitteridge*.

(1) "Christopher sat sideways at the table, slumped in adolescent gracelessness and did not respond when Henry Thibodeau asked him if he played any sports at school.", "Pharmacy".[22]
(2) "Bonnie frowned. "We've talked about that, Harmon. Why in the world should it bother us? They're free to do what they like."", "Starving", (110).
(3) "No, Olive could not get the splotches arranged in order, but Blue-Mask was very nervous; she understood early on he was frightened to death.", "A Different Road", (143).

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[18]Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, 178. In stylistics, the attribution of a particular way of thinking to a character has also been captured in the notion of "mind style" (e.g. Fowler; Semino)
[19]Ibid., 177–78.
[20]Ibid., 183.
[21]Ibid., 179.
[22]Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*, 5. All subsequent references to the novel are cited parenthetically by page number.

(4) "You haven't put up with me for years!" Olive shouted. "You have treated me poorly for years!"

"No," said her son, quietly. "I think if you think about it, you'll see that the story is quite different. You have a bad temper, I don't really know what it is. But you can make people feel terrible. You made Daddy feel terrible.", "Security", (287).

(5) "*Old horror*, Olive thought. He was a tall man with a big belly, slouching shoulders, and in her mind – a kind of arrogant furtiveness in the way he held his head thrust forward and didn't look at people.", "River", (313).

In the first example, the narrator's description of Christopher's physical appearance and in particular his body language "slumped in adolescent gracelessness" generates an impression of the character's overall attitude towards the visitor to the Kitteridge's house and a general lack of manners. In the second, the free direct speech of Harman's wife Bonnie provides the reader with a strong sense of her personality and attitude towards her husband's concern that his sons do not seem interested in taking over the family business. In this instance the mind-modelling of Bonnie, which has developed throughout the chapter, is supported by the narrator's description of her frowning which frames her response to Harmon. The third example is taken from the chapter in the novel where Olive and Henry find themselves held hostage in a hospital (Blue-Mask is one of the hostage-takers). Here, Olive's thoughts, although mediated through a narrator, are presented in a way that it appears we have privileged access and telepathic insight into her mind. In the fourth example, Olive's direct speech is followed by a response from Christopher which provides a counterpart to the reader's own response to Olive's predicament. Up until this point in the chapter, the narrative has largely been filtered through Olive's perspective so that the reader is arguably positioned to feel sympathetic towards Olive's plight in having to deal with staying with Christopher and his new wife, Ann. Christopher's alternative view of events, framed explicitly in "you'll see that the story is quite different", not only encourages the reconfiguration of our mind-model of Olive in this chapter but also, crucially, invites us to re-examine her personality and relationship with her family across the novel as a whole. And, in the final example Olive's description of Jack Kennison is realised in both direct thought "*Old horror*" and in the free indirect discourse that follows which, although again filtered through a narrating presence, represents Olive's evaluative stance towards the man who later becomes her second husband, "a big belly", "slouching", "arrogant furtiveness".

Of course, across the act of reading a novel, readerly models of a character are updated and developed as more information becomes known about them. Drawing on Text World Theory,[23] Stockwell outlines how readers "mind cast"[24] to track different iterations, or "enactors"[25], of a character across any spatial and temporal shifts that might occur in the narrative, or across ontological boundaries such as those inherent in examples of hypotheticality, speculation, desire and negation. In essence then, tracking a character across a series of narrative events involves the reader mapping out a path of attention across the different enactors in various connected mental representations,

[23]Werth.
[24]Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, 184.
[25]See Gavins, 41.

or text-worlds, of narrative events. This tracking may occur within a discrete episode (we return to this in our analysis of "A Little Burst" in Section 6) as well as more generally throughout a text as a whole in a process of mind-casting across multiple text-world boundaries that may occur from chapter to chapter, or in the case of *Olive Kitteridge*, across each of the component stories. The complexity of characterisation across a whole text means that readers are often asked to keep a mental note of seemingly contradictory enactors (just as with real life counterparts) which nonetheless may be imagined a single, evolving entity, or what is known as a "composite enactor".[26]

4. Reader Reviews

A brief survey of the top five community reviews of *Olive Kitteridge* on the Goodreads website reveals that those readers who gave the text a rating of five stars (out of a possible five total) similarly acknowledge the emotional resonance invited by Olive's characterisation. Although resonance is a term used impressionistically and in non-scholarly contexts,[27] in the context of this analysis the term refers to the "a tone [or] atmosphere in the mind that seems to persist long after the pages […] have been put down".[28]

> Strout's use of the novel-in-stories form, however, is pitch-perfect for the fundamental story she tells. She introduces us to a title character who appears to be considerably less than worthy as the subject of an entire novel. Then, through the use of deeply honest and insightful chapters about nearly unrelated characters, she paints a picture of this character that is infinitely richer than I originally assumed. And here is the beauty of Strout's use of this form; she lead me to discover that the assumptions I'd made about a complex human being (as each inherently is) were necessarily as narrow as the context of their formulation. (R1)

> The characters were very well developed, the town vividly described, and the emotions raw. Olive Kitteridge left me feeling very unsettled. I admire her quiet strength, her forthrightness, her realistic views of life, and the fact that she controls her emotions. I hate her brusqueness, her self-centeredness, and her difficulty with accepting changes. She was a complex character, definitely not your stereotypical cranky old lady. Each story is presented from different viewpoints and shows Olive's many sides as she interacts with family, neighbors and friends, as she experiences age, loneliness, grief and love. The characters are realistically drawn with such an emotional depth that I found I could easily identify with them and even see similarities to people I know. Olive Kitteridge makes me hate those qualities in myself that are like hers and makes me look at others with more patience and a less judgmental eye. (R2)

> Personally, I felt the tales had maybe a bit too much resonance. I recognized emotions, if not always specific situations, (and yeah, some specific situations too) that I have experienced, and saw through the eyes of a third party experiences that were likely to have been a part of the history of people in my life. Is it a good thing that a writer can make you squirm through such recognition?

> Olive grows as a character, gaining some self-awareness, softening some hard edges, finding some light in a dark place. (R3)

[26]Giovanelli, 102.
[27]Whiteley, 65.
[28]Stockwell, *Texture*, 17. See also Whiteley.

I connected and related to Olive so deeply, I spoke out loud to her a few times, during this re-read. I wanted her to know that I understood, that I often felt the same way. I didn't want her to feel alone.

This isn't a perfect novel. A couple of the stories (that have too little Olive in them) lag; but I wasn't looking for perfection, just the absence of pretension. (R4)

As I was reading I kept thinking, ok, the theme is life goes on no matter what; you just keep on living. Concurrently I happened to be reading a great novel, Portraits of a Marriage, by the Hungarian Sandor Marai, which I also reviewed. As her marriage is disintegrating, one of the characters in that book, rails, in effect, "What am I, a tree? I can't just go on LIVING; what I am supposed to live FOR?" Maybe Olive finds someone in the last chapter, but this "FOR" is the big unanswered question. Still a great book of interconnected stories, with Olive's hands making the connections. (R5)[29]

The reviews identify how Olive's representation invites readers to reflect on their own lives, such that the reading experience holds up a mirror to their personal circumstances. This is mentioned in R2, for example, who comments: "I could easily identify with [the characters] and even see similarities to people I know". While they are able to draw parallels between the characters in these stories and their own acquaintances, the reviewer also signposts how this experience is both positive and negative: "Olive Kitteridge makes me hate those qualities in myself that are hers and makes me look at others with more patience and a less judgmental eye". Similarly, R3 talks about this process of self-reflection as being a little too uncomfortable: they describe how the "tales had maybe a bit too much resonance", in that the narrative voices in the collection enabled the reviewer to detach from their own perspective and instead invite this self-reflection at a distance, "through the eyes of a [sic] third party experiences". For both reviewers R2 and R3, reading this text brings about self-reflection which is not an entirely pleasant experience, being seen as "unsettling" (R2) and making readers "squirm through such recognition" (R3).

The reviewers also highlight some of the features of the short story cycle (outlined in Section 2 of this article) as having an impact on their reading experience. R5 acknowledges the absence of resolution and the "big unanswered question" at the centre of the text, while reviewers R1, R2 and R5 comment on the multi-faceted perspectives within the stories. Some reviewers explicitly acknowledge Strout's position as writer of this collection (e.g., R1 comments on "Strout's use of form"; R3 questions the capacity of "a writer" for making readers squirm), and a metaphor of the narrator/author as an artist who physically creates the worlds of the story is also drawn upon to frame the writing process: the characters are not only written but "realistically drawn" (R2), and Strout is described as "paint[ing] a picture" of Olive (R1). This image is taken even further in the comments of R5, whose conceptualisation of Olive shows that, for this reader, her character has reached the "point of impersonation".[30] Olive is construed not just as a character within the text, but also as an agent pulling the narrative strings: it is "Olive's hands making connections" (R5) between the stories in the cycle. This point of impersonation can similarly be seen in R4's comments, who says: "I connected and

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[29]Goodreads website, Olive Kitteridge reviews. The original reviews are longer and only those sections relating to Olive specifically have been reproduced here. The reviews are anonymised and are labelled as R1-R5 in this discussion. All spelling and punctuation reproduced as in the original reviewer posts.
[30]Stockwell, Cognitive Poetics, 183.

related to Olive so deeply, I spoke out loud to her a few times, during this re-read. I wanted her to know that I understood, that I often felt the same way. I didn't want her to feel alone". In such accounts, characters are treated like real-world friends or acquaintances, and readers are enacting parasocial relationships[31] with these characters as though they are people with whom we could speak, or about whose wellbeing we should be concerned. It could be argued, then, that these readers are able to build a rich mental model for Olive's character, experiencing an emotional resonance that persists outside of the pages of the book.

Sections 5 and 6 of this paper outline how Olive is represented throughout three stories, "Pharmacy", "Incoming Tide", and "A Little Burst", analysing particular stylistic strategies that may help readers to mind-model her character. We begin, in Section 5, with an exploration of readers' first impressions of her character as perceived through external perspectives, before moving to a story where the narrative events are filtered through Olive's consciousness providing the reader with seemingly privileged access into her thought processes.

5. First Impressions in "Pharmacy" and "Incoming Tide"

The opening two stories in the collection are told from perspectives external to Olive. The first story, "Pharmacy" foregrounds the point of view of Henry, Olive's husband, and the initial impression of Olive is not a sympathetic one. The story opens as Henry reminisces on his journey to work in a pharmacy in a neighbouring town:

> Retired now, he still wakes early and remembers […] the light emerging through the early fog, the brief sight of the bay off to his right, then the pines, tall and slender, and almost always he rode with the window partly open because he loved the smell of the pines and the heavy salt air, and in the winter he loved the smell of the cold. (101)

That the story opens with a detailed description of travelling through Crosby foregrounds the importance of location in the collection, which forms a linking thematic structure across the stories. Here, though written in third person, readers are positioned close to Henry's point of view in this memory of driving through proximal spatial deixis ("off to his right"), and through the sensory and evaluative language ("he loved the smell of the pines"). We also experience a deictic shift in this description, as Henry revisits emotive memories of his working life though "[r]etired now". This alignment with Henry in this chapter/story means that the access readers are given to Olive's internal thoughts is closed off, and all descriptions are therefore filtered and subjectified through his perception of their relationship.

Compared to the description of Crosby, readers' first impressions of Olive through Henry's focalisation are less favourable and markedly less poetic. Olive's voice is first encountered through the presentation of direct speech, which marks her "apparently autonomous character's personality, mood and perspective".[32]

> "Mousy", his wife said, when he hired the new girl. "Looks just like a mouse".

[31]Horton and Wohl.
[32]Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, 179.

Denise Thibodeau had round cheeks, and small eyes that peeped through her brown-framed glasses. "But a nice mouse", Henry said. "A cute one".

"No one's cute who can't stand up straight," Olive said. (3)

In this exchange, Olive's voice is presented as direct and oppositional, passing a negative judgement on Henry's new co-worker despite Henry's views. Beyond the content of Olive's speech, the reporting clauses are minimal and unembellished, placing more emphasis on what has been said rather than the manner in which it was delivered. This fleeting encounter with Olive's voice is elaborated on in subsequent examples of the direct speech attributed to her character. As the story progresses, the reporting clauses provide greater evaluation regarding how her "personality, mood and perspective" are perceived by Henry. This can be noted in the following two "suspensions", which occur where narratorial description appears between two items of direct speech:[33]

"Yes, it most certainly is too goddam much to ask!" *Olive had almost spit, her fury's door flung open.* "You have no idea how tired I am, teaching all day, going to foolish meetings where the goddam principal is a moron!" (8, added emphasis)

'Henry's mind seemed to take a picture of that moment, his son's indistinctive deference at the very same time they heard Olive's voice in the next room. "Oh, you poor child", *in a voice that Henry would always remember – filled with such dismay that all her outer Olive-ness seemed stripped away.* "You poor, poor child". (20, added emphasis)

The suspensions in these two examples add further information about Olive's speech specifically through the use of metaphor. Earlier in the story, Henry's reminisces on his work at the pharmacy and uses a metaphor to describe the store and his day-to-day roles within it: he describes how "the ritual was pleasing, as though the old store […] was a person altogether steady and steadfast" (8). Here, Henry draws on a BUILDING IS A PERSON conceptual metaphor[34] to conceptualise the store as something (or rather someone) dependable and reliable in his life. This metaphor is inverted in this first suspension where the description of "her fury's door flung open" (8) frames an EMOTIONS ARE BUILDINGS metaphor. This switched metaphor maps Olive as a character given to extreme emotions, a person "changed and changeable" (4) compared with the calmer, steadier parts of Henry's life. In this second suspension, on the other hand, Olive's "Oliveness" is conceptualised as an external layer; a type of armour or wrapping that can be "stripped away" by emotion. The conceptualisation of personality as a layer that can be detached or removed also underpins other metaphors in this story. Following an exchange between Henry and Olive in the garden after work one evening, for example, he describes how "He wanted to put his arms around her, but she had a darkness that seemed to stand beside her like an acquaintance that would not go away" (4). Again, here Olive's emotions are personified as an unwelcome and lingering visitor who forms a physical barrier between them, but one who is separate from her rather than an intrinsic part of her being. This conceptualisation of darkness describes Olive's

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[33]Stockwell and Mahlberg.
[34]We draw here on the classic treatment of conceptual metaphor in Lakoff and Johnson where a *source* domain of knowledge is used to give structure to another, the *target* domain. Conceptual metaphors are written in small capitals using the formula TARGET DOMAIN(S) IS/ARE SOURCE DOMAIN(S).

depression as a kind of absence, Cross[35] argues, which can be further seen in other stories in the collection. Though clearly an emotional person, Olive can also be perceived as distanced and detached. Such metaphorical language and detailed suspensions create a kind of mediating subjectivity between the text and reader which gives further prominence to Henry's subjective perception. Specifically, these descriptions combine to foreground his perception of Olive as expressive and changeable from the outset of the collection.

The second story, "Incoming Tide", is focalised through a character who is not as emotionally close to Olive, though arguably offers a more sympathetic account of her character. The protagonist in this story, Kevin Coulson, is a former student of Olive's who has grown up and moved away from Crosby. In this story, Kevin returns to his childhood home, and sits in his car looking out at the marina and contemplating his suicide. Olive, seeing Kevin in the car, opens the passenger door and sits beside him. Two external perspectives of Olive are recounted in this story: the narrative is predominantly told through Kevin's perspective, though it briefly spotlights the character Patty, who works at the marina diner and who watches them from a distance.

Through Kevin's account readers receive direct descriptions of Olive's "physical experience and external cues (e.g., gestures, manner and body language)".[36]

> He looked away, and his body jumped a little to see a woman staring through the passenger window, her face close, staring straight at him.

> Mrs. Kitteridge. Holy shit. She looked exactly the same as she had in the classroom in seventh grade, that forthright, high-cheekboned expression; her hair was still dark. He had liked her; not everyone had. (40)

As observed earlier, readers' perceptions of a character can be mediated through "[t]he reactions of other characters (including the narrator) who can serve as counterparts for your own reading response".[37] Readers are positioned with Kevin through the use of free direct thought ("Holy shit") as he experiences surprise on seeing "a woman" so close to the window; a description modified when he recognises his seventh-grade teacher and identifies her more specifically as "Mrs. Kitteridge". Terms of address used to describe characters in stories can often be revealing, and that she remains as "Mrs. Kitteridge" throughout this second story (compared with "Olive" in the first), positions her at a greater emotional distance for this character and consequently for the readers. Here, she takes on the role of a former teacher catching up with a former student, and despite the undercurrent of emotion at the centre of the story, these roles remain in place throughout this short narrative. Furthermore, this first physical description of Olive tallies with her introduction in "Pharmacy". Readers are able to build up a mental model of a character who is bold and direct. The few details of her face – with "that forthright, high cheekboned expression" and her "dark" hair – align with features readers might prototypically map for such a character. Like Henry, Kevin additionally draws on metaphors in his description of Mrs. Kitteridge:

> He felt her presence, and imagined – fleetingly – that an elephant sat next to him, one that wanted to be a member of the human kingdom, and sweet in an innocent way, as though her

[35]Cross.
[36]Ibid., 179.
[37]Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, 179.

stubs of forelegs were folded on her lap, her trunk moving just a little as she finished speaking. (53)

In this comparison, Olive's physical presence is framed even more evocatively. The conceptualisation of Olive as an elephant defamiliarises her from the rest of "the human kingdom", explicitly mapping the properties of innocence, size, and solidity onto her. This more favourable and more emotional description is similarly echoed by the character Patty, who notices Olive and Kevin in the car and describes how Olive's presence there "gave her a feeling of safety" (48).

The rest of the story features the conversation between Kevin and Olive as they sit side by side in the car looking out at the marina, and accordingly it moves away from extended physical descriptions of the characters to include mainly direct speech presentation. The conversation progresses from polite enquiries to more personal disclosures about Olive's father's suicide:

"Visiting?" Mrs. Kitteridge prompted. "From New York City? Isn't that where you live now?"[38]

"No note," Mrs. Kitteridge said. "Oh, Mother had such a hard time with that no-note business." (46)

The absence of suspensions or more detailed reporting clauses attributes further autonomy to Olive's character and provides unmediated access to her voice. At the same time, however, the lack of intervention and framing through a close focalisation in Olive's speech also ironically creates greater ambiguity: we might question to what extent she is picking up on Kevin's thoughts and intentions at this moment.

Our analysis in this section demonstrates how readers are provided with first impressions of Olive and how, crucially, these invitations to mind-model her may come from different sources. In particular, the perspectives of other characters and their idiosyncratic ways of framing Olive's behaviours leads to an effect similar to that of refraction. In other words, our mind-casts of Olive across various enactors are cumulatively re-directed to capture the ongoing and dynamic process of modelling her mind as presented to us by others.

6. Olive as Focalizer: "A Little Burst"

In this section, we analyse "A Little Burst", the first story in the novel in which Olive is a primary focaliser. Although there is some narratorial mediation, the events of the story are largely filtered through Olive's perspective and so the reader is positioned to adopt the attitudes and stance conveyed by Olive. In Stockwell's terms, the effect of such a narrative style is that the reader appears to have access to Olive's mind with a telepathic ability to follow her thought processes.

The chapter takes place immediately following the marriage of Christopher, Olive and Henry's son, to Suzanne and the events are located in the house that Olive and Henry have built for Christopher but in which he now lives with Suzanne. At the beginning of the story, Olive removes herself from the wedding guests and takes herself to her

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[38]Ibid., 40.

son's bedroom where the remainder of the action takes place, initially lying down on "Christopher's (and Suzanne's) queen-size bed"(74); immediately then, Olive positions herself in contrast to Suzanne who has replaced her as the female figure in her son's life. Throughout the remainder of the story, Strout presents Olive's reflections on Suzanne and in doing so allows the reader to model and track Olive's mind in a more direct way than in previous stories.

One immediate way in which Olive and Suzanne are compared is through their physical appearance, a comparison which is foregrounded at the beginning of the story and which plays a significant part in influencing Olive's actions at the end. The initial description of Olive's dress "made from a gauzy green" (75) is significant since the comments that Olive believes Suzanne makes about it later on lead to the story's shocking conclusion. Olive's size is also foregrounded early on, creating a cohesive link back to the earlier stories such as Kevin's description of her in "Incoming Tide" that we discussed in the previous section. Whereas Suzanne is variously described as physically attractive, "thin and small-breasted" (82), Strout repeatedly emphasises Olive's size:

> Olive is a big person. She knows this about herself, but she wasn't always big, and it still seems something to get used to. It's true she has always been tall and frequently felt clumsy, but the business of being *big* showed up with age; her ankles puffed out, her shoulders rolled up behind her neck, and her wrists and hands seemed to become the size of a man's. (75)

This section, like others in the story, is narrated in the third person but there is the sense of Olive's own thought processes being foregrounded and presented to the reader. Further examples that follow such as "But the dress worked out well, she reminds herself" (75) similarly utilise free indirect discourse[39] in presenting third person narration together with elements of Olive's perspective so as to give the sense of some privileged access into her thoughts, albeit with the retention of some narratorial distance.

The comparison of the two women is perhaps most marked in the episode with one of Suzanne's nieces. The girl, who appears suddenly in the doorway, had previously sulked when she was meant to sprinkle petals on the ground during the wedding ceremony but is calmed down by Suzanne, whom Olive realises "could do things that others could not" (78). In contrast, Olive's interaction with the girl consists of being told "You look dead" (78) which results in Olive imagining a scenario in which she collapses and dies at the wedding, and being asked about a hair that is growing in a mole on her chin. Olive's response that it is ""From little girls I've eaten up […]"" (79), unlike Suzanne's calming behaviour, frightens the girl away.

The reader's modelling of Olive's mind is also facilitated by the way in which the spatial parameters of the bedroom are presented in relation to the rest of the house and the events taking place within it. The reader is positioned close, both spatially and emotionally, to Olive through the use of specific deictic markers that anchor our attention onto Olive. As the story progresses, we follow events from Olive's perspective so that sounds "make their way from the front of the house" (75), the living room is described as "in there" (75) locating it at a distance from Olive's current spatial position; elsewhere we are led, filtered through Olive's senses to perfumes "down the hall" and cigarette smoke

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[39]See Leech and Short, 260–70.

"in the back garden" (76). Later events are anchored so as to maintain the spatial deictic centre identified with Olive and thus to further facilitate the modelling of her mind since attention is not redirected onto other characters' thought processes, unless of course those are embedded in the thought of and focalised through Olive.

An important way in which we track Olive in this story is through a series of flashbacks and projections into the future that we imagine with Olive as we follow her thought as she lies on the bed and so mind-cast our attention across multiple enactors of her. These range from moments where the temporal deictic parameters of the story change so that we are asked to track back to a previous enactor of Olive (and/or others), such as when she and Henry designed and built the house for Christopher, when she recounts the event at the wedding with Suzanne's niece and the rose petals, when Olive recounts how she and Henry believed that Christopher would marry other potential love interests before he met and settled with Suzanne, and when Suzanne shows Olive her engagement ring only six weeks after meeting Christopher. On other occasions we share the vision of an alternative past with Olive such as her imagined death from a heart attack at the wedding or, in this example, where Olive imagines the future scenario of the house she has lovingly had built being destroyed:

> […] she has a momentary image of the house collapsing; pipes breaking, floorboards snapping, walls folding over. (76)

In all of these examples, then, the reader has to navigate ontological boundaries to keep a record of the various enactors of Olive that exist both in the present narrative of the story as focalised by Olive and the distinctive spatial and temporal spaces that are cued up by her thought processes and imagination. Given that all of these movements are framed explicitly through Olive's own voice, albeit with some minimal narratorial intrusion in the examples of free indirect discourse, the effect is one which develops a richly mind-modelled character of Olive as part of an ongoing composite that is continually updated to the exclusion of other characters; indeed the mind-modelling of the other characters only becomes possible through the words of Olive. In this way, and as we demonstrate later in this section, the reader is crucially positioned to model the minds of Henry, Christopher and Suzanne in ways which are aligned to Olive's mediating subjectivity.

As the story progresses, the illusion of telepathy allows the reader to reconnect some of the narrative threads around Olive's relationships with Henry and Christopher, and anticipate some of the ways in which these relationships will pan out across the remainder of the novel. The moments where Henry finds Olive in the bedroom provide insight into the couple's shared thoughts on Christopher and Suzanne's relationship and their wedding; for some of those moments, the narrative perspective shifts so that joint focalisation now is foregrounded:

> *They expected* at one point that he would marry his office assistant, but that didn't last very long. (80, added emphasis)

> […] Henry and Olive are silent, *gazing* at the foot of the bed […] *They have been* almost whispering, but at the sound of footsteps in the hallway, *both of them turn* toward the half-open door with perky, pleasant expressions on their faces. (81, added emphasis)

The description here in "A Different Road" foreshadows the intimacy they share, albeit in very different circumstances, and offers a stark contrast to the loneliness Olive feels following Henry's stroke ("Tulips") and then his death ("Basket of Trips"). Equally, Olive's relationship with Christopher, as presented within Olive's thoughts on his marriage to Suzanne, is outlined so that the reader starts to make connections across Olive's life: Christopher's own struggles with mental health remind Olive of her father, inviting the reactivation of a readerly schema first constructed in "Incoming Tide". The connection is explicitly framed in the temporal shift to direct speech in Olive's words to her father ("Oh, Father, we all have times when we feel blue", 87) and in the return to free indirect discourse ("The wrong response, as it turned out", 87). In turn, Olive connects Christopher's mental health to her own reflections on being a parent and the combination of anguish and jealousy that she feels towards Suzanne, here dismissively described as "Dr Sue" (87).

Olive's thoughts on Christopher's mental health are provoked by the comments that she hears Suzanne and other guests at the wedding make about her family. Unknown to them, Olive can hear them talking outside the window from within the bedroom. Asked about her relationship with her in-laws, Suzanne's responses from outside are partly inaudible in the room, which frustrates Olive who "strains her head forward to make out words in the sounds of the women's murmuring" (85). Here of course, the reader is positioned with Olive so that we have to accept her representation of events. Most crucially, Olive's inference that Suzanne is referring to her dress when she says ""I couldn't believe it. I mean would she really wear it"" (85) is the only information that the reader has; the readerly sense of telepathy here thus appears to extend across from Olive to Suzanne and influences the way that both we and Olive interpret Suzanne's actions and motivations.

This aligning of readerly perspective with Olive is also evident in the metaphor that Olive draws on throughout the story. First introduced at the beginning where Olive describes herself as "moving underwater"(74), the metaphor is extended to encompass a series of interrelated metaphors, KNOWLEDGE IS MOTION, KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT, and UP IS GOOD/DOWN IS BAD, which position the reader to side with Olive:

> […] for Olive it is as though these women are sitting in a rowboat above her while she sinks into the murky water […] Seaweed murmurs, and Suzanne's oar slices through the water again. (85–86)

Olive's inability to completely decipher the talking outside the window and the subsequent sense of alienation she feels both increase her hostility towards Suzanne and precipitate the events that occur at the end of the story. The explicit comparison between Olive and Suzanne is now framed within Olive's own thought process. She presents herself as passive and acted on both by Suzanne whose "oar slices' through the water again" (86) and by her own anxiety and distress which assume an agentive role through Olive, "But something stunned and fat and black moves through her" (86).

Olive's inertia drives the end of the story in which agency is reconfigured as Olive takes revenge on Suzanne. The final few pages provide the reader with exclusive insight (Olive even refuses to tell the returning Henry what she has done) into the extent of this revenge as Olive decides to deface and steal some of Suzanne' clothes. The bedroom, now explicitly framed through Olive's mediating consciousness as

"invaded" highlights the final, shattering contrast between the two women: what was "once a place for a boy's socks and T-shirts" (88), now has drawers filled with her daughter-in-law's underwear, "tumbled together, slippery, lacy, colorful things" (88) that explicitly signal the respective, and very different, roles of mother and wife/lover that Olive carves out for herself and Suzanne. The reader's modelling of Olive's mind here is facilitated by the range of attitudinal terms, which act as socially deictic markers sustaining her perspective: "this bride"(88), "hanging pompously" (88), "actually beige" (89), "the girl" (89), and "bagged a husband" (89).

It is in the final three paragraphs that the cumulative effect of tracking Olive's mind in "A Little Burst" reaches its climax. These paragraphs present a series of projections, again filtered through Olive's consciousness, in which she imagines the effects of her actions on Suzanne. These projections are marked by modal expressions that convey states of future certainty and uncertainty:

> […] there will be moments now when Suzanne *will doubt herself.* Calling out "Christopher, are you sure you haven't seen my shoe? Looking through the laundry, her underwear drawer, *some anxiety will flutter* through her. "I *must be* losing my mind, I can't keep track on anything … And my God, what happened to my sweater?" And she *would never know* would she? Because who would mark a sweater, steal a bra, take one shoe? (90, added emphasis)

Crucially, the direct speech that Olive uses to present Suzanne's imagined response invites the reader to further model Suzanne's mind, but again as with the other events in this story, the framing is embedded in Olive's own discourse presentation so that the reader is aware of the constructed nature of Olive's reporting. The projection into further imagined spaces where first the stolen shoe and bra, which Olive has thrown into a bin in the toilet of Dunkin' Donuts, end up "squashed into the dumpster" (90), and second where Olive imagines taking more clothes from Suzanne in order to unsettle her, provide important means for the reader to finalise connections with Olive that move beyond the ontological boundaries of the text-world of the present narrative. Again, the mind-casting that occurs here, foregrounded as it is at the end of the story and as the culmination of Olive's experience in the bedroom related to us through her own consciousness, is, we would argue, likely to create a highly immersive reading experience. This experience would, we suggest, result in a strong emotional identification with Olive, whether that be one that sides with and accepts her behaviour towards Suzanne or else condemns it. As the story and reader's attention deictically return to the narrative present in which Olive prepares to leave Christopher and Suzanne's bedroom, the mind-modelling that Strout encourages us to undertake is undoubtedly facilitated by this first sustained intimacy we have with Olive in the novel.

7. Conclusion

Our analysis in this paper has highlighted the diverse means by which Strout presents Olive to us across three stories in the collection, which we have discussed in relation to readerly mind-modelling and mind-casting. These processes were examined at a micro-level (within each individual story) but clearly, as argued, readers also need to maintain track of multiple enactors across an entire collection. The nature of *Olive*

Kitteridge, as a literary work with stories that might appear both independent and inter-related, thus offers intriguing ways of examining this phenomenon. For example, we would argue that, following "A Little Burst" the reader is positioned to re-examine "Incoming Tide" in the light of Olive's comments about Christopher and her father and that other stories provide similar space for connections to be made visible across stories that might not be obvious on first reading.[40] In her analysis of Strout's later novel *My Name Is Lucy Barton,* Załużna-Łuczkiewicz comments on these stylistic narrative gaps that mark Strout's work, "These strange inexplicable happenings, characters appearing in the text out of nowhere and disappearing without a trace like the man in the macintosh in Joyce's *Ulysses*".[41] In *Olive Kitteridge*, the connections often become obvious in later stories or else ask the reader to review and *remodel* characters' minds. For example, the mother/daughter relationship in "Starving" might be reread in light of Olive's relationship with Christopher. In the same story, Harmon's marriage troubles pre-empt Olive's own admission, in "Security", of how she fell in love with Jim O'Casey. "Security", positioned in between the aftermath of Henry's illness and his death and the introduction to her second husband Jack Kennison, also recentres attention on Olive's relationship with Christopher framed within the echoes of the water imagery of "A Little Burst". And, in "Tulips", the ongoing modelling of Olive's mind, which takes in both Christopher's announcement that he and Suzanne are moving to California and Henry's stroke, is mediated through the framing story of her interaction with Louise Larkin, whose own son has been imprisoned for murder, and thus taken away from her. The nature of Strout's writing means that mind-modelling and casting also takes place across discrete works; for example, *Olive Again* introduces the reader to characters and scenarios from *Olive Kitteridge*,[42] a strategy that Strout replicates with her Amgash trilogy.[43]

Though the linking thematic structures of place, time and family typical of the short story cycle are used to structure *Olive Kitteridge*,[44] it is clear that Olive's characterisation, and the filtering of her character across different stories, creates the predominant cohesive element in this collection. The processes of mind-modelling, mediation and mind-casting mean that Olive is continuously placed on-stage throughout as the focus of readerly attention. As well as creating an immersive experience in reading, we further argue that the layering of mind-models of character perspectives in *Olive Kitteridge* may also impact on the felt resonance of the text after reading, as observed in the discussion of the reader data in Section 4 of this paper. Arguably, the high engagement readers are invited to experience in building up Olive's character and in drawing inferences from the text plays a key role in how readers interact with this text. While an under-studied genre within literary criticism[45] – and also within stylistics – this literary linguistic

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[40]For an account of the impact of re-reading on attentional prominence within a short story, see Harrison and Nuttall, "Cognitive Grammar and Reconstrual: Re-experiencing Margaret Atwood's "The Freeze-Dried Groom"" and "Re-reading as Retelling: Re-evaluations of Perspective in Narrative Fiction".

[41]Załużna-Łuczkiewicz, 55.

[42]In fact, *Olive Again* also invites reconnections with other characters such as Jim and Bob Burgess who first appear in *The Burgess Boys*.

[43]The "Amgash trilogy" is the set of books that begins with *My Name is Lucy Barton* and continues with *Anything is Possible* and *Oh William!* Amgash is the town in which the main protagonist of the first novel, Lucy Barton, is brought up.

[44]Smith, 1–11.

[45]Nagel.

analysis has demonstrated that the short story cycle offers a distinctive kind of text-driven character-building which is complex and nuanced, and continuously refreshed and revivified through the tessellating perspectives inherent in the form.

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The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

ORCID

Chloe Harrison ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9963-3208
Marcello Giovanelli ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8470-3800

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