

# Prose Cycle

## (Narrative Cycle; Story Cycle)

A term in literary theory by which one might determine the external connections between the stories comprising the given cycle. In *A Dictionary of Literary Terms (Słownik terminów literackich)*, edited by Janusz Sławiński, under the cycle and its related terms, we find the following definitions:

Novel sequence – a form of literary cycle: a series of novels tied together into an overarching whole by means of a compositional frame that embraces them all (e.g. *One Thousand and One Nights*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*), or with the help of a common thematic element (be it a character or a motif) that appears in each constituent novel, (e.g. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novels, Ilya Ehrenburg's *Thirteen Pipes*) or through the narrator's continuous point of view towards the portrayed world dispersed throughout the sequence's installments (e.g. Maria Dąbrowska's *People from Over There*), or finally, through a conceptual problem that matures throughout the sequence (e.g. Zofia Nałkowska's *Medallions*). In the eighteenth century, the novel sequence became one of the sources of the literary novel<sup>1</sup>.

A separate entry defines the literary cycle:

Literary cycle – a set of works belonging to the same genre and tied into an overarching whole by a commonality of content (a literary character, motifs, ideas), either through a similarity of compositional resolutions, a compositional frame, or even the unity of the literary subject. Each work included in the cycle tends to maintain an advanced structural autonomy and might be taken as a self-sufficient whole in itself: e.g. the medieval cycle of knights' *chansons de geste*) or a sonnet cycle (Mickiewicz's *Crimean Sonnets*).<sup>2</sup>

The definition of the cycle given above explicitly emphasizes the necessity of an external linkage between the stories comprising a given cycle (the presence of a compositional frame or connections on the level of the portrayed world). In this way, the definition recalls research on the cycle initiated by the Russian Formalists in the 1970s. American scholars propose yet another view on the criteria that constitute a narrative cycle, in which the indispensable element is the "necessary presence between the stories of a specific link of a semantic nature."<sup>3</sup> In his book *Representative Short Story Cycles of Twentieth Century*, F. L. Ingram calls the story cycle "a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's succes-

<sup>1</sup> Entry for "Novel Sequence", J. Sławiński, in: *Słownik terminów literackich ed. Janusza Sławińskiego*, 2nd edition, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1989, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Entry for "Literary Cycle" J. Sławiński, in: *Słownik terminów literackich ed. Janusz Sławiński*, 2nd edition, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1989, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> K. Jakowska, *O cyklu opowiadań. Z teorii i historii cyklu narracyjnego w Polsce*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie Trans Humana, Białystok 2011, p. 13.

sive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts.”<sup>4</sup> Krystyna Jakowska, one of the best known scholars of cyclicity, considers these terms to be incomplete and therefore offers her own definition of the narrative cycle, calling it: “a collection of various stories in which each story forms a finished whole, and yet all of them are tied together. Due to their coherence, the entirety of the cycle relates to each of its constituent stories as an overarching whole – one that is both semantic and compositional. Each story, then, through its proximity to the cycle, modifies its own meaning – its meaning becomes new and greater than when we read it in isolation.”<sup>5</sup>

Research on the narrative cycle started drawing the interest of Polish literary scholars rather late, in the 1990s. Theories of the poetic cycle, however, gathered interest in Poland much earlier. The most famous study is Wiesława Wantuch’s text *On the Cycle of Lyric Poetry*, in which the author not only defines the concept of the poetic cycle on Polish territory, but also presents three fundamental variants of the literary cycle, supporting each one with appropriate examples. For Wantuch,

The poetic cycle is a composition pulled between two poles: it strives towards closure, exposing specific properties of its structure, which is not the sum of its parts, and towards the autonomy of each individual work entering into the array. Depending on which of these tendencies prevails over the other, it becomes possible to identify three main types of cyclical systems: concentric, linked, and annular (ring-shaped).<sup>6</sup>

In Wantuch’s opinion, the first variant is the most determined one: its most fitting example is so-called “wreaths of sonnets (*soneti di corona*)”, with all constituent works united not only by a common theme, but by a consistent equation: 1+14. Additionally, the beginning of each sonnet becomes the opening verse of the following one. For this reason, one cannot read them out of order, for this would undermine the artfulness of the system. As another example, Wantuch also cites Antoni Słonimski’s *Collected Poems*. The composition of these works is organized around a center that supplies the genre, theme, vocabulary and poetic subject of the first sonnet. Her next example from literature is Mickiewicz’s *Crimean Sonnets*, whose composition is organized in an entirely different manner. We might sort its constituent parts into the following groups: “sonnets of the steppe” (*View of the Mountains from the Kozłow Steppe*), “the sea sonnets” (*Quiet Sea, Sailing, Storm*), and “the mountain sonnets”. In this section, one also finds the confessional sonnets as well as the conversational sonnets between the Pilgrim and Mirza (the sonnets citing Mirza, or the descriptive sonnets).

The composition of the Crimean Sonnets might be compared to an artfully rendered chain, in which each element, not so similar to the ones that come before and after it, undoubtedly belong to the same pattern and extend it (...). Mickiewicz’s cycle hangs together by means of easily detectable and consistent linkages. Its continuity essentially becomes an organizational structure that is beyond definition and outside of genre.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> F. L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*, Mouton, The Hague 1971, p. 19

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> W. Wantuch, *O poetyce cyklu lirycznego*, in: *Miejsca wspólne. Szkice o komunikacji literackiej i artystycznej*, ed. Edward Balcerzan and Seweryn Wyslouch, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1985, p.43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47.

The third kind of cycle – the annular cycle – is exemplified by Bolesław Leśmian's *Figures (Postacie)*: "Compared to the previous examples, Leśmian's cycle seems to be the least coherent. Its constituent works differ in terms of their length, their rhyming schemes, and their vocabulary (...). It is only the markedly "ring-like" structure of the opening and concluding poems that allows us to detect one consistent speaker and uncover proof that allows us to ascribe all of the texts to him."<sup>8</sup>

In her analysis of poetic cycles, Wantuch evokes not only individual examples, but a number of overarching theses concerning all literary works collected into cycles. The scholar brings special focus to the necessary conditions for a cycle's coherence, as described by Maria Renata Mayenowa:

A coherent text must meet the following criteria: 1) it must be ascribed to one speaker, which is to say: each "I want", "I know", "I feel", "I believe" in all modal frames throughout the text must contain an "I" that refers to a consistent person or consistent group of people; 2) it must have the same addressee, which is to say: each "you" of all possible modal frames must refer to a consistent person or consistent group of people; 3) finally, it must have one consistent subject.<sup>9</sup>

The second important element is the emphasis on the necessity of an active reader who must recognize the basis for a collection's cyclicity either by drawing exclusively from the system of texts composing the given cycle, or perhaps by utilizing their own background knowledge on metatextual information provided by a given text in order to accurately read the information presented therein.

Systematizing concepts of cyclicity in reference to prose is much more complicated. As Bogumiła Kaniewska has pointed out, the novel sequence "belongs to those forms of "indeterminate" genre: it is simultaneously a united whole and a collection of wholes, one text and a sequence of texts, delimited twice over."<sup>10</sup> Most scholars treat the cycle as an exclusively compositional phenomenon. In his text *The Composition of the Literary Cycle (Kompozycja cyklu literackiego)*, Jan Trzynadłowski defines the poetic cycle "as a system of rigors determining the composition of successive works as an explicit set: a coherent whole comprised of subordinate organisms"<sup>11</sup> while the German scholar Rolf Fieguth considers the cycle to be a derivative genre, claiming that "despite the broad spectrum of variations that appear within its [the cycle's – P.M.] scope or revolution, it exhibits surprisingly consistent genre properties."<sup>12</sup>

Krystyna Jakowska has noted that the linking of a cycle's constituent texts can be developed on several levels. They can be linked on an external level, using a visible compositional frame,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 48-49.

<sup>9</sup> M. R. Mayenowa, *Poetyka teoretyczna*, Wrocław 1978, p. 256.

<sup>10</sup> Bogumiła Kaniewska, *Między cyklem a powieścią*, p. 23-35

<sup>11</sup> J. Trzynadłowski, *Kompozycja cyklu literackiego*, "Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Prace literackie IX", issue 67, Wrocław 1967.

<sup>12</sup> R. Fieguth, *Rozpierzchłe gałązki. Cykliczne i skojarzeniowe formy kompozycyjne w twórczości Adama Mickiewicza*, trans. M. Zieliński, Warsaw 2001, p. 28.

the narrator's attitude, a problem, theme, identified hero, or portrayed world.<sup>13</sup> On the "textual and metatextual" level, which is to say, the internal one, texts can be linked by integrated titles, slogans, beginnings, endings, a "delineation of a cycle" and the linear sequencing of stories.<sup>14</sup> Reconstructing the total sense of a cycle is only possible through the process of reading the collected stories in a linear order.

To develop a history of the narrative cycle in Poland, Jakowska distinguishes a few basic types of narrative cycles: the historical cycle, the portrait cycle, the autobiographical cycle, the "philosophical" or issue-based cycle, and the "intertextual" cycle. The first of these focuses as its title suggests, on historical events. Examples of these events include: the January Uprising (E. Orzeszkowa, *Gloria victis*, A. Strug, *Ojcowie nasi*), the post-uprising repressions (W. Sieroszewski, *W matni. Nowele jakuckie*, A. Szymański, *Szkice*), the 1905 revolution (A. Niemojewski, *Ludzie rewolucji*, A. Strug, *Ludzie podziemni*, E. Słoński, *W więzieniu*), World War I and the Polish-Russian War of 1920 (J. Kaden-Bandrowski, *Mogily*, Z. Kisielewski, *Krwawe drogi*, Z. Nałkowska, *Tajemnice krwi*, W.S. Reymont, *Za frontem*, K. Wierzyński, *Granice świata*), World War II (Z. Nałkowska, *Medaliony*, W. Solski, *Opowieść o Szejku*, K. Wierzyński, *Pobojowisko*), and in particular, the following themes: German concentration camps (T. Borowski, *Kamienny świat*, J. Andrzejewski, *Noc*), Soviet labor camps (H. Naglerowa, *Kazachstańskie noce*, P. Bednarski, *Błękitne śniegi*), and the Katyń massacre (W. Odojewski, *Zabezpieczanie śladów*, J. Trznadel, *Z popiołów czy wstaniez? Opowiadania "stamtąd"*). A robust group of cycles is devoted to themes of the Holocaust (A. Sandauer, *Śmierć liberała*, J. Mauer, *Liga ocalałych*, K. Żywulska, *Pusta woda*) as well as Martial Law (J. Anderman, *Brak tchu*, D. Terakowska, *Guma do żucia*). The fragmentary form of these stories perfectly accommodates the nature of the experiences described, capturing their lack of linearity.

Jakowska divides her next group of cycles - the portrait cycle - into "character sketches," "galleries," cycles of naturalist portraits, and realist portraits. The so-called "character sketches" are "strings of small narrative forms collected together (...) as a rule deprived of a definitive end".<sup>15</sup> These have been created since antiquity, and are situated at the border between the cycle and the series. Long ago, character sketches were distinct for their satirical character, although in the twentieth century they deftly tackled psychological and social themes (Zofia Nałkowska's *Charaktery*) and even wartime themes (*Charaktery dawne i ostatnie*, also by Nałkowska). "Galleries", in turn, present images and physiological sketches compiled into collections. They might also be called "albums". They can have a satirical character (A. Niewiarowski, *Galeria panien na wydaniu*) or a nostalgic one (M. Bałucki, *Typy i obrazki krakowskie*). Portrait cycles began to appear towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, most often consisting of short stories or novellas. The most prevalent theme of the portrait cycle is the problem of evil. Among acclaimed portrait cycles, a few deserve our attention: *One* by G. Zapolska and *Zawody* by J. Kaden-Bandrowski. The last type of portrait cycle is the realist portrait, created towards the end of the nineteenth century (M. Konopnicka, *Moi znajomi*, E. Orzeszkowa, *Melancholicy*), in the interwar period (M. Dąbrowska, *Ludzie*

<sup>13</sup>K. Jakowska, *O cyklu opowiadań. Z teorii i historii cyklu narracyjnego w Polsce*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie Trans Humana, Białystok 2011, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. 13.

<sup>15</sup>p. 40.

*stamtąd*, M. Kuncewiczowa, *Dwa księżycy*, H. Boguszevska, *Ci ludzie*), and rarely in the present day. Realist portraits portrayed individual characters immersed in the events and realities of their times. Their protagonists are often assembled together on the basis of contrast – the author selects people coming from diverse environments and representing various viewpoints.

The third group is the autobiographical cycle, which “maps the life cycle of the narrator-protagonist-author, creating a type of *bildungsroman* contained within a story cycle.”<sup>16</sup> This genre evolved out of the autobiographical passions of writers from the twenty-year interwar period. The 1920s and 1930s are rich with cycles portraying the experience of young individuals who grew up in an age that was not free – these include J. Kaden Bandrowski’s *Miasto mojej matki* and M. Dąbrowska’s *Uśmiech dzieciństwa*. Cycles from the 1980s and 1990s portray the life of young people growing up in socialist Poland – K. Nowicki’s *Drugie życie* and M. Nowakowski’s *Portret artysty z czasów dojrzałości* are two examples.

The fourth group is the philosophical cycle, or the issue-based cycle, which tends to mobilizes psychological and social themes. Its lineage reaches back to antiquity. In the twentieth century, cycles of this kind most often expressed the sentiment of a disharmonious world (A. Wat, *Bezrobotny Lucyfer*, W. Gombrowicz, *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania*, E. Stachura, *Jeden dzień*). The last group is the intertextual cycle, which is based on another literary text, such as a prayer (G. Zapolska, *Modlitwa pańska*), a catechism (R. Tomczyk, *Uczynki miłosierne*), or perhaps on the template of the institution of marriage (Z. Nałkowska, *Małżeństwo*). A dialogue with the cycle’s primary source yields a proliferation of meanings and allows the reader to discern additional senses behind the words.

According to Jakowska, to form a history of research on the literary cycle in Poland, one must prioritize tracing a history of frames, or “the most visible, external factor integrating the story cycle”. In classical Polish representations, the cycle’s frame had a distinctly narrative character. The frame often provided its own plot in which the cycle was embedded. In the eighteenth century and even into the nineteenth century, writers were still attempting to work towards a narrative whole. With the passage of time, the plot-oriented frame fell into disuse, although the author’s obligations to a story cycle continue to include the “creation of a narrating character and the development of the story’s scenario: the exposition of where the story is being told and who is listening.”<sup>17</sup> Novel series of the late nineteenth century no longer have an autonomous narrative framework that contains its own plot. Its tone becomes “rambling” – most often belonging to the first-person voice of the author, weaving playfulness together with a “serious” moralizing tone, and being self-referential and free in its composition.

The next change took place with the advent of the naturalist cycle. In this case, the rambling format gave way to a subjective frame with poetic attributes, especially in the works of the Young Poland movement. In twentieth-century stories, the frame was replaced with

<sup>16</sup> K. Jakowska, *Cykl opowiadań próba historii. Intuicje i sugestie*, in: *Cykl literacki w Polsce*, ed. Krystyna Jakowska, Barbara Olech and Katarzyna Sokołowska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, Białystok 2001, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p. 44.

other means for tying together a cycle's constituent texts. Among these Jakowska mentions: "a chronological series of events, wordplay between the titles, a citation from the text's introduction in its conclusion, a logical system, or reference to a template external to the text."<sup>18</sup> Stories concerning World War II are distinct for their return to the frame, most likely due to the renewed need to establish credibility for the described events. The frame is likewise reinforced quite visibly in stories from the 1980s and 1990s. In *The Walls of Hebron* (*Mury Hebronu*), Stasiuk links the last story directly to the first. Leszek Elektrowicz's cycle opens with a "Prologue", and closes with an "Epilogue", a decision that Jakowska interprets as an indication of contemporary writers' compulsion to solidify the frames of their story cycles.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 45.

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# KEYWORDS

*cykl problemowy*

*linked system*

## POETIC CYCLE

*concentric system*

**cyclical system**

*cyclicity*

*lyrical cycle*

**cycle**

*annular system*

### **ABSTRACT:**

This entry attempts to demonstrate the linkages and distinctions that emerge between descriptions of the literary cycle, the novel sequence, and the poetic cycle in the context of the prose cycle, as well as to summarize the current state of research on these issues in Poland. Although research into the matter of cyclicity had already drawn the interest of Russian Formalists, this theme sparked interest in our own country as late as the 1990s, mainly at the initiative of scholars from the University of Białystok's Faculty of Philology. This text attempts to systematize concepts of cyclicity in the prose context with the help of scholarship by Krystyna Jakowska, Bogumiła Kaniewska, Jan Trzynadłowski and Rolf Fieguth.

*novel sequence*

**literary cycle**

**prose cycle**

## HISTORICAL CYCLE

portait cycle

autobiographical cycle

*philosophical cycle*

ISSUE-BASED CYCLE

INTERTEXTUAL CYCLE

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