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Hurley, UK and Trimarco, P

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Less is More: Completing Narratives in Miniature Fiction

Paola Trimarco and Ursula Hurley

Introduction

This essay examines how readers interpret and interact with miniature fiction by completing the narratives in these extremely short stories. This is not to suggest that more traditional short stories have always provided complete narratives, but what we have found with miniature fiction is that the reader is more often required to complete the narrative in order for the story to make sense. At the same time, this inferencing process makes readers respond to these stories as they would to texts belonging to other genres.

Specifically, we will consider the following pieces of writing: an untitled 6-word story by Graham Swift, 'The Kids Are Alright' (148 words) by David Gaffney, 'Water' (186 words) by Fred Leebron, and 'Sparkles' (175 words) by Louise Yeiser. We have chosen these texts because in our opinion each provides a striking illustration of what 'short shorts' require of the reader in order for them to make sense. It could be argued that each text demands more of its readers than the previous; hence the order of our discussion is incremental in terms of the complexity of the texts in question. Common to all four texts are the following:

- Inferences made to comprehend the narrative
- Inferences employed from known social narratives
- Inferences of the types used in reading texts from other genres

Within this general examination of inferences, factors specific to each text will also be analysed.

Overview

Miniature fictions under the title of 'short shorts' began to be anthologised in the 1980s, growing in popularity and prominence over the last two decades until today we have single author collections like Dan Rhodes' *Anthropology* in the best seller charts. These miniaturist texts go by many names, including: sudden fiction, flash fiction, instant fiction, short shorts, prose poems, microfiction, postcard fiction, nanofiction, the hundred-word 'drabble', skinny stories and micro tales¹. There is widespread disagreement over precisely what constitutes each category. Colin Bulman suggests that a short story is traditionally defined as a prose narrative of up to 20,000 words, although a lower threshold of 2000 words usually applies (2007, p. 205). James Thomas proposes that sudden fiction is around 1750 words, while flash fiction is approximately 750 words or less (1992, p. 12). Microfiction is described in one instance as 'a few hundred words' (Gessell, 2004) and in another as 500 words by the literary magazine *Prairie Fire*. The boundaries of these generic distinctions are hotly contested and multiply defined.

The stories used in this paper range from 6 to 186 words and could be covered by these various definitions and categories of very short fictions. Suffice it to say, these stories are well below the word count of the traditional

¹ These terms can be found in various writers' magazines and fiction e-zines, including *Msllexia* and www.redinkwords.com.

short story as defined by Bulman above. Yet, common to all of these miniature fictions is the need to make inferences to complete the narratives.

Six Words by Graham Swift

In early 2007, *The Guardian* set the task to leading contemporary writers to compose a story in just 6 words. Of the 35 resulting short stories, nearly all were humorous; for the purpose of this paper we have chosen one that is typical of the responses:

Funeral followed honeymoon. He was 90.

--Graham Swift

The first inference that the implied reader must make in order for the story to work and be meaningful is that the funeral followed *soon* after the honeymoon. While it is usually the case that people die after their honeymoons, it is usually many years after. Although there is no reference to years, or any time lapse for that matter, the placement of the word 'followed' in between 'funeral' and 'honeymoon' suggests that one came soon after the other.

This inference is aided by the second sentence, 'He was 90.' Following the principles of Grice's Maxims for Cooperative Conversation, the implied reader employs the maxim of relevance by inferring that 'he' was the groom. When the reader is informed that 'he' was 90, the maxim of relevance is employed again; this time leading to the inference that *because* the groom was 90, he died soon after his honeymoon.

To complete this narrative, we need to take into consideration social narratives, namely that the honeymoon is when the newlyweds engage in frequent sex, a narrative that has been realised in comedy television and films for years. This leads to the final inference necessary for the comprehension of this story: that the 90-year-old groom died from having too much sex.

A further inference could be made in this case reflecting a well-known social narrative at the time the Swift story appeared. The heiress and former Playboy centre-fold, Anna Nicole Smith, died soon before Swift's piece was published, bringing her biography back into the news in the UK. Her story, and consequent celebrity, was dominated by the fact that she married a wealthy man of 89 when she was 26. The groom died fourteen months later. This narrative from the life of Anna Nicole Smith fits into part of a larger social narrative of the young woman marrying a wealthy man much older than her, who then dies, leaving her his fortune. This social narrative, with different characters playing the roles, has appeared in films, books, jokes, seaside postcards and the like in Western culture for some time. It could be said that knowing this narrative adds to our comprehension of the Swift story, although this knowledge is not necessary for comprehension in the way that the pragmatic implicatures and inferences mentioned earlier were necessary.

Another aspect of readers' potential responses to this text comes from their recognition that 'Funeral followed honeymoon. He was 90,' imitates lurid tabloid headlines, and could be seen to parody the 'journalese' style with which many readers will be familiar, especially hermetic, or cryptic headlines, which on first reading appear nonsensical or incredible. Again, this aspect is

not essential for our comprehension of the implied narrative, but it adds an extra dimension of humour and social observation for those readers who are equipped to recognise the parody. The sheer brevity of the text, and despite that brevity the calculated decision to suggest sexual activity, could be read as a knowing comment about the prurient interest in the private lives of individuals exhibited by certain sections of the popular press; a comment that is at once critical and humorous, as author and reader share a 'knowing wink' in which they acknowledge that despite their disapproval, they have still enjoyed unpacking the clearly signposted implications about a vastly aged bridegroom and his antics with a much younger bride.

What we also found interesting here is that no one (among our group of readers and colleagues) mentioned how old the bride was. We think this is the case because of these social narratives. The assumption is made that she is a much younger woman than the groom.

Moreover, this story can be seen as crossing genres. Nair (2002) explains that stories such as this, where the reader needs to make inferences and complete the narrative from so little information, are close in genre to riddles. Like riddles the brevity of the Swift narrative boasts their 'advertised unformativeness'. To quote further from Nair, 'So, when we get the point of a story, as when we get a riddle, part of the pleasure is our own cultural savvy. Cleverness pleases us, especially our own...' (p.99).

The Kids Are Alright

This next story appeared in *Transmission*, the short fiction magazine, in 2005 (Issue 2, p.12).

When I heard about the boy whose parents dressed him as a girl until the age of 12 I thought, lucky kid. My parents dressed me until I was thirteen as popular crooner Perry Como. They even encouraged me to carry, but not smoke, a beautiful briarwood pipe and I would stab the air with its stem to emphasise a point and suck on it when deep in thought. Yet I wasn't unhappy; it was normal. My cousin had it much worse as Max Bygraves.

One day I was house-training the dog. The sleeve to Swing Out Perry was on the floor and before I could stop him Engelbert squatted and squeezed a neat little turd right on the middle of Perry's polished inane features.

The next day my mother let me have my fringe cut like Dave Hill out of Slade. Kids have to be allowed to express themselves.

-- David Gaffney

Unlike the Swift story, there is less in the way of pragmatic implicatures or inferences required for comprehension. Furthermore, the social narratives are also more directly referred to by using the names Perry Como, Max Bygraves, Engelbert (presumably Humperdinck) and Dave Hill and by the title itself, alluding to the song 'The Kids Are Alright' released by *The Who* on their 1965 album *My Generation*. By themselves the names of Como and Bygraves are cultural references, but in the context of this story, they create the social narrative of a child being teased by other children or being considered odd for

dressing like an adult and acting like a well-known singer of his parents' generation. The narrator recognises this shared narrative when he says at the start, 'lucky kid', referring to the boy whose parents dressed him as a girl, and later when the narrator says, 'Yet I wasn't unhappy...' as if answering the implied reader's assumptions.

The opening line introduces the theme of inter-generational conflict, also alluding to *The Who* album, with parents insisting upon social practices which appear inappropriate or humiliating to their off-spring. This is a yet another social narrative to which most readers can relate and upon which they can draw in order to comprehend the story. Gaffney feels no need to refer explicitly to *The Who* song, judging that readers in early twenty-first century Britain are likely to make the connection for themselves. However, he does feel it necessary to use 2 of his 150 words explaining that Perry Como is a 'popular crooner'. One reason for this may be that because Como represents a previous generation, his significance is not so readily identifiable to readers. Another reason may be that 'popular crooner' employs the language of the narrator's parents or television announcers of that generation, perhaps with a hint of parody.

The precise and alliterative reference to the 'beautiful briarwood pipe' serves not only as a vivid detail, the specificity of which adds verisimilitude to the narrative, but also as a reminder for those readers who are unsure of Perry Como's identity. The image of a 12-year-old child waving a pipe around as he adopts the mannerisms of a much older man lends a vibrant and original image to the narrative. The detail of the narrator not being allowed to smoke the pipe again invites us to infer reference to the ideological conflict between the conformist respectability of Como fans, compared with followers of bands like *The Who*, who might smoke cigarettes, rather than a pipe, as a mark of their rebellious credentials.

The line 'one day I was house-training the dog' takes the reader from the frame of children to a smaller, more specific frame of one particular day, or in terms of narrative structure, from the orientation to the event. It provides the pivotal incident around which the narrative conflict is resolved. The starkly realised and peculiar image of a dog defecating on a record sleeve (which happens to bear a representation of Perry Como's face) reinforces the cultural materiality in which this story is rooted: not only does its content concern popular recording artists, but it is presented in the magazine as being written on the label in the middle of an LP. In addition, within the narrative it is an event involving a record sleeve that brings about change.

The dog's name is not crucial to the workings of the plot, so it is not imperative for the narrative to explain the reference, but for readers who are suitably equipped with cultural knowledge, the temptation to infer that the dog is named after Engelbert Humperdinck, popular ballad singer of the 1960s, adds to our understanding of a world where families are so obsessed with popular entertainers that they name their children and dogs after them.

The final resolution of the narrative is communicated by implication. The implied reader is invited to surmise that the sight of Engelbert the dog's 'neat little turd' on Perry's 'polished inane features' was in some way a pivotal point for the narrator's mother, who somehow understands, via the actions of the dog, the inappropriateness of having her child ape the dress and mannerisms of an outdated entertainer and allows him instead to copy the hairstyle of a

more contemporary rock musician. The reference to Slade moves the chronology of popular entertainment into the 1970s and the era of glam rock, superseding the *Who* song of the title. Readers might conclude that everybody models themselves on someone, but they must be allowed to choose their icon for themselves.

This narrative has much in common with anecdote: rather than develop psychological depth or a finely nuanced character portrait, as we might anticipate from a literary short story, it is possible to see this story as crossing into the territory of the conversational; a tale told to prove a point or illustrate a theme. The final line, 'kids have to be allowed to express themselves', reads like a maxim or motto, the principle of which has been illustrated by the story.

This emphasis on maxim or motto allows the text to be read as a fable, defined by the University of Victoria's Writer's Guide as:

a short story with a didactic purpose -- illustrating a moral or general truth about human nature, frequently allegorical in nature, and often ending with an epigram...
(1995, <http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/LTFable.html>)

We get the feeling that Gaffney is trying to communicate something about the difficulties of growing up, and how the older generation must allow the younger to find its own way – a general truth about human nature. The final line does function as an epigram, and the names of children and animals within this textual reality, at once improbable, ironic and slightly fantastical, invite the reader to interpret this narrative as verging on the allegorical, something other than a literary short story.

We are reminded of James Thurber's text, 'The Little Girl and the Wolf', which begins as the traditional 'Little Red Riding Hood' narrative, but then shifts our understanding of what we are reading by the sudden introduction of specific, contemporary cultural markers and a shocking narrative twist, tearing up the traditional 'script' which we have been encouraged to believe the text is following:

She had approached no nearer than twenty-five feet from the bed when she saw that it was not her grandmother but the wolf, for even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge. So the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead.
(Moral: It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be.)
(1940, Thurber. Available online at:
<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/quotes/picnicba.html>.)

Similarly, Gaffney's use of specific cultural markers, and a clearly presented final epigram signal that we may treat his text as a modern fable. While knowledge of pre-existing modern fables such as Thurber's are not necessary for our pragmatic understanding of Gaffney's narrative, readers who are familiar with Thurber's transformations of well known fairy tales into modern fables may find added resonance in Gaffney's text. We imagine that Gaffney is familiar with Thurber's work, as it seems to be a necessary platform from

which to create modern fables which do not have the safety net of employing almost universally well known fairy tale narratives.

Another related genre with which this story could be categorised is that of a monologue told by a comedian. This would allow for the lines related to Max Bygraves and Englebert to be interpreted not so much as features of orientation as added jokes to the narrative.

This connection between written miniature fiction and oral narratives is taken up by Jerome Stern in his introduction to *Micro Fiction*:

This is a strange little form, demanding fictional strategies that are both ancient and yet to be discovered... there are very old stories of enormous power that can only be called short shorts. Earlier than written language, there was the anecdote, the brief telling of an adventure on the hunt, a narrow escape, or a piece of good fortune. (1996, p. 16)

But it should be noted that present day miniature fictions, such as the Swift story and 'The Kids Are Alright', differ from oral narratives as they are not usually of the moment, nor are they intended for a few listeners; written texts can be referred back to and can resonate for an indefinite time; moreover, these written texts are aimed at larger audiences through paper and digital publication.

Water

This next story was taken from the anthology *Flash Fiction 72 Very Short Stories* (1992, pp. 157-158) and builds its content from social narratives about modern relationships.

She touches his hair by the river.

I am in our apartment, working. Her hand moves down his back.

I empty the trash and unclog the kitchen sink. His former girlfriends have turned into lesbians.

I take the key to his apartment, which he gave me so I could water his plants during the summer. He bends his kissing face to hers.

I walk over to his apartment, just two blocks away. Their legs dangle in the river.

I unlock the door and bolt it behind me. The room smells of feet and stale ashtrays. In the kitchen is a gas stove. I turn it on without lighting it.

Down by the river is a flock of geese, which they admire while holding hands. Soon he will take her back to his apartment. Soon they will lie there, readying cigarettes.

I relock the apartment and slip into the street. The air smells of autumn, burnt. In the sky, birds are leading each other south.

I know there is nothing left between us, that she looks at me each morning as if I were interrupting her life.

--Fred Leebron

This narrative operates within three frames: the scene by the river, the apartment and the street. In addition there is an unspecified frame of the relationships and habitual actions that are also referred to as if they make up their own world. While these first three frames rely on cultural understandings, which are aided by the description provided, it is the unspecified frame which is most intriguing.

The ideal reader infers that the 'I' narrator in the story has deliberately left the gas on in the man's apartment with the intention of blowing up the man and his lover when they light post-coital cigarettes. Largely this can be seen as an inference required for the comprehension of the text brought on by what Grice would call the maxims of relevance and quantity. That is to say, the reader is able to link the action of leaving the gas on to the couple's habit of smoking after sex. This could at first be interpreted as giving us too much information, but in effect it causes the reader to seek relevance for these two propositions to be placed in the same story.

At the same time, as with the other stories in this paper, the reader is not given enough information about certain aspects of the story and has to infer from social narratives. Namely, who is this non-gendered 'I'? This could refer to an ex-girlfriend (perhaps one who has become a lesbian), the jealous girlfriend of the man's current lover, a male friend whose girlfriend has been stolen by the man, or even the man's mother. The only clues given to the reader are the statements about the narrator still having a key to the apartment and that the narrator senses animosity from the girlfriend. The identity of the narrator enables the reader to complete the narrative by providing a motive for the planned killings.

Another point left open for the reader to fill has to do with the title of the piece. Why is it called 'Water'? What have the river and the geese and the birds leading each other South got to do with it? In both instances, Grice's maxim of relevance can be seen as flouted and the reader needs to make further inferences to render these references to water and the scene at the river sensible in this context. Water is mentioned directly in the text only once and is referred to twice in reference to the river. Possible interpretations for this are wide ranging. For example, having to 'water' the plants being the man's undoing. This would be relevant in the context of the story, making the tale ironic and darkly anecdotal. Another interpretation would have this story about the opposition between water, suggested by the lovers at the river, and the impending fire at the apartment, also alluded to in the phrase 'The air smells of autumn, burnt.' Such an interpretation would make this a larger, less anecdotal story, perhaps signifying a greater inner turmoil or perhaps the nature of love.

In these ways, the inferences could be seen as akin to those employed when reading poetry. Indeed, miniature fictions can be so weighted with symbolism that many are classified as prose poems. So much is left up to implication that the reader is required to do much more than many longer fictions demand. Readers here can be seen actively creating the text, using their autonomy, assuming power over what happens, what they interpret, what they want it to mean. This level of freedom (or uncertainty) allows the reader to categorise what they are reading in terms of genre, as the nature of the discourse being presented to them is unclear. Some may decide they are reading a poem, or a dream; others may decide they are reading a crime story,

and modify their expectations accordingly. It could be argued that if the status of the discourse is attributed by the reader, then the reader's decision will influence their attitude to the text. Someone who decides they are reading a dream episode would probably be satisfied with the ambiguity of 'Water' because their own experience of dreams would lead them not to expect a logical and tidy narrative. Conversely, someone who decides they are reading a crime story may well feel dissatisfied with the lack of clearly presented resolution.

Sparkles

'Sparkles' appeared in the e-zine [Six Sentences](#) in April, 2007. As the title of the e-zine suggests, the story is 6 sentences long, with about half of the sentences being compound sentences, joined by *and*:

I remember summers in Cape Cod at my grandmother's cottage, sitting on a stool, watching a white curtain curving, flowing, waving into a sunny room that smelled like cedar and pine, and standing in front of a three-tiered rack of baubles, staring at rows and rows of colored, flashing birth stones, fashioned into rings and necklaces, each for a dollar. I fell into the bright, endless spectrum of radiant rubies, precious peridots and luscious, lavender amethysts, and I liked it. 'Mom, please?' I begged. 'No, they're only glass,' mom would reply absentmindedly, as she filled her red basket with paper towels, tissues, and Pond's cold cream that felt like Crisco icing on her cheeks at night, offering me no safe landing for a goodnight kiss. Glass or stone, no matter. I wanted the twinkling on my finger, around my neck, so I could sit on my stool and be the magic, and move the sparkle through the sunbeams of the window with the curtain, and turn it this way and that, and continue my forever freefall.

--Louise Yeiser

This story constructs its narrative in three frames: grandmother's cottage, the shop, and at bedtime. This last frame is interesting in that it is not in a specific place; it could be at her family home or at her grandmother's cottage, and is marked as a memory of something habitual, or perhaps ritualistic, the goodnight kiss. The storyline is then interrupted by an evaluation, using the term in Labov's sense: 'Glass or stone, no matter. I wanted the twinkling on my finger, around my neck, so I could...' Like Labov's evaluation in oral narratives, the narrator is answering the question 'So what?' and this is where the narrator justifies 'the value of the story they are telling, to demonstrate why these events are reportable' (Labov and Walestzky, 1967, pp. 12-14).

As illustrated with the previous stories, these frames are supported by social narratives. These narratives are that of the child by themselves dreaming in a sort of 'magical' world, the child shopping with the mother and wanting things that the mother will not buy and the bedtime kiss between mother and small child. These narratives contribute to the meaning of the story through conscious or subconscious inferencing on the part of the reader and allow the writer to be brief as she dips into these different frames with

very few words of prose. Again, the reader's inferences help to complete the frames of the short story.

For other readers of 'Sparkles' further inferencing to complete the narrative has occurred by allowing it to cross genres with autobiography. As this story appeared in an e-zine, it was followed by readers' comments, including this one:

madam z said...

Geez, Louise, you get better and better! I LOVE this one.

Especially the evocative line, '...cold cream that felt like Crisco icing on her cheeks...offering me no safe landing for a goodnight kiss.' Could it possibly be that you and I had the very same mother?

These comments shift the 'I' narrator to 'I' author and the short story becomes arguably a piece of autobiography even though the e-zine advertises itself as producing flash fiction. This has interesting ramifications for the short story form and the inferences made by readers, in particular with flash fiction, which more often appears in digital literature, where the story is influenced by its environment on the internet, alongside blogs, My Space, YouTube and other personal websites.

'Sparkles' could also be interpreted as 'fiction'. Like fiction and other literary texts it employs foregrounding, which 'draws attention to some property of the language itself' (Jefferies, 2007, p.6). For example, the use of repetition with '-ing' forms: 'sitting on a stool, watching a white curtain curving, flowing, waving into a sunny room'. And later in the same sentence, there is alliteration in the phrases: 'of radiant rubies, precious peridots and luscious, lavender amethysts...' Moreover, the manipulation of frames, and the shifting back and forth between frames, gives the prose a somewhat dream-like and fictional quality.

And finally, for us, this piece demonstrates fictional qualities in the way that the open-ended resolution is more poetic than autobiographical. Of course it could be argued that some forms of autobiography are themselves poetic. For example, Michael Rosen's autobiographical work *In the Colonie* (2005) is an episodic meditation in verse form, non-linear in structure, requiring a large degree of inferencing from the reader, and without a strong sense of closure. Indeed most readers find that they need to approach Rosen's work as poetry, and to employ reading strategies more usually associated with poetry in order to complete the narrative. However, despite such exceptions, the temporal reality of a life story with its inevitable arc of beginning and ending would usually indicate an expectation of closure for most readers of autobiography. In 'Sparkles' we do not have a sense of a clear-cut ending or a solution to the little girl's problem of wanting something she cannot have, or any sense that she has learned a life lesson from this episode. It is therefore the generic label of fiction that will allow readers greater scope for inference, and the creation of a satisfying conclusion by means other than relying on what is presented in the text, rather than reading from the perspective of autobiography.

Thus, the open-ended resolution could be seen as a final frame, but one that needs to be inferred. Here, the reader might ask 'What does the narrator mean by this 'forever freefall'?' It might be her world of dreams or her entire life and therefore is a commentary on the implied reader's life as well; that is, are we all in 'forever freefall'? Some readers (students and colleagues) felt it was necessary to make inferences along these lines to create the final frame to give the story some sort of resolution.

There is also the possibility here of treating the story as simultaneously both fiction and non-fiction, short story and autobiography, applying Bakhtin's (1981) idea of heteroglossia of the text. Such an interpretation would allow the text to sustain all the possible readings given above; existing at once as a polyphonic entity from which readers, via their decision about the status of the discourse they are reading, would select their own interpretations. The fact that this text appears digitally, rather than being conventionally published, may indicate that on-line readers are already comfortable making their own choices about what it is that they are consuming, and modify their expectations accordingly. Madam Z, quoted above, clearly has no problem deciding that she is reading autobiography; it is this interpretation which allows her to gain most satisfaction from her engagement with the text. If, as Bakhtin says, language is something that is always populated with the intentions of others, then readers such as Madam Z are using the 'short short' form as a space which is perhaps less populated with authorial intention than conventional literary fiction, imposing their own intentions upon texts which are more open than most to multiple generic classifications and polyphonic readings.

Concluding Remarks

Skilfully written miniature fictions will present a snapshot, subtly weighted with little clues, hints, and suggestions from which readers construct potential pasts and futures for the briefly delineated characters. We will never be told: 'Reader, I married him'.

Miniature fiction questions generic boundaries in a way that literary short fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the whole has not. The confusion of naming this genre which was briefly illustrated at the start of this paper adds to its refusal of categorisation, its eclectic nature, and its kaleidoscopic incarnations. As Stern notes: 'it's a challenge. A problem in narrative' (1996, p.3). By its very nature miniature fiction pushes genre to breaking point – when does a narrative cease and a collection of words emerge? To use the analogy of a black hole, perhaps the material contained within very short fiction has become condensed to the point where it is beginning to collapse upon itself, until it creates a rift in the reality of text as we know it, where the rules of genre do not apply.

By analyzing these pieces of miniature fiction we have shown that making inferences has a prominent role in comprehending and completing these narratives. Moreover, many of these inferences are drawn from well-known social narratives. And finally, narratives in miniature fiction can be completed by allowing the stories to cross into other genres and are certainly worthy of further investigation.

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