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Snapshot in a Squiggle:  
How Painting Terminology Illuminates Short Fiction

Jennifer Pretzer

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Marybeth Baggett, Ph.D.  
Thesis Chair

---

Stephen Bell, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Eva Palmer, M.F.A.  
Committee Member

---

Tess R. Stockslager, Ph.D.  
Assistant Honors Director

---

Date

### Abstract

This paper will demonstrate that painting terms can offer a helpful avenue to understand short fiction, particularly abstract short fiction. After defining abstraction, realism, and the short story, it will trace relevant stages in the evolution of both painting and short fiction to show how and why the media share similar elements. In this examination, the paper will discuss which features of painting correspond with certain features of short fiction. Based on the essential elements of short fiction, as well as the features mentioned above, the paper will analyze examples of short stories that exemplify how painting parallels short fiction and how terminology drawn from that field can help illuminate abstract short stories.

### Snapshot in a Squiggle: How Painting Terminology Illuminates Short Fiction

Though many people talk of “the arts” as though they were one category, they rarely allow the various artistic branches to illuminate one another. Surveys of history may mention artistic developments in literature, visual arts, and music together, but most scholars study them individually. For the most part, this independent analysis is effective because it allows academics to focus more narrowly on the work or works they are studying, but this approach can sometimes exclude the valuable insights comparison offers. For example, a comparison between painting and short fiction could clarify the techniques and goals of the short story form, particularly when applied to the relatively obscure abstract short story, since both realistic and abstract art have received extensive critical attention. Since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, visual art has been using color and texture to focus on stylistic experimentation, inward focus, distortion of reality, and the communication of ambiguity rather than realistic depiction of the external world. Similarly, short fiction during this same time became in some instances more abstract, but in contrast to visual art, it remained primarily focused on capturing a snapshot of reality, evidencing the genre’s continuing embrace of realism. Abstract stories do exist today, but they are less popular than the realistic variety and largely excluded from the literary canon, implying their inferior worth to both academic and popular audiences.<sup>1</sup> Because of this unpopularity, comparatively little study has focused on abstract short stories, making it difficult to find a critical framework to discuss their innovations. This paper will argue that terms and theories typically used to discuss visual art can help understand and frame short stories.

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<sup>1</sup> This obscurity of abstraction in short fiction differs markedly from the state of the visual arts, which have largely focused on abstraction since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Definitions

Before tracing the historical developments of painting and the short story to highlight their parallelism in development, goals, and techniques, it would be beneficial to define the terms “realism,” “abstraction,” and “short story” as they will be used throughout this paper. “Realism” refers to the attempt to depict lived experience or the external world according to the way they actually appear to an average person. In painting, this approach involves the use of colors and techniques designed to imitate the look of external reality, while in fiction it entails the use of concrete terms and straightforward narration to create a scene that could actually occur. In contrast, “abstraction” refers to depiction that does not mimic the real world but exaggerates, distorts, or isolates some aspect of it for emphasis. Painting achieves this emphasis using non-traditional coloring schemes, skewed lines, and fragmented perspectives, while fiction utilizes non-traditional manipulation of structures such as punctuation, word choice, or narration to do so.

The traditional short story form distinguishes itself from poetry and the novel in that it is a “short prose narrative” (Poe 1772). The prose structure differentiates it from poetry, while the “brevity” of the form “distinguishes [it] from mere prose fiction” (Pasco 127). In contrast with the novel, the structure of the short story helps to give it more “unity” than the novel has, since a novel “cannot be read at one sitting” and the intervals between reading allow life’s vicissitudes to interrupt the flow of the story (Poe 1772). Thus, short-story writers seek to utilize their format to “convey the quality of human life” as experienced in the “flash” of the “present moment,” a goal that the novel is necessarily unable to achieve because of its length and the time required to read it (Gordimer 264).

Consequently, whereas the novel may be compared to memories from years of life, the short story can be considered more as a snapshot of a moment, short enough for readers to experience in one sitting and to retain all its details in their minds at once.

Because of the emphasis many of these definitions place on realism in short stories, some have attempted to define the abstract short story separately. However, their definitions have varied widely and often failed to elucidate the subject (Wentik 49). For example, some have attempted to define the short story by combining it with the prose poem genre (Wentik 49). However, while some more abstract short stories may look a bit like prose poems, the two differ in goals and techniques. For instance, the prose poem “does not (usually) wish to develop a plot, point a moral, or portray a social scene. It characteristically has more room than short fiction for puzzled elaboration and rhapsodic flight, and less room for tale-telling,” while the focus of a short story is, in fact, to communicate some sort of story to the audience (Mikics 245). Others simply portray abstract short stories as overly symbolic and incomprehensible, but such a description provides no concrete, useable definition (Wentik 49-50). Short stories that critics refer to as abstract appear to share an “absence of form or plot” and to hold together due to stream-of-consciousness association or “some externally determined structure” (Wentik 52). In other words, abstract short stories reject traditional structure and plot progression, holding together instead through techniques or structures that imply a relation between ideas rather than stating that connection through traditional means.

### **Why Compare the Short Story with Painting?**

Because of the general confusion in approaching, discussing, and understanding abstract short stories, as shown by the form’s conflicting definitions, critics need

language to more concretely analyze and discuss abstract short fiction. Abstract painting may offer this language, since critics of visual art have analyzed, discussed, and studied both realistic and abstract paintings successfully enough to make both forms popular subjects of amateur and academic examination.

Moreover, the wording most definitions use to describe realistic short stories—snapshot, “flash,” and “scene,” among others—implies a similarity between the goals of visual art and short fiction. Both paintings and short stories aim to capture a moment, which represents a congruence of purpose that suggests a closer association between painting and the short story than that between painting and other forms of literature. The potential for comparison between painting and writing has been noted before, though not in the context of the short story (Bosworth 313). Thus, since the media share common aims, it seems reasonable to suppose that shared language could illuminate their techniques to highlight their comparable functions and goals.

In painting, artists use techniques such as brush stroke, texture, line, color, shape, proportion, and perspective to produce the image and communicate the message they desire. Even seemingly minor adjustments to these elements can subtly alter the image, focus, and impact of a painting, which in turn affects the audience’s reception of it. For example, colors can contribute to making an image appear muted or prominent, realistic or abstract, natural or artificial, while perspective can emphasize different aspects of an image or filter it through a different interpretive lens. These elements of artistic composition manifest their importance through the way variations in their usage result in widely divergent movements and schools of art throughout the history of painting, as I will discuss below.

Many of the features of short fiction function similarly to the elements of painting. Specifically, word choice seems to function similarly to brush strokes, punctuation to textures, sentence structure to lines, tone to colors, characterization to shapes, organization to proportions, and point of view to perspective. Word choice and brush strokes form the most basic elements of their mediums, while punctuation and texture add an element of articulation to those basic elements that, while only a seemingly small detail, can make a significant difference in close analysis. Sentence structure and lines both have more evident influence on a work's aesthetic appearance, since they both represent more readily visible but still detail-oriented aspects of a work's composition. Tone and color seem to function similarly, since both contribute to the feeling a work communicates through presentation rather than content. Characterization and shape seem to correspond to one another, since both represent larger-scale aspects of their respective works and since they shape the appearances of the people and objects presented in each medium. Organization and proportion both contribute to shaping works and communicating their focuses, and point of view and perspective both determine the viewpoint from which the audience gains access to the content of the work, which affects the audience's perceptions and understanding of the work. These correspondences between techniques used in painting and short fiction highlight similarities in form and function that help these forms achieve their similar goals.

### **Development: Painting**

#### **Realism**

For centuries, realism was the rule in visual art. Artists from the ancient Greco-Roman world onward, through the Renaissance and into the Realism movement, made



imitation of the real world their goal. Though the Realist school of painting was not founded until the sixteenth century, artists of other times and movements depicted the external world as accurately as they could, which appears through samples of art and from author statements from those periods (Vincent 157). For example, classical Greek art, particularly sculpture, imitated the human form with an accuracy that indicates a value for realistic imitation. As one commentator has stated, “A striking feature of Greek art was the almost miraculous sense of proportion” (Vincent 29). Though they did idealize their figures, depicting only what they considered the best possible types, the Greeks utilized such realistic proportions and details that their sculptures still amaze viewers by their life-likeness. During the Italian Renaissance, in the period known as the Quattrocento, artists developed a “realistic style related to the earlier Gothic but much more closely associated with observation of nature” (Vincent 136). Such a focus on “observation of nature” and its replication reveals a value placed on mimesis, even if the Realist movement would not emerge until later.

As one might expect, realism was of central importance to the Realist school of painting that arose during the Baroque movement. This emphasis on verisimilitude manifested in the Realist school’s adherents’ striving for the “literal quality and the illusion of actuality” (Vincent 157). This movement, reflected in Caravaggio’s painting, utilized a style “depicted . . . entirely in terms of contemporary low life” even when painting “sacred subject[s]” (Janson 407). By introducing elements of common experience rather than restricting themselves to idealized situations as the foci of their works, these artists added depth of realistic portrayal to skillful imitation of the details of humanity, nature, and emotion.

**Transition**

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, scientific and technological innovations influenced artists to proceed in a more subjective direction, experimenting with form to produce more abstract work that eschewed realistic imitation in order to maintain an emphasis on individual perceptions. One major technological innovation influencing this shift was the advent of the photograph, especially as it became increasingly available to the general populace. Simple reproductions of the real world could more quickly and easily be created through photography than through the old methods of portraiture and landscape painting, so “artists were compelled to develop new resources, to become introspective in order to seek a new expression” (Vincent 188-189). They began to turn “inward to their own feelings for their subject matter” (Chipp 48). This transition toward an internal rather than external model for depiction in visual art began with the Impressionist and Subjectivist movements, which, by representing both internal and external realities in their paintings, formed a bridge or transition period between the staunch realism of tradition and the abandonment of realism that characterizes modern art.

**Abstraction**

Though artists in the Impressionist, Postimpressionist, and Subjectivist movements sought to depict aspects of reality, their art utilizes abstraction rather than realism because it depicts these aspects of reality using exaggeration, distortion, or isolation of key features to emphasize features or perceptions. In other words, their new focus is on their perceptions of the subject rather than its objective, “real” appearance, making their art more abstract than realistic. The work of two influential

postimpressionists, Cézanne and Van Gogh, illustrates this practice of abstraction to imitate reality. They wrote in their letters about their longing to mirror the real world, saying “I simply must produce after nature” and referencing a desire to capture the “essential” aspect of reality in a scene. However, both ultimately emphasized more fully their perceptions of the scene than an intentional reproduction of the scene itself (Cézanne 23; Van Gogh 32). In fact, Van Gogh said he left all but the “essential” as “spaces” to be filled in with only contour, a technique that would produce a painting that distorted reality rather than faithfully sought to reflect it (32). For these artists, the “real” thing they sought to capture in their art was the way the scene appeared to its painter, a subjective focus that, combined with their unconventional techniques, resulted in paintings depicting an individual impression rather than straightforward reality.

These abstract tendencies intensified in the work of the subjectivist painters from around 1885 to 1900. They “rejected the realist conceptions of art that had prevailed for the preceding generation,” turning for subject matter and focus from the “exterior world and inward to their own feelings” (Chipp 48). Their prioritization of the artist’s internal reality over that which is visible in the external world aligns with such statements as the following by Gauguin, in which he advises his followers to exaggerate color to intensify the depiction of their perceptions of reality: “How do you see this tree? Is it really green? Use green, then, the most beautiful green on your palette. And that shadow, rather blue? Don’t be afraid to paint it as blue as possible” (53). In other words, Gauguin, an influential Subjectivist painter, encouraged his students to exaggerate what they saw in nature, tweaking reality’s appearance to assist them in capturing what was “really” in a scene—what they saw in the world around them rather than what just anyone could see.

With this transition to a more inward focus, art became increasingly abstract, depicting an increasingly subjective vision rather than seeking to capture objective reality, while using techniques designed to exaggerate, distort, or isolate particular features of reality. In other words, painters in these later movements not only depicted reality according to their subjective perceptions of the world but also defined reality as that which they perceived, resulting in increasingly subjective artistic works that exhibited a “tendency to take . . . liberties with visual appearances,” constituting a “response to the external world” rather than a depiction of it (Golding 16). This increasingly subjective trajectory led to Cubism, which has been called the “most complete and radical artistic revolution since the Renaissance” because its “vision was conceptual and intellectual rather than physical and sensory” (Golding 15). For example, to achieve their goal of depicting ideas rather than reality, these painters used colors much brighter than those found in nature, depicted figures in geometric shapes rather than with natural lines and proportions, and painted using a two-dimensional perspective rather than the more life-like three-dimensional one that had been the rule in classical art. Cubism’s nonconcrete vision thus sets it apart from prior art forms because it represents a departure from the reliance on the external world for subject matter, which characterizes every art form preceding it. Those predecessors included the external world, if only as something to which they responded, but Cubism entirely abandoned concrete reality as its source of subject matter, portraying instead the realm of ideas.

This trend toward a visual presentation of ideas rather than reality only strengthened in the artistic movements that arose throughout the twentieth century. In Neo-Plasticism and Constructivism, for example, painters viewed their medium as an

“absolute entity with no relation to the objects of the visible world” (Chipp 309). Such art, which became widespread in Europe shortly before the beginning of World War I, involves techniques and goals nearly opposite to those of realism (Chipp 310). These movements intensify the use of conspicuous lines and geometric figures that began in Cubism, eliminating the clear human subject that is a common figure in Cubist art. Instead of composing a figure using geometric shapes, then, these movements depict lines and geometric shapes as their focus rather than as a tool to depict another subject.

This abstract, subjective art also differed from realist conceptions of art in that it “referred to universals rather than to specifics,” precluding even the possibility of realistic representation (Chipp 309). Most decisively, this art “appealed principally to the mind and only secondarily to the senses” (Chipp 309). Following the example set by these schools of thought, contemporary art is “not often an obvious and direct expression of external conditions,” as it was in ages past, but presents such an ambiguous image that some consider “subject matter [to be] completely absent” in it (Vincent 198-199). In fact, there is subject matter, but the subject may be a mental or philosophical construction rather than a visible entity. In other words, the art does not seek to depict reality but to create an image that invites the viewer to create meaning for him- or herself out of its form, an aspect of abstract art, since the mode privileges subjective perception over reproduction of objective reality.

### **Development: Short Fiction**

#### **Realism**

Although the trajectory of short fiction does not exactly match that of visual art, some painting terminology can still be useful in understanding short stories.

Developments in literature and in the visual arts paralleled one another for centuries, but this principle no longer strictly applies to short fiction (Vincent 64, 135). Unlike painting, whose abstract works academics study, value, and display, abstract short stories remain comparatively few and largely relegated to obscurity. While the academic and artistic worlds recognize that painting has grown increasingly abstract, short fiction resists such claims. Abstract short stories do exist, but most short stories remain focused on realism, as the contents of anthologies reveal. For example, Norton anthologies are considered authoritative in literary studies and constitute about the closest thing to a literary canon still extant. The eighth edition of *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, published in 2015, however, contains very few abstract stories. Instead, of the 22 stories in the anthology that were published in the last 20 years, none are truly abstract, revealing the priority literary scholars place on realism in the short story.

The element of realism in traditional short fiction manifests itself in the medium's goal of depicting a "snapshot" of the real world, a goal it shares with realistic paintings (*The Short Story* 92). Anton Chekhov, "one of the great short story writers of his time, as well as the creator of a distinctive new short story form," is credited with the "shift to the 'modern' short story" because of his effective use of "realism" (*The Short Story* 52). This attribution alone evidences the value short fiction places on realistic depiction, since the person credited with giving the short story its currently recognizable form is the person who introduced realism into its composition. Chekhov's focus on "sketches" or "fragments of everyday reality" set a course for short fiction that still dominates the genre today ("Chekhov and the Modern Short Story" 199). The sketch or snapshot idea, like Nadine Gordimer's "flash," effectively describes the goal of short fiction: to illustrate

internal and external reality. Chekhov and Hemingway's stories are usually "stark black-and-white snapshots of lives," and other anthologized short stories tend to follow a similar pattern, if not quite as austere as these authors' stories do (*The Short Story* 92). Hemingway himself once stated that in his writing he "eliminate[s] everything unnecessary" to make the story "seem actually to have happened" to the reader ("Interview" 1717). Such statements as these indicate the value that authoritative, foundational short fiction writers placed upon realistic depiction in their fiction, and contemporary authors seem to share these goals and utilize many of the same conventions as Hemingway, Chekhov, and other such early short story writers did.

Brevity in short fiction functions not merely as a structural requirement but also as a means of making meaning in the text. Hemingway and Chekhov both "communicate by indirection, suggesting much by saying little" in their fiction (*The Short Story* 92). Both authors utilized this brevity consciously in their fiction and recommended it in their advice to others. In a letter, Chekhov called it a "very serious [defect]" for a short story to include any "useless" material because it is "compactness that makes short things alive" (Chekhov 197). This statement is similar to Hemingway's "iceberg" principle, in which "there is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows," and "anything you know you can eliminate" (Hemingway 1717). In other words, Hemingway worked in his fiction to say only that which was absolutely necessary, striving to "eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader" (Hemingway 1717). This compactness reflects a strategy short stories share with paintings, since both portray a carefully limited scene.

Such a writing style seems as though it could be problematic, since cutting nearly all of the background out of a story should leave gaping holes in that story, interrupting the meaning. However, according to Wolfgang Iser, this is not the case. In fact, he asserts that the situation is quite opposite: “What is missing from the apparently trivial scenes, the gaps arising out of the dialogue,” “give rise to communication in the reading process” (1527, 1526). In his opinion, the “structured blanks of the text” confer “greater significance” upon what is said, and “it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning” of a text (Iser 1527). By these assertions, Iser means that the “gaps” in a text—the parts of dialogue or background that go unstated, which the reader must figure out for him- or herself—actually contribute to a story’s meaning and make that meaning more powerful. This understanding of the power of the unspoken permeates short fiction, realistic and abstract alike.

### **Abstraction**

In contrast to realistic short fiction, abstract instances of the genre formally expand or challenge the traditionally accepted expectations and boundaries for art to emphasize (sometimes almost to the point of obscurity) some feature or concept. Previously, I defined abstraction as an attempt to depict some aspect of reality using means that do not seek to mimic that aspect’s appearance in the real world but usually exaggerate, distort, or isolate the aspect of reality (or some facet thereof) to emphasize some feature or perception of it. Abstract short stories go beyond the non-realistic elements in such genres as fantasy or science fiction, which require readers to suspend their disbelief while learning the rules of that universe but then follow those laws throughout the entirety of the story. Nor is it merely magical realism, which bends some



laws of reality within the limits allowed for in the story but otherwise meets normal expectations for the functioning of reality. All these types of stories present something fantastical but strive to make it appear plausible and realistic within the slightly tweaked reality of the story. In contrast, abstract stories seek not to present a believable reality, even an altered one, but to distort the audience's perception of reality, leaving them to create meaning from a fragmented text.

Iser's understanding of "gaps" in a story, though originally propounded in the context of realistic short stories, also applies to abstract stories. One of the major differences between realistic and abstract stories consists in the widening of the "gaps" between the two—increasingly abstract stories require the reader to fill in more pieces of the text to make sense of it. Moreover, as a feature consistent between realistic and abstract short stories, it seems logical to look for a resonance between brevity in short fiction and some technique or goal in painting. Van Gogh's "spaces" appear to function similarly to Iser's "gaps," since both represent an attempt to focus detailed attention only on the portions of a scene that are most important to its focus while leaving the non-essential pieces for the reader to fill in (Van Gogh 32). This focused, detailed attention represents a resonance between short fiction and painting, as both attempt to present a moment in time (in their more realistic manifestations) and something approaching pure ideas couched in a non-traditional form (in their more abstract instances).

### **Examples**

Within the limited scope of this paper, it would be impossible to examine every realistic and abstract short story ever written, or even all the most influential examples of each. However, a few representative pieces should help communicate how samples of

each type include parallels to either realistic or abstract paintings and how analysis on this basis can illuminate the stories' meanings. For this comparison, I will briefly analyze a few features of Ernest Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants," George Saunders's "Victory Lap," and Surendra Prakash's "Talqarmas."

### **Ernest Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants"**

Realism characterizes Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants" both in what the story includes and in what it excludes. The narration includes concrete, strategic descriptions akin to precise, minimalistic paint strokes to help the reader clearly visualize the scene portrayed, which in this case functions similarly to a background in a realistic painting. The very first words of the story situate the reader in a particular setting—the "valley of the Ebro"—and provide visual details of the scene ("Hills" 642). These details are simple and concrete, describing the hills merely as "long and white," the immediate vicinity of the characters appearing immediately thereafter: "no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun" ("Hills" 642).

This description creates a setting the reader can immediately visualize, creating an effect similar to that of a landscape painting, and Hemingway keeps it firmly grounded in the feeling of recognizable experience by including such specific, concrete details as "strings of bamboo beads" ("Hills 642"). He could have merely referenced a curtain, or even a bead curtain, but providing a specific type of bead furnishes the reader with a precise mental image, possibly associated even with tactile information about what bamboo beads are like. This sort of specificity, present at strategic points throughout the story in such descriptors as "the shadow of a cloud moved across a field of grain" and "two heavy bags," offers a setting the reader can easily visualize, providing shape to the

setting (to use a painting term) by giving it a particular character through its descriptions (“Hills” 646). By providing such concrete, specific language to describe the setting, Hemingway’s story situates the reader in a world that appears very like the one he or she inhabits, lending the story a strongly realistic visual element.

Hemingway also utilizes realism through the strategic nature of his descriptors, which imply more than they overtly state. For example, the phrase “keep out flies” grounds the reader by providing a sensory detail that readers associate with sound and movement (“Hills” 642-643). Bringing up flies in conjunction with descriptions of heat also helps the reader to imagine a type of hot, still day that most people have experienced. Evoking a setting that readers know and associate with emotions brings this scene alive in their imaginations with minimal description. These descriptors, particularly due to Hemingway’s word choice, communicate a tone that suggests languidness and tension simultaneously. These aspects of composition parallel what brush strokes and colors do in a painting, as warm, muted colors would communicate a feeling similar to that created by the story’s tone, while brush strokes would reinforce and contribute to that feeling in a manner comparable to the way Hemingway’s word choice does in “Hills.” Thus, the concrete descriptors and strategic depictions in realistic short stories create settings readers can visualize, just as realistic visual art uses brush strokes, colors, and shapes to create images that could have been copied from the real world.

Hemingway crafts a realistic story not only through the details he includes but also through those he excludes. The unrevealed background and dialogue gaps in “Hills like White Elephants,” which centers around a conversation between a man and a woman about abortion, contribute to the story’s realism by mimicking the way people actually

speak. For example, the abortion itself is never overtly mentioned in the story. Instead, the characters talk about “it,” and the reader must deduce the subject by the relevant details they include in discussing “it” (“Hills” 644). This device contributes to the story’s realism because it represents a human tendency to talk around uncomfortable subjects and to be unwilling to use certain words that are considered crude or emotionally charged. By including only that which is necessary and allowing the reader to fill in the missing information, Hemingway’s approach parallels the strategy that motivates painters to add detail to only the most necessary components of a scene, leaving other parts less defined and allowing the audience to imaginatively participate to visualize the scene.

Additionally, the lack of background information contributes to the realistic feel of this conversation because all the reader sees of the characters is this interaction, and people do not review all relevant background information in every conversation they have. This brevity reflects the goal of presenting a moment that painting and short fiction share. Finally, the silences in the dialogue mimic reality in that people often utilize silence, pauses, and rhythms in speech just as much as actual words in order to communicate meaning. Hemingway includes various silences in the conversation, when “the girl did not say anything,” sometimes looking off into the distance “at the hills” or “at the ground,” to communicate her discomfort (“Hills” 644). Relating this body language, while not explicitly telling the reader what the girl thinks, utilizes realistic techniques because it replicates people’s tendency to communicate through mediums other than words.

The “gaps” in the story—that which goes unspoken but underlies everything that is said—not only contribute to realism but also provide the story with its power and

poignancy. Because so little is actually said, every line takes on additional meaning through the implication that, with so much left out, every detail given must be vitally significant. For example, when the man merely says, "It's pretty hot," in response to the girl's question, "What should we drink?" the reader seizes upon these details to understand that the characters are talking at and around each other more than they are to each other, which informs the entire story by revealing the dysfunction and lack of straightforward communication of the most important issues in their relationship ("Hills" 643). If Hemingway had provided straightforward dialogue that overtly included the subject of the characters' conversation, rather than simply calling the abortion "it," these lines would lose their power because the reader would assume that the mundane details were not as important as the main subject of the dialogue ("Hills" 644).

Forcing the reader to figure out the subject of the dialogue for him or herself, however, not only requires him or her to read carefully in order to find that subject but also amplifies the significance of every line merely because it was important enough to include when even the central focus of the story was not. This principle also holds true for the silences included in the conversation, since in order for the reader to divine what the silence communicates, he or she must pay close attention to everything surrounding those spaces in the dialogue. Even the act of thinking about and searching for the meaning of the silences gives them influence, since it directs the reader's focus upon strategic passages in his or her effort to make meaning out of the text.

However, because they occur in the structure of a specific, realistic story, these gaps do not license the audience to read just anything into the story. Instead, they require readers to search the text Hemingway provides for clues to that which he leaves out,

resulting in an ambiguity that is essentially different from that contained in abstract art because readers must use common human experience to decipher the story's meaning. This method stands in contrast to that required in more abstract stories, since their inherently subjective elements encourage the reader to consider his or her perspective on the story's content to determine meaning.

### **George Saunders's "Victory Lap"**

The realism in George Saunders's "Victory Lap" appears primarily through the story's characterization of Alison Pope, Kyle Boot, and the unnamed rapist using word choice, punctuation, tone, organization, and point of view, elements that parallel the way paintings use brush strokes, textures, colors, proportions, and perspective in composing and filling out shapes. Everything stated contributes to communicating the kind of person each character is or to relating an action that character takes, building a believable foundation for the characters' actions and thoughts based on their past experiences and positions in life. This method of providing background details and mental patterns before relating actions parallels realistic paintings because it shapes and colors a backdrop and the subjects of the snapshot before allowing the reader to discover the characters' actions.

The word choice used to narrate Alison Pope's internal monologue, like brush strokes in a painting, fits her presentation as an average almost-15-year-old girl from a comfortable, loving home who hopes to achieve recognition and appreciation. She consistently thinks in age-appropriate colloquialisms, using words such as "like," "super," "no way," "ixnay," "guy," and "discombobulated" (Saunders 1321, 1323, 1324). Alison's inner monologue also includes frequent blanks or action insertions, indicated in the text as "{special one}" or "{eyebrow raise}," for instance, respectively (Saunders

1321). One could imagine a painter using lighter, more playful strokes in creating a figure with a similarly casual, friendly attitude. Interspersed among Alison's colloquial expressions and language are overly formal usages, such as "tender," "ample," "foul," and "one" or "we" in reference to herself, and technical interest-specific terminology, including frequent French ballet steps (Saunders 1321, 1322, 1323). These instances of more formal word choice might correspond to bolder, more solidly colored brush strokes to communicate the excessive care with which Alison shapes herself through her words. This language and narration style, presented as Alison's stream of consciousness, characterize her as an average middle-class teenage girl with a playful attitude and an overly serious side, just as brush strokes might paint her both lightly and bluntly to communicate the simultaneous pomposity and sweetness of her character.

"Victory Lap" also characterizes Alison and Kyle through the punctuation it uses in their inner monologues, which corresponds to the way texture reinforces and amplifies the effects aimed at by brush strokes. For example, Alison thinks, "She'd peed herself. Which was fine. People did that. When super scared" (Saunders 1332). This abruptly punctuated thought pattern fits a victim of trauma still functioning on adrenaline but starting to come down from the intense terror of her experience. In a painting, the texture of the paint used to depict a scene can add to emphasis and communicate grittiness, just as in this quote the periods emphasize Alison's fear. Kyle's monologue also uses punctuation to emphasize discomfort and the boy's secret rebellious tendencies. This emphasis appears when Kyle questions the logic of including "All In" on the Family Status Indicator, saying:

Would he like to ask Dad that? Who, in his excellent totally silent downstairs woodshop, had designed and built the Family Status Indicator?

Ha.

Ha ha. (Saunders 1325)

In this quote, Kyle's sharply punctuated thoughts indicate his discomfort with the idea of challenging his father. In a painting, a rough texture might communicate that opposition, while a smooth one might imply more harmony or unanimity. Thus, the punctuation in this story emphasizes discomfort just as rough texture in a painting might imply roughness in character or action.

Moreover, the story uses tone to characterize Alison and Kyle much like paintings use colors to communicate how the "reader" should perceive a figure. For example, Alison conjectures about how "special" she is, comparing herself to famous women and concluding, "She, Alison, could not hope to compete in the category of those ladies. Not yet, anyway!" (Saunders 1323). Such lightly ambitious thoughts as these show that Alison perceives herself as an independently important person who must achieve greatness if she wants other people to acknowledge that self-image. Bright colors might communicate the optimistic view of life that readers associate with her tone in this passage, since people associate such colors with youth, vitality, and excitement. Kyle's tone portrays him as a repressed child of strict parents who obeys them carefully but feels the urge to rebel and act independently. His internal monologue constantly responds to his parents' requirements, expectations, and potential reactions to any course of action he considers, reflecting the feelings of a child striving to please his or her parents.



For example, he considers his parents' reactions to his mental swearing and accidental violation of minor rules, developing contingency plans for answering their objections in a game he calls, "WHAT IF they came home RIGHT NOW?" (Saunders 1325). By emphasizing the first and last words of this sentence, the story communicates an anxious, serious tone, but the fact that it occurs in a question challenging authorities' expectations implies Kyle's desire to rebel. Similarly, muted dark or red-tinted colors would communicate Kyle's frustration and unwillingness to express it, since viewers associate them with anger but muting them would make them less noticeable. Thus, the story's tone characterizes Alison and Kyle in a similar manner to the way color shapes audiences' understandings of painted figures.

Because of the mental image it creates of Alison, Kyle, and the rapist, the story's characterization functions similarly to the shape of figures in paintings. As explored above, word choice, punctuation, and tone all contribute to the characterization of each character, paralleling the contributions brush strokes, textures, and colors make to the formation and presentation of a painted character. The story's organization and point of view also contribute to Alison, Kyle, and the rapist's characterization, since swapping between their streams of consciousness enables the reader to understand each of them, both as they see themselves and as the other main characters see them. By providing two of the teenagers' points of view and only one of the rapist's, the story implicitly prioritizes their perspective, which functions similarly to perspective in a painting by foregrounding the traumatic experiences of the victims over those of the rapist.

Similarly, the story's organization acts as proportions in paintings do, both to emphasize what is most important and to do so in a way that seems to reflect reality.

Including Alison and Kyle's perspectives before the rapist's allows the reader to see the children first through their own eyes but the rapist first through the eyes of his victims, casting the children in a more sympathetic light, which the story perpetuates by bracketing the rapist's perspective with one of the children's and ending with Alison. This presentation of the victims as more important and positively portrayed than the rapist appears as a realistically proportioned rendering, since most people feel closer to victims than their abusers and want to focus their attention on the people being hurt rather than on the one hurting them. Thus, Alison, Kyle, and the rapist all gain characterization through the story's word choice, punctuation, tone, organization, and point of view in dealing with their perspectives, elements which parallel the way in which (respectively) brush strokes, texture, colors, proportions, and perspectives contribute to the shape of a realistic figure.

**Surendra Prakash's "Talqarmas" and Samiran Sarkar's "Splash Abstract Painting"** (painting to be found at <https://www.saatchiart.com/art/New-Media-Splash-Abstract-Painting-Digital-Painting-on-Canvas/4169/2446766/view>)

While Surendra Prakash's "Talqarmas" fits the traditional short story characteristics of brevity, plot, and "gaps" readers must fill in, it also reflects the experimentation with form that so often characterizes the abstract, whether in the mode of the short story or of the painting. The story is extremely short, occupying less than four pages in its English translation. Its text, though fragmented, communicates snatches of story, which one could argue resemble a plot, if not a traditionally structured or filled-out one. The story's opening lines illustrate this fragmentation:

In September its [*sic*] not good to use teargas in those days the farmers come to buy ration card seeds in the city they were very hospitable people in place of eggs they boiled the heads of their children and in place of bread cut off and presented the breasts of women but at the last moment when I was dying they were thinking of stealing my ration card they had set up their trays of wares on the high walls  
(Prakash 151)

As this passage shows, “Talqarmas” includes hints of plot—using teargas in September, farmers buying ration cards, people boiling children’s heads, cutting off women’s breasts, dying, stealing a ration card, setting up tables of wares—but these events do not progress according to the logic of a traditional story. The story does not show any causal, temporal, or geographical relationship between the events, implying their relationship only by their conjunction in the story.

This presence of a non-traditional story that takes a form closer to fragments of seemingly unrelated ideas pushed together in the same small space than to a traditional plot structure parallels the way abstract paintings include more fragments of seemingly unrelated or unexplained pieces of images instead of a whole picture that tells a story. Much of what contributes to this fragmentation and the difficulty of interpretation, whether in short fiction or in painting, is the near lack of apparently relevant context for what the artist does include. The story’s “gaps”—unstated story components that readers must fill in to fully understand the story—are wider than those in more traditional stories, but the element remains essential in “Talqarmas” just as it was in “Hills Like White Elephants,” another feature it shares with abstract paintings. However, the story also removes many of the familiar formal elements that organize meaning in traditional prose

through its use (or lack) of punctuation, paragraph breaks, and logical connections, reflecting a creative impulse similar to that which experiments with non-traditional textures, proportions, and lines in abstract paintings.

For example, just as “Talqarmas” creates splashes of meaning with its disjointed but conjoined series of events, the splashes of color in Sarkar’s “Splash Abstract Painting” exist together with little guide to tell the reader how they inform one another. The painting includes a wide variety of colors, such as bright pink, mustard yellow, light blue, and black, and each color appears as a splatter composing an indeterminate larger shape. The “reader” knows that these colors must relate to one another and to the larger shape they compose, since the artist chose to conjoin them, but the painting does not appear to mimic anything in reality. This indeterminacy of shape and subject makes it difficult for the “reader” to determine what the painter is communicating, and to some extent the reader gets to decide what he or she believes to be the point of the painting.

“Talqarmas” includes no punctuation throughout its almost-four pages except one period at the very end of the story. This lack of punctuation results in a story without formal definition or organization, allowing all ideas and images to flow into one another without any formal indications of where one thought ends and another begins. The absence of punctuation also makes it more difficult for the reader to determine which phrases and clauses are independent and which are subordinate, which contributes to the difficulty in understanding or interpreting this short story. Thus, the story abstracts itself formally to the point of abolishing grammatical indicators for sentence structure and organization, a rejection of traditional form similar to the fragmentation or geometric

innovation of lines and the counter-intuitive arrangement of proportion in many contemporary abstract paintings.

Similarly, the story includes no paragraph breaks. Thus, it carries its abstract sentence-level technique to the paragraph-level, abolishing the traditional breaks in text that readers expect to indicate the packaging of larger ideas. While the lack of paragraph breaks is not as jarring for readers as the absence of punctuation is, its impact on the story's structure and organization is nearly as significant, since it eliminates the traditional separation of one idea from another in discrete blocks of text. In other words, the absence of paragraph breaks parallels the absence of punctuation in its implication that ideas cannot exist as distinct, conveniently structured and packaged entities, but that they constantly run into one another and mix to the point of near-indistinguishability, a similar impression to that often communicated in abstract paintings that manipulate lines and proportions the way this story uses sentence structure and organization.

In addition to removing traditional structural elements, "Talqarmas" complicates its meaning by juxtaposing apparently unrelated thoughts without providing any logical connections between ideas. This absence of logical connections contributes to the conflation of disparate meanings, similar to the lack of punctuation and paragraph breaks, by running apparently unrelated ideas together. They transition abruptly, without warning or explanation, implying that there is little or no need to make sense of their relationship. Instead, the text's structure seems to imply that the contradictory ideas it contains exist side-by-side in reality—in the human mind—and thus should be accordingly presented, senselessly, abruptly, and rapidly, a concept that appears visually in abstract paintings that depict apparently unrelated or unrecognizable objects without any organizing

principle to communicate the metaphorical proportions inherent in an objective value system.

### **Conclusion**

Because abstract short fiction is largely excluded from academic study and popular consumption, comparatively little work has explored its workings in a way that helps those unfamiliar with its variety of forms to understand it. This paper has used definitions of realism, abstraction, and the short story to argue that short fiction shares enough common goals and elements with painting that a comparison of the two could contribute to greater understanding of short stories, particularly of the more abstract variety. The comparison would be helpful because abstract art has been produced, countenanced, and studied much longer and more prolifically than short fiction has been.

In addition to their shared goals, painting and short fiction utilize comparable elements to achieve their similar purpose. Comparing their techniques highlighted the similarities between short fiction and painting, and a few examples showed how analyzing short stories in painting terms can illuminate the meaning of both realistic and abstract stories. As painting has demonstrated, abstract art is here to stay, so studying it is not only an expected activity but also a potentially valuable and fruitful one. Art has been called the window to the soul, and if one is to understand the soul of one's people, one must understand the art they create. While no two pieces of art are identical, so there is no direct correspondence between paintings and short stories, those produced by the same people come out of a related soul, which explains the deep resonances in purpose and technique between the two forms that makes them such complementary and rewarding objects of study.

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