



Flash Fiction: A Unique Writer-Reader Partnership

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Abstract

The proliferation of an unconventional miniature story, in the digital age, is a testament to its rising popularity. In response to the expanding demand for very short stories, writers have delivered the briefest possible stories falling under the short-short fiction umbrella. Short-short fiction is identified with various labels; however, flash fiction is more commonly used in America. The term ‘flash fiction’ was initially used for short-short stories of up to 750 words. However, since then, stories ranging from 50 words to 1,500 words have also been included in the classification of the flash fiction genre. Flash fiction is a hybrid style that mixes verse with narrative to form a story that captures a ‘moment’ of a larger narrative sequence akin to a series of still photographs taken from a movie. Flash Fiction is not plot driven and precisely includes only essential information in a compressed manner. Flash fiction writers deliberately sketch scenes with strokes of ambiguity to keep readers fully attuned to each word. They also withhold details regarding the story’s characters, events, scenes, and atmosphere that watchful readers try to compensate with an active imagination. Apparently, the readers also are inclined towards making sense of each word based on their individual experiences and perceptions. Typically ending with an ironic twist, flash fiction’s ending surprises the readers and leaves them stimulated that encourages multiple re-readings for closure. This paper argues that flash fiction uniquely draws the reader into a partnership with the writer and it is with their combined contribution that the story is completed and remains memorable.

Key words: Brevity; Compressed narrative; Hybrid-genre; Short-short story; Flash fiction; Writer-reader partnership

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INTRODUCTION

Flash fiction is an emerging genre featuring an extremely short story form that has been simmering in the literary ocean for ages; however, in the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly prevalent. Flash fiction has revitalized its literary presence in the digital age such that learning to write flash fiction is now in vogue. Ever-evolving technological advancements have positioned the Internet as a front-line medium that handles the dissemination of flash fiction. Novel ways of reading, writing, publishing, and recommending are introduced by the Internet at a time when increasing number of writers are finding a platform where they can relate to a broad range of stories (Penny, 2014). Critics tie the success of flash fiction genre to its Internet popularity and consider the two happily married with a future promising relationship. The increasing popularity of flash fiction is due, in part, to its short length that fits small screens, and also to the “one-byte-and-go culture” (Shapard, 2012). Flash fiction’s popularity may also have to do with the amount of time and effort needed to complete a story; like a flash, the story starts, conveys its substance, and concludes with a twist leading to a change in either the characters or the reader (Batchelor, 2012). Moreover, the increasingly popularity of flash fiction is also attributable to the declining attention spans. Some writers and editors also encourage flash fiction because they believe that

truth descends upon us infrequently and in flashes (Casto, 2015).

Flash fiction is a hybrid or mixed genre that consists of one part poetry and one part narrative. It is also called prose-poetry and needs to be read slowly like a poem because missing a word can change the meaning of the story entirely (Ferguson, 2010; Shapard, 2012; Stanbrough, 2007). There is a consensus among critics that flash fiction is about ambiguity; therefore it is argued that no hard definitions can be assigned to it (Ferguson, 2010). It is purposefully atypical, eccentric, formally experimental, and its content is condensed with colloquial language (Guimaraes, 2012). The term "Flash Fiction" was coined by James Thomas, in 1992, to include stories of up to 750 words count (Thomas & Shapard, 2006). Nevertheless, due to the continuous reconfiguration and mutation of the flash fiction genre, its word count now ranges from 50 words to 1,000 words (Batchelor, 2012) or from 75 words to 1,500 words (Gurley, 2015). Moreover, a broad spectrum of forms and styles are covered under the flash fiction rubric including content that is whimsical, clever, entertaining, literary, ironic, satirical, sublime, funny, controversial, unconventional, troubling, unsettling, and unpredictable (Casto, 2015). Flash fiction is known by various names such as stories in miniature, short-short stories, prose poems, and various fiction based names that include micro, sudden, postcard, furious, fast, quick, skinny, smoke-long, and minute fiction. These names are used interchangeably and also vary by nationality. For example, flash fiction is popular in the United States, nouvelles in France, micro-fiction in Latin America, and labels such as minute-long, palm-sized, little short, pocket-size, and smoke-long (just long enough to be read while smoking a single cigarette) are popular in China (Casto, 2015; Gurley, 2015; Shapard, 2012). Flash fiction also falls into various genres and modes of writing including traditional or mainstream short-short stories, tall tales, horror, suspense, science fiction, fables, anti-fables, parables, ghost stories, monologues, epistles, mysteries, myths, romance, fairy tales, prose poetry, magical realism, futurism, surrealism, dadaism, irrealism, and postmodernism (Casto, 2015). Flash fiction can also take the form of a magazine quiz or a survey questionnaire, or can even be an acknowledgment in a scholarly biography generated by classified ads, bulletin board messages, or even by a telephone answering machine message (Casto, 2015). As a simple explanation, Wallen (2009) compares flash fiction to distinct species of tiny birds suggesting that flash fiction is tiny but includes stories of varying sizes.

Due to the unique demands and scopes involved in writing flash fiction, many novelists find it hard to write flash fiction and vice versa. In a novel, redundancy can be necessary; whereas adding unnecessary interjections, elaborate descriptions, or diversions can obscure the

clarity of flash fiction (Chambers, 2012). Novelists focus on capturing all aspects of a character's life and tend to over-explain while flash fiction writers trim out extra details and only subtly imply necessary details through clues. Grant Faulkner notes that "The joy of flash fiction as a writer and a reader is found not only in the words of the story, but in what is left out—the absences can be almost spectral, haunting what's been told, only guessed at" (Tuch, n.d.). Rich (2014) compares marathoners with novelists, middle distance runners with authors that limit their novels to 300 pages, and sprinters with the short-short story writers. Running a marathon requires dogged persistence and a great deal of preparation; whereas, writing a flash fiction does not require an enormous amount of preparation, but requires training and concentration (Chambers, 2012). There is also a marked difference between flash fiction and a vignette or sketch. A flash fiction provides a complete story with a definite beginning, middle, and end along with a basic setting and perhaps a minimal plot with at least one character; therefore, a fragmented story cannot be a piece of flash fiction (Batchelor & King, 2014; Gurley, 2015; Ferguson, 2010). On the other hand, a vignette or sketch is comparable to a 'slice of life' that encompasses some elements of a story such as setting, characters, and usually a conflict. However, a vignette never incorporates a resolution and lacks a plot (Ferguson, 2010; Stanbrough, 2007). Notwithstanding these differences, flash fiction is not concerned with the development of a complicated plot or even with the complex interplay of characters, which is typical of longer works (Chambers, 2012); however, it requires an essence of the plot, summed up in a few words, if not a fully developed plot (Ferguson, 2010).

Favorite topics, in flash fiction, include gender, social class, relationships, suicide, death, isolation, racism, sex, dystopia, technology, interpersonal disputes, and easily recognizable circumstances, surreal situations, global problems, etc. (Batchelor, 2012; Thomas & Shapard, 2006). Some flashes include thought-provoking, philosophical, and unsettling content, which keeps the reader's attention captivated long after finishing the story (Casto, 2015). Flash fiction focuses on reality as a fictional design and substitutes momentary awareness for traditional narrative techniques. In flash fiction, time lapses are infrequently used; however, flashbacks can be used successfully (Batchelor, 2012). An essential distinction between a novel and short story is that in a novel, readers travel through time as if they are propelled by it, whereas in a short-short story, time catapults readers from the start to the end and back to the beginning due to their strong desire for rereading (Rohrberger, 2011). Moreover, the time in flash fiction can be sped up or slowed down by manipulating it through compression, stretching it out or even by stopping it altogether (Ferguson, 2010).

1. CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS OF FLASH FICTION

Flash fiction must contain all the components of a story in a compressed and economical fashion (Ferguson, 2010). Great flash fiction writers weave their short stories with artistic brevity, which requires cutting to the core of an issue without digressions or extraneous descriptions (Tuch, n.d.). Such a compressed narrative also necessitates active titles that add valuable information to the story. The title of flash fiction also succinctly conveys information regarding the subject of the story. Batchelor (2012) notes that “The flash can be summed up as a three-point pattern; suck the reader into the middle of the story with action, swirl it with crisis, and end with an implied resolution” (p.79). To convey a story’s structure, the mood and atmosphere of the scene may also be used to imply events. The story’s atmosphere may be suffused with a mixture of familiar settings and bizarre psychic projections (Guimaraes, 2012). Moreover, the content of a flash fiction story can be only one or two sentences long, and it can include either dialogue or indirectly express the views of a second person (Casto, 2015). There are five characteristic elements of a flash fiction story, including its setting, characters, conflict, resolution, and suggestion. The argument that in a flash fiction the story is completed through an active partnership between the reader and the writer is further strengthened by a flash fiction piece by Harvey Stanbrough, which is cited below to illustrate these elements.

At Confession

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”

“How long since your last confession?”

“Two years.”

“What’s the trouble?”

“I have wished death on a man”

“You haven’t acted on your wish?”

“Not yet.”

“Who is the man?”

“He is cheating with my wife.”

The priest paled. “I forgive you.”

I shot him through the screen.

1.1 Setting

The setting is the platform for the story’s activity, a place where the action unfolds and the characters act out a scene. In flash fiction, the setting plays out naturally, and a single sentence should be sufficient to include all the relevant information. Famous historical events, stereotypes, and schemas are purposefully used to describe flash fiction settings, which also save words. Flash fiction begins, usually, with an active first sentence that vividly details the physical setting of the story and arrests the reader’s attention (Thomas & Shapard, 2006). In the above example, the setting is provided by the title and also is implied through the dialogue of the narrator and the priest.

1.2 Characters

The characters are the players in the story; however, they need not represent humans or animals only. Characters may be implied or may also represent inanimate objects (Popek, 2015). A story cannot be told without including characters; therefore, at least one character is required to complete a piece of flash fiction. In a traditional story, character development takes place in reaction to repeated challenges faced by the characters. In flash fiction, only a moment or a series of moments are captured, and there is no space to add details regarding the reactions of the characters. Hence, flash fiction lacks substantial character development. Some critics believe that character development is a requisite of the novel, but not of flash fiction (Ferguson, 2010). Characters can also be used to advance a plot and /or to signify mood. In the example, the characters in the story include the narrator, the priest, and the narrator’s wife. It is open to argument whether it is the priest himself who is having an affair with the narrator’s wife or it is his involvement with another person that paled his face. In the latter case, the participation of other characters is implied.

1.3 Conflict

In the flash fiction, conflict produces tension by not only by what is said, but also by what is only subtly implied. Tension can be enacted through a narrative reversal or between two dissimilar characters, or even by two different world views. The conflict can also represent a difference of opinion that can be verbal, physical, or mental. Conflict keeps the readers interested in the story and paves the way for resolution. The above example involves multiple conflicts. The initial conflict is rooted in the infidelity of the narrator’s wife, which led to the second conflict that is faced by the narrator when he wished death on a man but did not act on it. The priest also experienced a conflict when he paled indicating his culpability, but still forgave the narrator.

1.4 Resolution/Ending

Resolution is a natural and satisfactory conclusion of the conflict; therefore, the ending of a flash fiction needs special attention. In flash fiction, there is no place for miracles to resolve the tension (Stanbrough, 2007). The resolution should be plausible and likely to happen; for example, if the story involves humans, a dragon cannot suddenly appear to save the protagonist (Popek, 2015). The popularity of the flash fiction is linked to an element of surprise. Batchelor (2012) notes “there are supposedly only 14 different plotlines a writer can deviate from in storytelling” but the readers still want to be surprised at the ending (Batchelor, 2012, p.80). In great flashes, readers can rarely guess the ending until after reading the last word, and in some cases, the ending remains ambiguous even after reading the last word. This uncertainty and unpredictability make

flash fiction a rewarding experience (Ferguson, 2010). The best resolution is when the reader is surprised and simultaneously also feels disappointed with his/her inability of not anticipating the writer's resolution (Popek, 2015). Historically, short fiction has relied on surprise twists and turns; however, modern short fiction relies on smart surprises present throughout the story (Ferguson, 2010). The writer engages readers with 'the surprise and shock technique', which goes beyond the story completion (Batchelor, 2012). The ambiguous endings also capture the readers' attention and compel them to determine the story's ultimate meaning. Unlike the novel, in flash fiction the finishing words of the short fiction take the readers beyond the story and are memorable (Ferguson, 2010). In the example, the resolution entailed in shooting a culpable priest is intense and dramatic. The writer first implied that the narrator came for confession with a desire to purge himself of his sins; however, the surprise ending shows that the narrator came with a different motive altogether.

1.5 Suggestion

Suggestion is a valuable way of informing readers, indirectly, about the story's substance. Flash fiction allows readers to participate actively in making inferences from textual signals (Ferguson, 2010). Banal elements can also be enriched powerfully through suggestiveness and implications, and the dialogue can also efficiently deliver suggestions (Patea, 2012). While deciphering suggestive inferences and speculating on implied emotions, readers can also experience some of the emotions felt by the characters (Stanbrough, 2007). Moreover, suggestions can also be employed to mislead readers' expectation for a possible resolution and surprise them with another resolution. In the example, the priest's culpability is subtly implied through his change in color. It is open to debate whether the priest was directly involved with the narrator's wife or if his involvement with another person made him feel the guilt. Readers can interpret the story in a variety of ways and season it with their perceptions and experiences.

2. THE POPULARITY OF FLASH FICTION

There is considerable market interest in publishing short-short story anthologies. Responding to expanding demand for the genre, educators, writers, critics, and editors have collected very short stories (Nold, 2007). Newspapers, magazines, blogs, and flash specific online magazines invite writers to submit their short-short stories. Although flash fiction has gained momentum and shows great marketing potential, Shapard (2012) argues that the length of a story should always be subject to its content rather than to its perceived marketability. Qualities of flash fiction such as depth, clarity of vision, and human significance resonate well with the readers (Thomas & Shapard, 2006). Moreover, the flash fiction

is materializing as a crucial teaching technology for the twenty-first century as it is quickly written and serves as a perfect instructional tool (Boyd, 2006; Kirby, 2013). Flash fiction comes naturally to writers in the late childhood and teenage phase because it does not involve complex plot development or an interplay between characters (Chambers, 2012). Moreover, the predilection of a technology-savvy young population for flash fiction is due to the ease of writing and publishing short-short stories on electronic devices, which also excites and motivates young writers. Notwithstanding the popularity flash fiction has earned, research conducted on writers, editors, critics, and readers has shown opposing views regarding short-short stories of up to 750 words. Shapard and Thomas asked experts to read and rate some of the best short-short stories, which they had grouped into two categories: flash fiction comprising a maximum of 750 words and new sudden fiction consisting of a maximum of 1,500 words. The ratings showed that the longer stories were more popular (Guimaraes, 2009). Perhaps the predilection for longer length stories (up to 1,500 words) is due to their resemblance with the traditional story; moreover, the poverty of content, lack of poetic condensation, and absence of a traditional story form may also make the short-short story less appealing to some readers.

3. INTERPRETING FLASH FICTION

Flash fiction engages its readers in a unique way. The novel or a traditional story typically offers readers a complete resolution with little room for speculation. However, in flash fiction, clues and suggestive implications give readers a reason to brainstorm for alternative answers. Like a riddle, flash fiction continuously draws its readers back to the story for more deliberation. Individual perceptions can give a flash fiction numerous possible resolutions based on the vagaries of human experience. The subtle clues, woven into the story, leave readers pondering on what else the protagonist or the antagonist could have done to have reached an alternative resolution. In most flash fiction, a change in personality, behavior, or world view is experienced by the protagonist and/or antagonist, or even by the reader (Stanbrough, 2007). Such a change marks the character arc or the story arc.

It is the reader's interpretation of the story, especially its ending that engages the readers beyond the completion of the story. The best flash fiction includes stories that haunt readers for days or weeks even though it took them only a few minutes to read (Batchelor & King, 2014; Casto, 2015). Flash fiction is linked to the human condition (Batchelor & King, 2014); therefore, readers are more inclined to link such stories with what they have either experienced themselves or have seen others experience. The suggestions offered by the writer, especially through the resolution, lead the readers

towards an active involvement in the story even after its completion. In essence, the success of flash fiction depends on the readers' interpretation of the story and whether it captivates their attention beyond the end of the story.

CONCLUSION

In the current technology-driven age, flash fiction has become a global phenomenon with an increasing number of writers turning to the Internet to share their sudden flashes of insight. Internet-savvy writers and readers easily disseminate flash fiction through posts, tweets, retweets or likes on the social media, blogs, or other websites. Writers also market their flash fiction directly, to readers and critics, by keeping an active online presence. Flash fiction represents complete stories that are unconventional, compressed, precise, and are also marked with an element of surprise. Moreover, these stories are not plot driven and involve isolating a 'moment' to create an intense and emotionally charged scene.

The ending of flash fiction is purposely obscured with clues that provoke repeated readings to achieve closure. The ambiguous narrative also begs for the reader's attention to probe further possible scenarios, which also give them an opportunity to interpret the story based on their individual experiences and perceptions. Thus, the reader and the writer complete the story in partnership with each other. Despite the predilection of readers for easy access to short doses of fiction, flash fiction is not appreciated by all. The poverty of narrative and lack of clear plot makes it less appealing to novel readers. However, the worldwide proliferation of the Internet is changing the mindset of the readers who may be motivated to try short-short fiction in the coming years.

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