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## Based on Brevity: Fiction in 140 Characters or Less

### Abstract

This paper examines how short-short stories published on social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* experiment with brevity. It examines the use of devices such as planned spaces between words, colors, and enjambments, a genre called twitter fiction, to deliver the literary after-taste of 'byte-sized' fiction. What are the ramifications, requirements, and results of this form of brevity? Since the works are written and published on/for the digital media, what other aids supplement the reading process, if any? What forms of innovation does this conciseness allow? Two platforms of reading and writing short-short stories (of 140 characters or less) will be used to examine these questions: *Terribly Tiny Tales* on *Facebook* and *Very Short Story* (@veryshortstory) on *Twitter*.

**Keywords:** digital humanities, twitter fiction, brevity, short story, technology, social media

*"For sale: Baby shoes. Never worn."*

-Ernest Hemingway

The six-word story by Ernest Hemingway, written in the 1920s, can be seen as an exemplary precursor to the recent burgeoning of short-short stories on *Twitter* and *Facebook*. To clearly define the term in the context of length is a complicated process as not only do short-short stories have different names, there is no fixity in terms of how short they must be or which style or form they deal with – ranging from myths and fables to serialized novels. However, works that are strictly 140 characters or less come under the subset of short-short stories and are popularly known as

'140 stories,' 'short-shorts,' and 'very short stories.' These are mostly published on social platforms like *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Tumblr* and personal blogs to allow immediacy in writing, self-publishing, and reaching out to an audience. Restricting the work to this minimum character limit allows the writer to publish the work across different social platforms. Therefore, the underlining requirement of this form of literature is that it must be brief. This becomes the first and the most important prerequisite for the genre.

This stress on brevity in the new media poses challenges both for the reader and the writer. The reader must decipher the story conveyed succinctly while the writer not only has to fit in the words but also spaces and punctuation to meet the requirement of length. This paper surveys these important issues regarding short-short stories: 1) What are the ramifications, requirements, and results of this form of brevity? 2) Since the works are written and published on/for digital media, what other aids supplement the reading process if any? 3) What forms of innovations does this conciseness allow? Two platforms of reading and writing short-short stories (of 140 characters or less) will be used for the purpose: *Terribly Tiny Tales* on *Facebook* and *Very Short Story* (@veryshortstory) on *Twitter*.

Short narrative fiction is not a recent phenomenon in literature. Biblical verse narratives, myth, fables, and folktales are just some of the seeds of the genre. In the late twentieth century, short-short stories had begun to be regarded as a new literary practice. In the first anthology of the form, *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories* (1986), Robert Shapard and James Thomas claim that "the short-short story must be an even younger form than the short story. Short- *shorts* must be a sub-category. Or maybe a sub-sub-category" (xiii). However, in *New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond* (2015), the same authors see short-shorts as a separate genre. In 2012, the # *TwitterFiction Festival* challenged writers like Jeffrey Archer and David Lodge to write a 140-character story. Social media proved to be a great platform for an easy dissemination of these. In the article "The Rise of Twitter Fiction," Melissa Terras says that "[w]ith Twitter fiction, people are taking the limitation of 140 characters and doing something creative. It's a slightly different art form and it creates a different experience of fiction" (Goldhill). The only requirement of this genre is that the stories be brief.

"Brevity," from the Latin word *brevitatem* (nominative *brevitas*), conveys a 'shortness' in space or time ("Brevity"). In his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe iterates the impact and importance of brevity in both prose and verse:

*The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading, would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences – resulting from weariness or interruption. (572)*

This conciseness requires that the reader's attention be grasped by the written work from the start to the finish. The work is required to be short to ensure that interventions do not pause the effect. However, when reading on social media platforms like *Twitter* or *Facebook*, "worldly interventions" might be present on the very same page: advertisements, status updates, pictures – all can lead to a pause that, for Poe, would destroy the true unity of a work. To keep that in check, short-short stories, when not intentionally paused by the writer as in serialized publications, try to retain the unity through brevity. The challenge lies in how the work will fit in yet stand out within the structure of a webpage.

Unlike an eBook that is downloaded and read by default in 'full-screen' mode to minimize distractions on the screen, a short-short story is injected into already noisy platforms like *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Various elements of the cluttered screen beg for the attention of the viewer. The contest between these components and a short-short story work posted on the same webpage is that the short-short story attempts to grasp the viewers' attention by giving them an experience of having read a piece of literature. As the eye glances from one object of the digital screen to another, the success of a piece lies in how it delivers and presents itself to convert a viewer to a reader. With the average human attention span of eight seconds ("Attention"), swiftness and

terseness are both crucial. In the introduction to *Sudden Fiction International* (1989), Charles Baxter highlights that these short-short stories can speak through the noise of the contemporary world:

*I suspect that these stories appeal to readers so much now because the stories are on so many various thresholds: they are between poetry and fiction, the story and the sketch, prophecy, and reminiscence, the personal and the crowd. As Stuart Dybek has said, no one is sure what they are or even what to call them. Which means that, as a form, they are open, and exist in a state of potential. Unpredictable, funny, and certainly memorable, these stories may be wrong for the serious world of Big-Time Fiction, but they are right for all the right reasons. Length is not always seriousness; sometimes it simply has to do with how much information a story requires. With the noise of the contemporary world increasing exponentially hour by hour, and people trying to drown you with words alone, these stories have managed a neat trick: they put up and shut up. (14)*

While brevity is the necessity of these platforms, does it do anything else apart from meeting the requirements of length? In his memo on "Quickness," Italo Calvino argues that mental speed and swiftness are gifts in themselves:

*The motor age has forced speed on us as a measurable quantity, the records of which are milestones in the history of the progress of both men and machines. But mental speed cannot be measured and does not allow comparisons or competitions; nor can it display its results in a historical perspective. Mental speed is valuable for its own sake, for the pleasure it gives to anyone who is sensitive to such a thing, and not for the practical use that can be made of it. A swift piece of reasoning is not necessarily better than a long-pondered one. Far from it. But it communicates something special that is derived simply from its very swiftness. (Six Memos<sup>45</sup>)*

The "something special" derived from short-short stories is that while these are embedded onto a page that gets updated every second, they offer a kind of escape from the happening-right-now. The trending-now takes a backseat and these stories offer an atemporal element within the 'nowness' of a social media page. At the same time, these allow the reader to go back and forth between these two positions. One can read a short-short story, come back to reading a friend's status update, and then go back to reading another short-short story. The ease of this form of

escape-and-return perhaps adds to why such stories are popular on already popular platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. There is a convenience of reading, discovering, and sharing such stories.

Social media platforms add a shared and participatory nature to the act of reading. The reader can partake in a meaning-making process with others. This form of story-telling and reading then becomes a social experience. The writer can share the work instantly with others and the reader can leave his/her comments on the work or retweet and share it with others in their virtual social circle. Participation is also encouraged when the authors call readers to suggest a theme or a keyword for their next story, or encourage others to submit their own works to the parent page giving them a chance to convert from readers to writers. The formation of a story-telling community further strengthens the feeling of being a part of a community on a larger, global platform and enables creative participation:

*But among a quickly growing number of consumers, as in a large number of the nearly billion Facebook members and 100 million Twitterers, leisure time has become increasingly interactive, where some amount of creative participation is part of the fun [ . . . ] We are just beginning to see how our shared creativity will become our main ways of entertaining each other. (Lambert 4)*

The entire process of sharing, co-creating and participating can be done in a fraction of a minute because the brevity of the story allows it to be read and shared instantaneously. This swiftness of digesting the story leaves the reader with an after-taste and allows the tale to linger in the mind.

Even though the language is simple, there is a challenge to comprehending the story because superfluous details and explanations (even punctuation marks) are often kept out. These deletions become devices as the reader is forced to connect what is said and what is left unsaid. The strategic omissions use implicitness to create the desired effect, which Ernest Hemingway asserted is enough to deliver if the writer handles the material well:

*If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as*

*though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (192)*

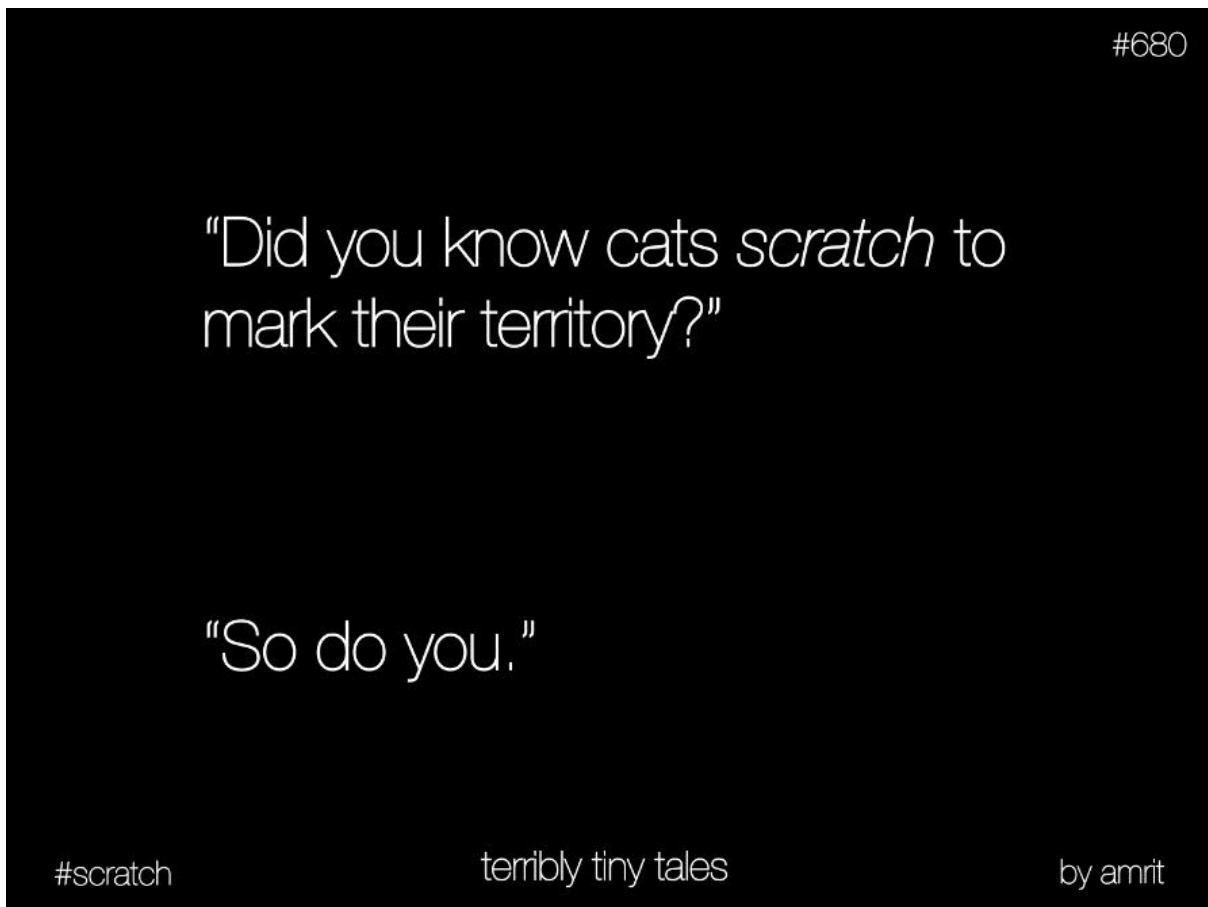
The 140 characters, therefore, become a tip of this iceberg where the seven-eighth of it can be deciphered by the reader despite these deliberate omissions on the part of the writer:



Decoding becomes a challenge. It serves the emotional resonance of the story and its ability to evoke a certain image, feeling or memory in the reader. Omissions fuel brevity which further drives the effect of the tale. Both *Terribly Tiny Tales* and *Very Short Story* use the same devices to make stories that are complete in themselves within 140 characters. While micro-fiction, twitter fiction and nano-fiction are all used to experiment with word-limit to publish anything from serialized novels to the *Mahabharata*, 140 stories form a complete unit in themselves. These are not told in a

series of tweets or statuses but begin and end within the assigned limit. This retains unity and makes possible the emotional effects caused by what Poe, as mentioned earlier, deemed an “immense force derivable from totality” (572).

*Terribly Tiny Tales*, launched in 2013, defines itself as a platform that “brings together a diverse pool of fantastic writers to create one tweet-sized story every day” (“About”). The series has run into sixty-four seasons with each season consisting of approximately ten to fifteen tales (although no specific limit is adhered to), each based on a different keyword like ‘fail’, ‘more’, ‘color’, ‘poem.’ These keywords can be suggested and submitted by anyone using a basic form on their website or are decided internally by their team. A keyword is chosen by one of their internal writers and the work is then published online across *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*. There is a consistent pattern that is followed across almost all tales – the text is white and put on a black background; additional information like serial number, hashtagged keyword and the author’s name are put in the corners:



The story and 'terribly tiny tales' –form the centre of the rectangle and these operate as the two focal points of the box. The brand name takes precedence over the author's name and is slightly larger than most of the details in the corners. Through this, the hierarchal relationship between these elements is subtly revealed. The author is not invisible or absent from the box but is virtually relegated to the corner. However, it is the tale that is the centre of focus with a font bigger than the rest. When a reader shares the same on his/her page, it ensures that along with the story, the name 'terribly tiny tales' is reproduced and indirectly advertised as the first authority that tale belongs to.

The second visual element of the rectangle is the colors. The choice of these is a strategic one: the black draws the attention of the viewer from other elements of the webpage to the box and offsets the white background of *Facebook* and *Twitter*. The white text further pulls the eye towards the words. If contrast is a visual technique to draw the eye, then black and white offer the highest degree of contrast possible between two colors (Sherin 58). In *Theory of Colours*, published 1810, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe noted this combination is "vivid, distinct, and powerful" and that "[i]f the object is *sharply relieved from its ground, like white on black*, the coloured accessory image in like manner appears in its greatest force" (54). Black text on a white background, the combination used by most websites, helps readability of the words, but since *Facebook* and *Twitter* already use this as their main combination to display text, the inversion of it is used to present a contrast that steers the eye towards the tale. However, apart from the obvious agenda of capturing the attention of the viewer, this use of the two colors also adds an atemporal quality to the tale. If the tale permits the reader to escape the 'nowness' of these platforms, then the black-and-white combination heightens the timeless appeal of the story, like black and white photographs and the 'classic' status of these two colors in the fashion industry.

Visually and structurally, the brevity of these stories allows words to become visual signifiers of the message or the theme of the story. The planned placement of words and spaces, with the often breaking of the regular syntactic structure of a sentence, facilitates guided perception of the viewer/reader where words become images and images become words:



#595

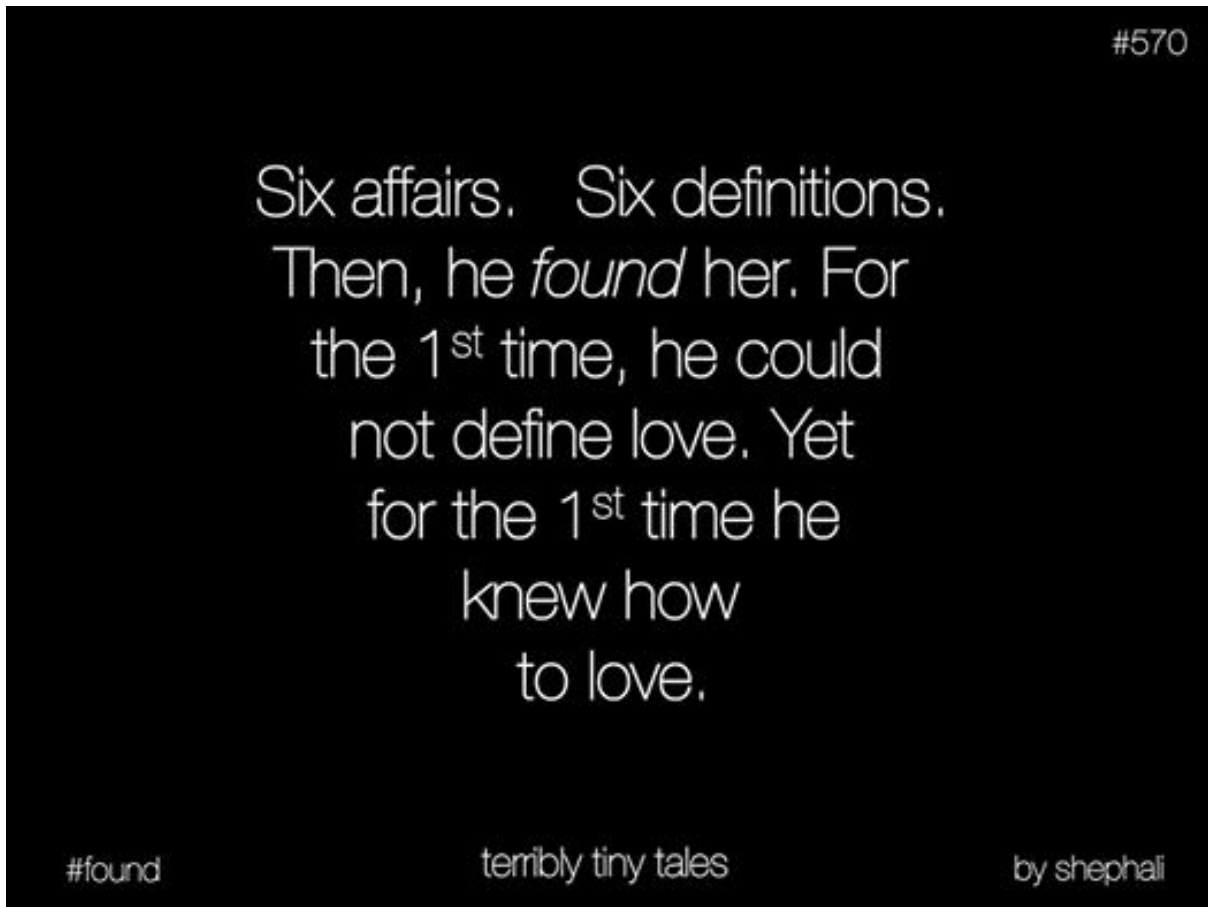
I'm the first to reach  
a parallel universe.  
My wife has married  
her Ex. Hah.  
Different life, house,  
pets.

But their son looks  
the *same*.

#same

terribly tiny tales

by ricardo



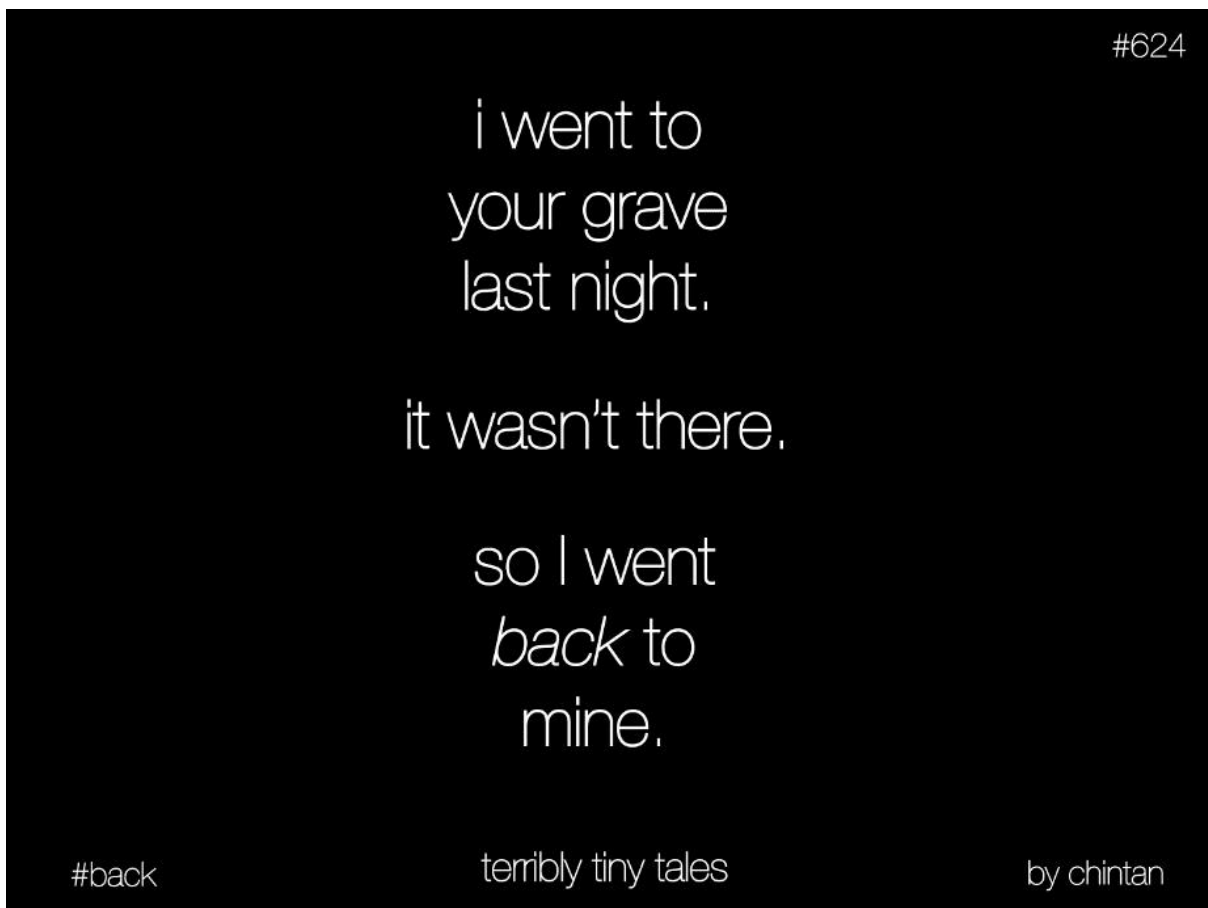
/p>

The non-neutrality of spaces in literature and their function have been long studied –Mallarmé’s *Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance* (1897) being a famous example of this. In its preface, the poet urges the readers to be conscious of the spaces between words and the spaces on the page because the “blanks, in effect, assume importance and are what is immediately most striking” (*Collected Poems* 121). The example on the left above – a tale on ‘same’ by Ricardo Vaz – uses enjambments and spaces to depict the parallel universe of the story, while the story on the right – on ‘found’ by Shephali Bhatt – depicts the shape of a heart in line with the theme of love explored in the work.

Enjambments that are a part of most of these stories have two functions: they are a necessity to fit the story within the box and they assist the desired deployment of meaning. In *Digital Discourse; Language in the New Media*, Thurlow and Mroczek highlight that this poetic device is now an everyday part of how we communicate in the world of digital media:

*As in a poem, enjambments can serve to heighten the expressive properties of language – such as dramatic tension – within an instant message. It is also an efficient means of punctuation. Consistent with the ecology of turn-taking characteristics [. . .] each stroke of the return key not only initiates a new utterance, but it also can serve to replace intrasentential punctuation such as commas or quotation marks with enjambment. (31)*

The replacement of commas and other punctuation marks is a technical need to save on character spaces since a limit of 140 characters includes spaces taken up by each alphabet letter and by each punctuation mark. Instead of random line breaks in the story, enjambment is used to cause a run-over of meaning to the next line, equipping the story with rhythm and tension:



When it comes to the writing of the tale itself, *Terribly Tiny Tales* has fixed criteria:

*There are certain rules and guidelines we adhere to.*

Must be a story within 140 characters (including spaces)

Must not be an abstract musing or poem

Must convey a passage of time

Must have a beginning and an end

Must include a character – could be anything from a cat to a letter box

Must include the selected word in the tale (“All Your Questions”)

While “it must not be an abstract musing or poem,” there is a coupling of poetic devices in the stories (such as enjambment as mentioned above). The third, fourth and fifth points of the depiction of the passage of time, the compulsory beginning and an end and the necessity of a character in the piece add to the literary quality of these tales being short-short stories and make them traverse into the realm of narrative poetry.

*Very Short Story* on *Twitter*, launched in 2009 by Sean Hill, has 140 character stories written in the form of tweets by the author. The *Twitter* handle has 200,000 followers. Works from the collection were published in the form of a paperback in 2011. Both *Very Short Story* and *Terribly Tiny Tales* express the brevity of their stories in their titles through the words ‘very’ and ‘terribly’. These are not short stories or tiny tales but are small enough to require an added stress on the shortness of their length. Also, in the same way that *Terribly Tiny Tales* publishes tales based on a suggested keyword, Hill bases each of his stories on nouns that can be proposed by anyone, following a similar pattern of collaborative creation:

*I ask my Twitter followers to send me nouns. The nouns that inspire me, I use in a very short story that I send out on my @veryshortstory Twitter feed. Since it’s Twitter, the stories have to fit in 140 characters. This character space limitation can be challenging, but it forces me to use my creativity to find a way to convey the stories in a small space. My best trick is getting the readers to use their imagination to fill in the gaps. (“Very Short Story”)*

Hill, like Hemingway, stresses that the use of implicitness and omissions are sufficient devices to ensure brevity and a rich reading experience: "The real magic is that the mind connects the details on its own. Your brain fills in the gap and it's almost never the same between two people" ("Phenomenon"). These stories are absent of a title and hashtag, and not even the chosen nouns are highlighted anywhere in the tale:



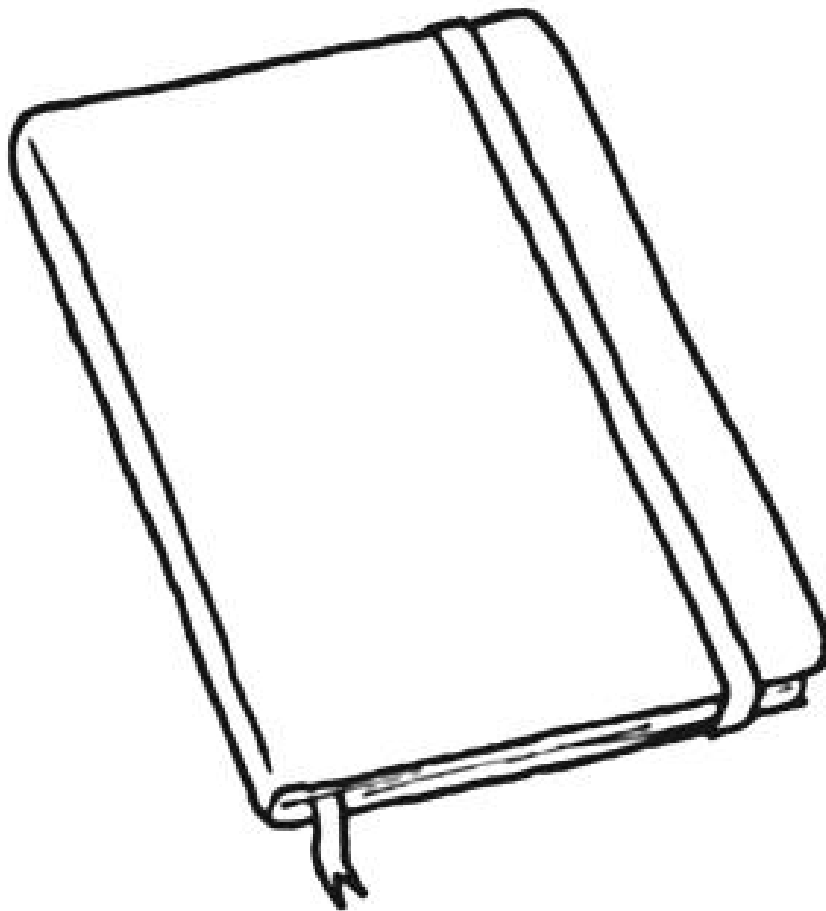
**Very Short Story** @VeryShortStory · Mar 31

My body broke down on the long journey.  
With no spare parts available, I discarded it  
and continued on my quest for  
enlightenment.

← ↻ 275 ★ 341 + 👤 ⋮

The 2011 paperback version retains these absences and each tale is inserted as is onto the page. Does the change of platform change the reading experience? When the same tales are published in book form, the reading experience is heightened because the noise of status updates and tweets are willingly removed, along with the instant share-ability of the tales. However, since these have already been shared on social media, the reader can go online to access them if necessary. On the other hand, putting these tales on actual paper ensures that they are not lost in online archives, or *Facebook* and *Twitter* timelines. Also, this works as a filtering of all the tales published online, to give the reader an experience of the ones considered best among the rest. The webpage *Very Short Story* has no system of categorization of tales but the tales in the book are subdivided into sections including "Relationships," "Family," and "Work" to guide the reading process, taking away some of the ambiguity and challenge from the tale. Interestingly, some are illustrated:

Read your diary, discovered your  
secret. I thought I loved you, but now  
I'm not sure. Don't know what to do,  
you look so human.



( *Bite-s ize* 45)

The need to be concise and brief to share, create and communicate via mediums like *Facebook* and *Twitter* has ushered in possibilities of looking at these platforms as spaces that enable snacking on fiction. The # *Twitter FictionFestival* has been running every year since its launch in 2012 and has

showcased creative literary experiments that include everything from the re-telling of 100 Greek myths in 100 tweets, versions of Italian folktales inspired by Italo Calvino's *Italian Folktales*, collaborative sonnets in French, to a memoir in tweets and a psychological thriller (Fitzgerald). There has also been a recent publication of the *Mahabharata* retold from the perspective of Bhimain a series of tweets (Sreedharan). Even prominent writers like Margaret Atwood and Salman Rushdie are using *Twitter* in a similar way to not just write terribly tiny tales, but to participate in the wider co-creation at play (Atwood was a part of # *Twitter Fiction Festival* held in May 2015). In "Is Twitter the Future of Fiction" from *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers*, Julie Armstrong argues that this is giving even more authority to the readers than before:

*This digital fiction gives the reader greater autonomy over the text and encourages them to be engaged, interactive readers, leading some critics to voice concerns that more and more authority is now lying with the reader as opposed to the writer, taking Barthes' polemic, 'death of the author, birth of the reader', to its ultimate conclusion.(190)*

The larger question, however, is: Why are these platforms becoming popular channels of reading and writing fiction? Firstly, these are already popular spaces to connect and share socially. Secondly, self-publishing content is convenient, so is discovering and reading it, and thirdly, they allow such innovations and an immediate response from the readers. Since anyone and everyone can become a writer on these platforms by just creating an account, there is a burgeoning of new talent amidst everything else. *Twitter* and *Facebook* can prove to be testing waters for new writers trying to understand and gauge the moods and the likes of their potential readers before they become writers of works more than 140 characters. On the other hand, writers with already published books are using these platforms to engage with their readers or respond to criticism online. The freedom that these platforms bring is allowed space for Shakespearean sonnets in internet slang, *H inglish* haikus, retellings of epics, one-act plays, short stories and short-short stories along with a mixing of the categories of highbrow and lowbrow literature. Instead of concentrating on the constant noise these platforms make, we need to examine their literary variations as writers known and unknown experiment with brevity.

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