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How Short Is Short?

Charles Holdefer

- 1 There are many ways to end a short story, a multitude of strategies and techniques for closure or for resisting closure, but the one abiding certainty is that the end is near. Indeed, the imminence of the end is an “undisputed genre marker” (Lohafer 142). Still, the perception of this imminence, like the adjective “short” when applied to the short story, is a relative affair.
- 2 For instance, Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) counts among his short stories, according to *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* (Ward, Waller and Trent). At 42,000 words, today it would surely be marketed as a novel. Although the short story has always been a flexible form and any critic should be wary of being prescriptive, evidence suggests that we are presently experiencing an age of increased brevity. As recently as the 1990s, a short story of 7000 words was unremarkable; nowadays, respectable American publications like *Ploughshares* prefer 5000 words as the upper limit; for *Triquarterly*, which recently shifted to an online format, the limit is 3500 words. In the UK, *The London Magazine* submission guidelines refer to a maximum of 4000 words, and *Chapman* says it averages 3000 words.¹ These are just a few examples and there are notable exceptions (e.g. *The New Yorker*), but for many magazines, the end of stories is, quantitatively speaking, *more* imminent. “Short” is not as long as it used to be.
- 3 Other major magazines (e.g., *Narrative* or *North American Review*) have created different submissions policies for the short story and the short-short: in effect, elevating what has frequently been considered “a subgenre of the short story” (Hall 234) to the status of a genre in its own right.² Recent years have also seen a rise in publications devoted exclusively to very short forms, in both print and web formats. These include *Nano*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *The Journal of Compressed Literary Arts*, and *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, among many others. This last example started in 2008 at the University of Chester, which also actively welcomes MPhil and PhD research on flash fiction,³ while in the U.S., some university writing programs now include workshops devoted exclusively to writing flash.⁴ Institutionally speaking, flash has made significant inroads. According to Sue O’Neill, the co-editor of *Vestal Review* (an American publication

started in 2000 which describes itself as “the longest-running flash fiction magazine in the world”⁵), interest in flash is a reflection of the larger culture. She remarks, “We’re an ADD society—we want a lot in a small space and time. We want instant sizzle” (qtd. in Michael Wilson iii).

- 4 Perhaps. But even if O’Neill is correct, it is also worth recalling that very diminutive forms are nothing new. Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894) requires only 1007 words and would be at home on today’s flash fiction webzines. The history of the short-short has been explored elsewhere (Chantler; Masih; Hazuka; Howitt-Dring) and will not be rehearsed again here, beyond underlining that our age certainly did not invent the form. Nor is our culture uniquely susceptible to it. In fact, Sue O’Neill’s description echoes the sentiments of A. Demott Freese, who published a “How To” manual in 1932 entitled *Writing the Short, Short Story*, in which he argued that the short short arose from “the modern tendency to briefness and hurry in all places of living” (qtd. in Masih xxvi). Such sentiments have existed for a long time.
- 5 What is noteworthy about recent developments is not a question of kind but of degree, the extent to which short forms have resurfaced and the renewed energy devoted to exploring their potential, often assisted by new technologies. Symptomatic of this activity is the recent proliferation of labels which attempt to distinguish today’s shortest works from the short-shorts of previous generations.
- 6 Very short forms are, in practice, quite eclectic, and like the traditional short story will differ in length according to a magazine or website editorial policy. These more compact forms include “flash fictions,” “microfictions,” “sudden fictions,” “postcards” and “smokelongs,” among other designations. “Postcard” fictions are stories that would fit on a traditional postcard;⁶ a “smokelong” refers to a story that you can read in the time it takes to smoke a cigarette.⁷ Such terms are intentionally impressionistic, playful or provocative: a website called “Fuck Fiction” is devoted not to erotica but to “fiction that could be read in the time it takes to fuck, discounting cuddling and the post-coital cigarette” (Wills). Other descriptions rely solely on word count. Typically, “flash” is less than 1000 or 750 words. *Vestal Review*, alluded to earlier, puts the limit at 500 words. There are also competitions and websites for 100 word stories or 55 word stories or 25 word stories or, in the spirit of the story that Ernest Hemingway supposedly wrote on a cocktail napkin at the Algonquin Hotel (“For sale: baby shoes, never worn”), six word stories. Though Hemingway’s example appears to be apocryphal (Mikkelson), the appeal of the form is undeniable. Examples on the “Six Word Stories” website include works by Margaret Atwood, Jeffery Eugenides and Dave Eggers, and collections of six word stories have been compiled and published in book-length anthologies.⁸
- 7 What does all this activity tell us? In this discussion, I cannot treat all these forms exhaustively or claim to distil them down to a decisive theoretical argument. I shall use the terms “short-short” and “flash” interchangeably (the latter term is a more recent coinage), and assume that “microfiction” embraces a gamut of smaller models. My interest is in a sense documentary, based on the simple observation that short story writers and readers are experiencing an interesting moment in the ongoing development of the genre, and that it might be timely to pause and to take a snapshot. Inevitably, much will get left out of the frame. But even a limited scrutiny can be revealing. Toward that end, I’ll address some particularities of the form as it is currently practiced in regard to narrative epiphanies and the limits of allusiveness. Lastly, I’ll speculate about the future

of flash in light of recent technological developments and how these might affect both its consumption and perception as art.

Questions of Narrative

8 Aside from the crude measure of word count or even character count, in the case of Twitter, what are some of the particularities of these forms? What distinguishes a piece of flash from a longer short story, or from a prose poem? One of the more interesting descriptions, in my estimation, has come from Robert Olen Butler, who is also an accomplished writer of short-shorts.

9 For Butler, the prose poem is more clearly an *object*, occupying a space, and it needn't necessarily address a human subject in time. Fiction, in contrast, is "a temporal art form" and, in various ways, it centers on "a character who yearns" (102).

It has been traditional to think that a story has to have a "plot" while a poem does not. Plot, in fact, is yearning challenged and thwarted. A short short story, in its brevity, may not have a fully developed plot, but it must have the essence of a plot, yearning (Butler 103).

10 To this distinction (and I'll take for granted some necessary qualifications, such as the long tradition of narrative poetry or the objectification implicit in Edgar Allan Poe's concepts of unity and single effect⁹), Butler offers a further formal observation. He underlines the difference between flash fiction and a short story of the kind which culminates with an epiphany. He argues that fiction in this tradition actually has two epiphanies. There is the Joycean epiphany, usually at the end of the narrative, where an aspect of the human condition "shines forth in its essence" (103); and there is also an earlier epiphany, placed near the beginning, "where the yearning of the character shines forth" (103). This first epiphany doesn't have to be explained but it is implicit, in the cumulative detail of the work.¹⁰

11 For Butler, what distinguishes flash fiction from the traditional model is that for flash, the two epiphanies are often simultaneous: they converge into one. "The final epiphany of the literary short-short is also the shining forth of a character's yearning" (103).

12 For instance, consider Marc Schuster's "The Turn:"

She waits until the last turn to say what kind of party this will be.

[...] Dinner, yes, with two other couples—the host and hostess and friends they all share. But in the space between two clicks of the turn signal, she says, "Oh," like she almost forgot, and the rest of the sentence lays bare what she's been failing to mention since early last week when the hostess asked in quiet and cautious yet straightforward terms if they'd "be cool" with this thing that she, the good wife and mother, is now telling her husband—as if in passing, as if to say that dinner starts at eight, that their friends don't eat shellfish, that the night will conclude with a game of charades.

[...] "Oh," he says as the information begins to unfold in his brain.

[...] When the light turns green, he turns the wheel, and all the reasons she said yes, they'd be cool with it, slide from one baby seat to the next—the juice box, the sippy cup, the crumpled baggie of Cheerios, the things that remind her of who she is, who she was, and who sometimes she wishes she could be.

[...] So the car rolls on—beneath railroad tracks, past quiet homes with swimming pools and rope swings through neighborhoods just like hers—until they reach the house where things will change.

[...] She wants him to keep driving. She wants him to turn back. She wants him to

say no, that's not us, but then again she doesn't, and when he pulls into the driveway and puts the car in park and says yes—he's cool with it, too—a part of her dies while another blinks nervously to life.

(Schuster, reprinted with permission)

- 13 Naturally there are a number of ways to read this flash fiction of 287 words, and to see hints of the main character's yearning earlier on ("who she wishes she could be"), but one could argue that this piece demonstrates Butler's description, with both epiphanies shining forth in the last paragraph. This is where conflicted yearning emerges just as the story itself comes to a halt. As flash fiction writer Randall Brown has observed, "flash *desires* its ending" (Brown, "Interview," my emphasis). Or, to put it another way, the imminence of the end has been brought forward.
- 14 For this to work, there needs to be a sufficient accumulation of meaning to achieve a dramatic charge, a fact which is obvious yet vexingly difficult to pin down, since how much meaning is "sufficient"? Short story critic Susan Lohafer's work on reader reception might point toward an answer. Lohafer has described how readers' internalized story schema contribute to a cognitive process of "storying" which includes various preclosure points preceding the final sentence of any story, which is its ultimate closure (59, 146). She refers to how a reader "chunks" a narrative in order to arrive at its meaning (57).
- The perception of storyness is a gestalt; each of us [is] a human story processor [...]
How do readers chunk a text into meaningful units above the sentence level? When do these chunks become story size? Enter, preclosure study (57-58).
- 15 Although Lohafer does not explicitly address flash fiction, I would argue that the preclosure points that she describes, demarcated by various attempts at "chunking," could correspond to Butler's allusion to a "first epiphany" or a located sense of yearning. Stylistically, perhaps writers of flash are producing a "chunk" and arguing by implication that it can stand on its own. This pushes the limits of the genre, and in some cases, perhaps the limits of comprehension itself. For some readers, it might appear that the writer has failed to finish the job. But the same writer might reply, however, that it is the reader who is not trying hard enough.

Playing with Limits

- 16 How far can this approach—this challenge from the writer—be taken? The shorter texts of microfiction are often highly allusive and sometimes forgo the principles of epiphany or reader reception "chunks" in favor of other, more elliptical literary values. Robert Swartwood, editor of W.W. Norton's *Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 words or Fewer*, posits a contrast between the longer forms of literary fiction which meet the reader half way and examples like Hemingway's "Baby Shoes" which rarely meet the reader a tenth of the way, thus the label, "hint fiction" (Swartwood 24-25). As an intuitive judgment, this sounds unexceptionable, though of course Swartwood is speaking metaphorically. Yes, it is possible to count words in a story: but how does one quantify literary reception, especially at the "sub-chunk" level?
- 17 And what about counter-examples of very short texts which are hardly elliptical at all? Consider, for instance, this piece found on the "Six Word Stories" website: "You all suck. Get a job" (Nishi). Reading this text in the manner that one would read "Baby Shoes," one can indeed infer a narrative framework, a larger context, a world of reference. But one

will also likely detect a different convention, a genre which is engaging in another kind of meaning. This text is, formally speaking, a joke, not an attempt at literary fiction. I don't say this to disparage jokes, not at all; I'm simply observing a distinction. Extreme compression does not equal literary allusiveness. Sometimes, what you see is something else.

- 18 Nor is an advanced sense of allusiveness, when it happens, a quality particular to microtexts. The critic Charles May, writing about the short story in its more ample forms, has remarked upon its proximity to “the original religious nature of narrative” (May “Introduction,” xxvi) and he has underlined how often short story writers have compared the genre, for its lyric nature, to poetry and music, which are conventionally considered as more allusive modes of expression. Starting with Poe, May also cites William Faulkner, Herbert Gold, Amy Hempel, Deborah Eisenberg, David Means and Alice Munro, among others (May “Music and Mystery”). Thus, rather than constituting a signature quality of short-stories and even smaller forms, the question of allusiveness might simply be, once again, a matter of degree, of pushing an already-present attribute of the short story to the forefront and making it even more marked. Holly Howitt-Dring has observed that in its narrative structure, microfiction “almost *exaggerates* the devices of longer stories” (53, my emphasis), adding that microfiction and prose poetry are so interrelated that often they cannot be easily differentiated (52).
- 19 But in this case, playing with the limits of genre is not considered a critical “problem.” Kirby Johnson, editor of *Nano* magazine, has described flash fiction as living “in a gray space between fiction and poetry” (qtd. in Melinda Wilson). This is the kind of writing she pointedly seeks out. Grant Faulkner, founding editor of the webzine *100 Word Story*, refers to communicating “via caesuras and crevices” (2013). In his book *A Pocket Guide to Flash Fiction*, flash fiction writer Randall Brown playfully takes Anne Sexton’s poem “Young” and reformats it to make it appear, quite plausibly, as a piece of flash prose (163). In doing so, his purpose is not to be provocative but rather to provide a demonstration; he argues that writers need not worry about a putative difference between flash and prose poetry (164).
- 20 The challenges are not only formal, either. Sometimes they are political. In very short, highly allusive pieces, the traces of the implied author are greatly diminished, and it is harder for the reader to remain a passive receptor. This fact was recently seized upon by Nicole Monaghan, who in 2011 edited an anthology called *Stripped: A Collection of Anonymous Flash*. In this volume, all the bylines were removed from its 47 stories so that the reader couldn't know the identity of the author. (As pre-arranged by the publisher, this information was revealed a year later.) One of Monaghan's stated purposes was to question a reader's assumptions about gender. “Perhaps,” she speculated, “as readers we can be more fully engaged with our characters, our disbelief more truly suspended, when we know nothing of the author” (x). Strictly speaking, this is an editorial intervention with the paratext, but the general point holds true, that flash fiction is well-suited for such an experiment.
- 21 Monaghan's approach with *Stripped* recalls I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* and his withholding of authors' identities from his Cambridge students in the 1920s in order to come to grips with their literary values (Holdefer). We live in a very different world now, to put it mildly—gender issues were not a priority for Richards—but some of the same questions of reception persist, and very short forms quickly put them into relief. How does knowledge of the author's identity, for instance, affect a *Stripped* reader's reaction to

a story that expresses ambivalence toward motherhood? What about domination or abasement fantasies during sex? Does the gender of the author matter? Flash and related forms do not answer those questions but they help foreground them along with other sensitive subjects which are coded in terms of identity or authorship. It is one of the potential strengths of this kind of writing.¹¹

Platforms

- 22 In many of the examples cited above, I am referring to materials available exclusively on the Web. Even if very short pieces are nothing new, they have, of course, been affected, along with other forms of writing, by recent technological changes in the publishing industry, as readers increasingly turn away from books and print magazines to look at screens and pixels. How do smaller forms fit into this larger cultural conversation?
- 23 One can begin by observing that the publishing industry is experiencing a crisis even as the volume of disseminated content is unprecedented. Travis Kurowski, author of a recent book about the history of literary magazines in America, has compared the situation to “sifting through an avalanche.” He explains:
- One of the greatest challenges today is connecting to readers buried beneath more text and narrative than ever before in human history. There is just so much data now, so much language and narrative. How do you get the writing/art across, get it heard, seen in the avalanche of information, when every tweet, news flash and side boob (thx HuffPost) seem to be vying so hard for our attention?
- 24 How, indeed? Nowadays many predictions regarding the future of literary fiction are unremittingly gloomy, if not catastrophic. Ted Genoways, the former editor of *Virginia Quarterly*, a first-rate literary magazine, recently published an article entitled “The Death of Fiction.” The title pretty much tells it all, but Genoways underlines how, in today’s world, editing a literary magazine seems to most people “only slightly more utilitarian than making buggy whips or telegraph relays.”
- 25 Though widespread, this view has dissenters, many of whom could be described as techno-boosters. In an article published in the same year as Genoways’ death dirge, Ben Johncock of *The Guardian* wrote of “A renaissance rooted in technology: the literary magazine returns.” He explained:
- For Five Dials and other PDF-based magazines, you can save issues to your bookshelf in iBooks now. If Hamish Hamilton decide to offer Five Dials as a free iBook instead of a PDF from their website, you’ll be able to download it directly from the iBookstore, as you would any other book. [Editors] Taylor and Prosser are looking at the future, at apps and HTML5, because they realise what has happened. The literary magazine has come full circle. What didn’t kill them has made them stronger. Have no doubt about it, the short story is back.
- 26 It’s too soon to say whose view will prevail but clearly we are in a transitional period. And, plausibly, if one entertains the more optimistic version that recent developments are a salutary episode of creative destruction, flash fiction and its cousins are perhaps some of the biggest beneficiaries, rising out of the rubble as literary fiction’s more resilient forms. Stories that can be quickly consumed on a hand-held screen, texted or tweeted, might have a competitive edge.
- 27 Before one embraces that happy ending, however, a few qualifying observations are necessary. First, there is the danger of being seduced by a fashionable discourse which is

less interested in literature than in celebrating the undeniably impressive achievements of recent technologies. In this telling, readers are invited to marvel about new apps while assuming that the literary text and its aesthetic qualities will, in some mysterious way, take care of themselves. It is also assumed that there will be an audience for the product. A recent article in *The New York Times* about technology and short fiction describes “a proliferation of digital options” (Kaufman) and touts Amazon’s Kindle singles program, established in 2011, as a way to make short stories more profitable for both established and fledgling writers who can sell them for a dollar or two per unit.

- 28 Will this approach work better for the publishing business than it did for the music business? iTunes and others have been trying desperately in an era of file-sharing and piracy to recovery a piece of an earlier, far more lucrative, model. If it does work better for fiction, it will likely be because short story writers, with rare exceptions, hardly make any money in the first place, so their expectations are very low. A turnover that would seem risible in the music industry could still represent a net gain for the writer of short fiction.
- 29 But even then, the volume scarcely registers in comparison to the ocean of *free* content on the Internet which, for the foreseeable future, will continue to grow. This is a second important consideration. Some of this content is very bad, as web publishing, in many cases, is scarcely more difficult than posting a blog; and some of it is very good, as well-established magazines move part or all of their content online (e.g., *Triquarterly*, *The Agni Review*, *The Kenyon Review*) and serious new webzines acquire a reputation and an audience (e.g., *n + 1*, *The Collagist*, [*Pank*]). Significantly, though, as noted earlier in my comments about the shortening trend in editorial policy, “more” content does not equal *longer* content. It would probably be more accurate to describe today’s situation as increasingly pluralistic and specialized, with, for example, the advent of publications devoted *exclusively* to flash or microfiction. Freed from the limits imposed by the cost of paper and postage, it is indeed easier today to publish a 15,000 word story, just as it is easier to access PhD dissertations or entire archives. But, demonstrably, micro aesthetics are prospering, too, and are very much at home in a world of free content. The audience is small but one does not have to be an enthusiast of the naive sort to argue that current conditions have helped these forms to achieve a greater visibility, allowing writers to reach out to their potential audience.

* * *

- 30 Very short forms are nothing new but they are presently enjoying a greater currency under a variety of labels. Their concentrated presentation, their more urgent enactment of the “imminence of the end,” can change the experience of reading. For some narratives, this is reflected in the placement of epiphanies and handling of “storying,” and for others, especially the smallest forms, the degree of allusiveness enacts other values than “storying” and makes them difficult to distinguish from prose poems. Technology has also played a role in the ascendance of very short fiction, which to many readers may seem better adapted to their new digital reading platforms. These forms are very much at home in the world of free content, with the hope of reaching an audience proving a sufficient incentive for many writers, at least so far, compared to the more unlikely prospect of making money in today’s publishing business.

- 31 Writing about the re-emergence of minimalist forms in 1980s, which were arguably the beginning of our current wave of interest, John Barth identified “the ground inspiration, moral-philosophical in character, of minimalism [...]: the feeling that the language (or whatever) has for whatever reasons become excessive, cluttered, corrupted, fancy, false. It is the Puritans' reaction against baroque Catholicism; it is Thoreau's putting behind him even the meager comforts of the village of Concord.”
- 32 It is, indeed, one way to get to heaven. Barth, himself a maximalist, was quick to point out that it is not the only way. And this is surely true. Expansive forms continue to exist, and are in no danger of disappearing. But, generally speaking, at present it appears that many short story writers and readers continue to turn their back on the baroque as they venture even deeper into the woods. And this time, they often have a smart phone in their pocket.

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NOTES

1. Policies about story length are available on the websites of *Ploughshares*, *Triquarterly*, *London Magazine* and *Chapman*, respectively.
2. Submissions policies for the short-short are available on the websites of *North American Review* and *Narrative Magazine*, respectively.
3. See "Flash Research" on the University of Chester website.
4. See, for instance, the web descriptions of Randall Brown's workshops devoted to "Flash Fiction" at Rosemont College in Pennsylvania.
5. *Vestal Review* publishes both a semi-annual print magazine of flash fiction and a frequently updated website.
6. Science fiction editor George Hay reportedly challenged Arthur C. Clarke to write a story of this length. For more information and examples, see the website of *postcardshorts.com*.
7. According to Tara Masih, this form is particularly popular in China. See Masih, xxi.
8. See, for instance, the collection of conceptual "memoirs" in Rachel Fershleiser and Larry Smith's, *Not Quite What I Was Planning, Six-Word Memoirs by Authors Famous and Obscure*.
9. See, for instance, Poe's essayistic review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*.
10. Although the terms like "epiphany" and "essence" can be problematic, conveying strong connotations of totalizing reifications of human consciousness or of crude essentialism, my reading of Butler infers that he is claiming something more modest. Codes created by writing are assumed to be provisional and subject to contradiction.
11. Lohafer's work on preclosure also has some interesting observations about possible gender bias, 44, 77, 173n.

ABSTRACTS

On considère désormais l'imminence de la fin comme « un marqueur générique incontestable » (Lohafer 2003). Au cours de la dernière décennie, de nombreux magazines littéraires ont opté pour une politique éditoriale réduisant la longueur des histoires à publier. À présent, les « fictions flash » et les « micro-fictions », jusqu'ici considérées comme des sous-genres, jouissent d'une popularité grandissante et d'une visibilité accrue dans le monde de l'édition. La « fin » est donc plus proche pour de nombreux lecteurs.

Cet article interroge ce phénomène de mode de la brièveté accrue et les possibilités de trouver une terminologie pour « l'extrêmement bref » qui ne se confonde pas avec celle de la nouvelle. Il

se penche également sur les affinités que la micro-fiction peut entretenir avec la prose poétique et analyse en quoi son caractère allusif requiert un effort supplémentaire de la part du lecteur, créant des implications à la fois formelles et politiques. Enfin, il se demande à quel point et selon quelles modalités les mutations technologiques, notamment la lecture à l'écran et les dispositifs portatifs, ont modifié la façon d'envisager l'avenir de la fiction brève.

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