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► **To cite this version:**

| Donald O Besong. Subjective Interpretation in Flash Fiction. 2024. hprints-04378421v2

HAL Id: hprints-04378421

<https://hal-hprints.archives-ouvertes.fr/hprints-04378421v2>

Preprint submitted on 9 Jan 2024

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Subjective Interpretation in Flash Fiction

Author: Donald O. Besong

Abstract

This analysis paper presents two of the author's flash fiction stories. He encourages readers to make sense of the narratives in their own way. The paper argues that revealing too much of the story would deprive the reader of the stimulation which was supposed to draw them toward closure.

The author observes that the vast majority of recent flash stories do not have the above-mentioned ironic twist but hopes that this paper will proliferate the endangered mystique.

The author terms the mistake of telling the reader too much as 'the spoiler'. The term is often used in the movie industry to mean a piece of information that—too early on—reveals important plot details, twists, or surprises about a movie.

It is intended that this paper remains short and easy to understand so that readers can grasp flash fiction and be interested in stories of that nature.

Keywords: Flash, short-short, suggestive, irony, enigmatic

1. Introduction and Literature Review

The origins of short fiction may be anecdotal, but its theorisation dates back to the 1960s (Winther, Lothe, & Skei, 2004).

Flash Fiction has been described as an emerging, popular and increasingly prevalent genre (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015). It may have a nuanced classification: while that reference classifies flash fiction as a genre, Othman thinks it is a subgenre (Othman, 2007).

This type of story is extremely short—with a beginning, middle and end—and retains the primary components of a complete story: setting, character, conflict and resolution (Stanbrough, 2004).

A conflict in flash fiction does not necessarily mean a fight or quarrel between characters. The tension that is produced by what is said or subtly implied is conflict (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015) and (Othman,

2007).

Furthermore, Stanbrough's flash fiction piece (*At Confession*) insists on a fifth component on this list: suggestion (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015). This is also known as the "surprise ending" and is not a requirement (Stanbrough, 2004). The author of the present work has read many stories without this fifth element but is only interested in stories with it.

The term 'flash fiction' is used interchangeably with other names, such as "stories in miniature, short-short stories, prose poems" (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015). The terms "micro, sudden, postcard, furious, fast, quick, skinny, smoke-long, and minute fiction" also address this subgenre (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015).

The stories normally have "as few as 100 words up to 1,000 or even 1,500 words" (Casto, 2023). However, according to the taste of Stanbrough, flash fiction is written in 99 words or fewer (Stanbrough, 2004), which Othman characterises with "extreme brevity" (Othman, 2007).

This essay restricts itself to flash fiction that includes the suggestion aspect. In this case, the resolution may occur to the reader through their interpretation of the story, especially its ending, beyond the completion of the story (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015). In other words, different resolutions may arise in other readers as the writer "engages readers with the surprise and shock technique" (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015). This kind of resolution transcends the story completion (Batchelor, 2012). Stanbrough purports that the most exciting resolution is plausible but unexpected, causing the reader to ask themselves why they didn't think of that (Stanbrough, 2004). Othman analyses this category of stories in their work, where the subgenre is characterised by ". . . the choice of words, grammar and punctuation to actively involve the reader in the act of unravelling the multiple layers of meaning evoked" (Othman, 2007). Stanbrough's flash fiction piece (*At Confession*) falls under this illusive category of the subgenre (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015).

A complete story must have a plot, but this is unnecessary in flash fiction because it may occur in the reader's mind as a result of implication (Stanbrough, 2004). In Stanbrough's *Writing Realistic Dialogue & Flash Fiction*, page 29, he is enthusiastic about the subtleties of implication as he writes: "When we tell the reader everything, he is knowledgeable but passive and bored" (Stanbrough, 2004).

Flash fiction is becoming increasingly popular in the digital age, providing compressed narratives that provide writer-reader partnerships (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2015). This subgenre is encouraged in this era of short attention spans because "truth descends upon us infrequently and in flashes" (Casto, 2023).

Readers who are interested in a literature review on flash fiction can refer to one of Othman's manuscripts (Othman, 2007), but the present work is intended to be brief. Readers can learn more about—how to write—flash fiction from the following authors, though it is not an exhaustive list: Stanbrough, Stollman and Masih, who have been referenced, but there is a wealth of other resources to explore.

2. Methods: Analysis of Two Flash Fiction Stories

2.1. Thug Love (Author: Donald O. Besong)

One breezy May afternoon, Tom was having a sip in a local pub at peace with the world and savoured the idea that he'd had a successful career after calling his most recent job a swan song.

A young, attractive woman approached him by the bar. "I missed you."

"Aww. My name is Tom." A big smile. "Where did we meet?"

"In the bank."

"Oh, you love my type?"

"Sure, and you made me shove something into a hole."

"Oh, baby, can I see your hole?"

"Definitely. It's in the wall of the bank."

A strident roar from the burly man behind the women: "That dark, lovely head is our colleague. She just shattered your pipe dream, huh?"

A sinister round of laughter from the man's dozen companions. They all surrounded Tom, who noticed Kevlars bulging from underneath their shirts.

"The mask you wore that day was so thick you had to take it off too early." One of the men said. "That gave you away."

As the woman read his Miranda Rights, Tom knew it was over.

Analysis

Setting:

In the above story, the setting is provided in the first line of the narrative. It is a pub.

Characters:

Tom and a woman.

Conflict:

Thug Love involves multiple conflicts. The initial conflict, or tension, is when a mysterious woman suddenly declares she has missed Tom. The reader may wonder where they first met. Tom faces the same conflict just before confusion hits him again: he asks to see the hole. Is it the woman's private part?

Another interesting conflict arises in the use of the word love. Tom might have meant romantic love, while the woman was being ironic.

Resolution/Ending:

The uncertainty of where they met is partly resolved to be the bank. The keen reader may resolve the ambiguous hole as gunshots in the wall of an investment bank—where the thug has been robbing. The ‘miss’ may imply the woman’s bullet missed Tom during the robbery. Therefore, the woman must be a cop or an armed guard who was shooting at him during the act. This is confirmed by what one of the policemen says.

The presence of men with gun proofs confirms that she is working with other cops. Note that gun proofs are often made from a material known as Kevlar from the Kevlar brand. Therefore, a gun proof is sometimes called a Kevlar. This resolution is exactly what the author had in mind at the time of writing this particular story. The title of the story also favours this resolution.

Although this story seems to reveal quite a lot, there are bits left out which make it fun and exciting.

Spoiler:

The author believes that since this story isn’t too enigmatic, adding to the narrative that Tom is a thief and that the woman is a cop would spoil the little enigmatic angle.

There might be no conversation about holes if the woman immediately points a gun at Tom, and the story would take a completely different turn and fail to fulfil the purpose of this paper.

2.2. A Ton of Flesh (Author: Donald O. Besong)

A bored Mr Sock tossed the newspaper he had been reading into the trash basket, having done most of the puzzles. He was good at anagrams.

Rubbing his tired eyes with the back of his hand, he casually perused the large-print instructions on the pharmaceutical packet on his bed: You must swallow this tablet.

With a cool glass of water, he gulped the medicine for scabies and smiled.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an insect fall from the instruction leaflet. His now-heightened curiosity forced him to crouch and focus on the dead ant spread-eagled on the floor.

What is this? He wondered.

On a white patch on her belly was typeset: TON.

The man stiffened with horror.

Analysis

Setting:

The reader might correctly assume the setting to be the man's home because of the cool glass of water. Any setting would do, such as the first-class cabin of an aeroplane, without loss of context.

Characters:

A man infected with scabies. His name is unnecessary.

Conflict:

The man is startled when an insect falls from the instruction leaflet. It clearly reverberates in his mind: *what is this?*

The reader might prematurely assume that it is all resolved by knowing that it is just an insect. However, the biggest conflict in the story arises: how did 'TON' get printed on the insect's belly, and is the man horrified by a mere insect? Maybe the word gives the reader the needed clue.

Resolution/Ending:

After some thought, the engaged reader might not be able to draw any suitable conclusion because the author's pre-defined conclusion while writing the story is that a flake from the instruction leaflet was stuck under the insect. The man reads it in the inverted position as 'ton' and realises that the insect was initially stuck over the word 'NOT', causing him to misread the instruction. He now realises the print actually said, 'You must NOT swallow this tablet'. This is why he is horrified.

He can connect the two anadromes because he is characterised by expertise in these types of puzzles. He doesn't mind the space in the instruction because he is tired. Hence, actually swallows poison.

That being said, the author does not categorically negate the possibility of different resolutions.

The reader should drop their disbelief and enjoy the story instead of pondering how large the insect is.

There is no guarantee that every reader will reach a plausible resolution without more clues that others would term spoilers.

Spoiler:

It would have defeated the purpose of the genre if the author had ended the story with a line like 'The man immediately knew hell was coming to him'. This would have led the reader to an easy conclusion, hence, spoiling the excitement.

3. Conclusion

Flash fiction stories abound in literature and the media. A majority of them are simply condensed stories having enough clues to avoid piquing the reader's brain. However, some flash fiction stories provide fewer clues and incorporate the irony (or suggestion) component. The latter type is what this essay is about.

Some readers may find the above-narrated stories too vague and may prefer the former category. For instance, in the current author's *A Ton of Flesh* (narrated in the analysis section), such readers may prefer that a space is left on the medicine's instruction as a clue for the reader: *You must. . . swallow this tablet.*

The author of this essay proposes that flash fiction writers fine-tune the clarity of their enigmatic stories by seeking feedback from friends. Subsequently, they can decide whether to add or remove clues to achieve a more reasonable level of palatability in the narrative.

This essay may be used as a compact primer on flash fiction while captivating the reader with two of the author's short stories.

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