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ABSTRACT

This article combines a craft-focused approach with a stylistics perspective to consider the ways in which flash fiction may be said to operate as a unique literary form. In the opening section flash fiction is defined in relation to what are usually seen as its two closest literary companions: prose poetry and the short story. This is followed by an introduction to the linguistic phenomenon known as deixis, and to related concepts from the field of Narratology. These ideas are subsequently illustrated and explored through the close analysis of several short texts and used to uncover what might be considered the defining features of the form. The earlier taxonomic approach of William Nelles is also evaluated in the light of more recent creative practice. The article concludes by arguing that the mobilisation of a story world is a necessary requirement for a text to be classified as flash fiction, by highlighting the importance of deft manipulation of deictic elements, and finally by suggesting that the unique communicative context evoked by flash fiction has significant implications for its interpretation.

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1. Introduction: what makes flash fiction a distinctive literary form?

In her introduction to *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, after noting that it is virtually impossible to give a 'hard-edged' definition of flash fiction, Tara L. Masih settles on the idea that, in the end, it is simply 'a story in miniature, a work of art carved on a grain of rice' (2009, xl). This is an appealing image: the tiny story as objet d'art, the intricacy and skill required to exquisitely render a piece in minute detail. The idea of flash fiction as a story in miniature is aesthetically pleasing and simple, but it does not quite get to the heart of the form. It is not the case, as Masih's image suggests, that all the elements of the story exist on the page, shrunk down. I would suggest that different techniques and approaches are used in flash fiction – and that this necessary 'drive for innovation' is part of the form's growing appeal. As Russell Banks says: flash fiction is 'not a diminutive version of anything. It's its own self' (Thomas and Shapard 1986, 244). William Nelles echoes this sentiment when he posits that flash fiction is 'not just quantitatively but qualitatively different' from longer stories (2012, 88).

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In this article, I consider what makes flash fiction qualitatively different from the short story. I demonstrate that the *mobilisation of a story world* is necessary for a text to function as flash fiction and that this can be a useful way of distinguishing the form from prose poetry. This is a new and necessary distinction, as critics and writers seem to have found the two forms very difficult to separate. I also consider how the interpretation of short texts is highly bound up with the *context* in which readers encounter them.

Before going further, it is worth defining my terms. I have chosen to use the term 'flash fiction' and see it as an umbrella term for all short fiction under 1000 words. However, there has been (and remains) a fair bit of disagreement and dissent around the naming of the form. Although writers have occasionally written very short stories for centuries, it is only really since the 1980s that we have seen the proliferation and anthologising of such work. An early and influential anthology was *Sudden Fiction. American Short-Short Stories* (Shapard and Thomas 1986) edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas. The pair coined the term 'sudden fiction' in an attempt to capture the way short-short stories come at the reader; they are 'suddenly just there', 'without warning' (1986, xiv). Between them Shapard and Thomas have gone on to edit or co-edit a further eight such anthologies, and other series have sprung up around them, such as the annual *Best New Microfictions*. Shapard and Thomas' upper limit for *Sudden Fiction* was a hefty 1500 words, but in later anthologies they brought the upper bound down to 'around 750', the approximate length of Hemingway's 'A Very Short Story' (Thomas and Shapard 2006, 11), and their term of choice became 'flash fiction'. A more recent anthology in this lineage is *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction* (2018), edited by James Thomas and Robert Scotellaro. In the introduction, the editors' note '[t]he phenomenon is that the stories have been getting shorter and shorter' (foreword, xv).[1]

The terms 'sudden', 'flash', and 'micro' (along with others such as 'small stories' and 'short-shorts') are all still used today to describe very short fiction, although they tend to be used somewhat inconsistently. Thomas and Scotellaro see a scale running from sudden fiction at one end, through flash fiction, down to microfiction. The stories in *New Micro: exceptionally short fiction* are all under 300 words, yet this is the upper bound for many *flash fiction* competitions, prizes, and magazines, with the term *micro* often being reserved for pieces under 100 words. It should be noted here that while I understand the dissatisfaction with the term 'flash fiction' expressed by some writers (for its crude connotations – casting the form as showy or ephemeral, perhaps), I believe that the alliterative, catchy nature of the term is the reason for it ultimately 'winning out', and that this distinct nomenclature has, in itself, helped to popularise very short fiction as a distinct literary form, worthy of study and practice in its own right.[2]

When writers and critics attempt to pin down the form, they usually consider how it differs from the traditional short story on one hand and from prose poetry on the other. To turn attention first to distinguishing flash fiction from the short story, one thing that does seem to be almost universally agreed upon is the need for some kind of narrative. Discussion around the minimum requirement for a 'story' is not new or exclusive to the field of flash fiction. Writers and theorists (Genette, Bal, Barthes, and others) have proposed differing thresholds in thinking about what constitutes the bare minimum required for a text to be labelled as 'narrative'. It is generally agreed that

something needs to *happen*; at least one 'event' or 'action' is required. Thinking about the types of stories produced in the flash fiction form, it seems a 'narrative' does not require much movement or dynamism; the story may emerge in somewhat different, unexpected, and implicit ways in flash fiction. However, I am of the opinion that something needs to happen, or perhaps more importantly, that *a context needs to be created* in which there is the *possibility* of something happening, as I will discuss in due course.

There seem to have been some rather over-specific and limiting early definitions, as writers and critics struggled to name and classify very short fiction. James B. Hall, for example, states that 'the short-short form is not notable for bold actions', rather it 'tends to be a story of manners' (Thomas and Shapard 1986, 234). Considerable emphasis was initially placed on the idea of a twist or 'surprise ending' (Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman 1960), an idea which seems to have come about mainly from its use in a couple of notable short pieces: 'The Gift of the Magi' by O. Henry and 'The Necklace' by De Maupassant (although neither piece is short enough to qualify as flash fiction by modern standards).

More recently, writers and critics have focused on the idea of 'compression'. Writer Kathy Fish (a leading exponent of the form and influential figure in the flash fiction writing community) says:

> Compression and distillation are so important in flash [fiction]. You can have a very short story that is not very distilled […]. The story must "feel" larger than the space it takes up on the page. That means cutting anything the reader doesn't need. Trusting the reader to understand. Taking out unnecessary words. (2022)

Here, Fish gets at the ideas of economy, implication and subtext (all important in short fiction generally) suggesting that they are perhaps of heightened importance in flash fiction. The idea that many of the differences between short story and flash fiction are of *degree*, not *kind*, is a recurring one in flash fiction theory.

Slightly more complex, is Fish's idea that 'you can have a very short story that is not very distilled'. Here Fish seems to suggest that she does not see length as the defining characteristic of flash fiction. The idea that you can have a very short story that does *not* qualify as flash fiction is something I have seen mooted elsewhere in the flash fiction community. The Bath Flash Fiction Award website published a lively piece by writer Electra Rhodes suggesting that, along with length, 'there are 9 other elements that factor – form, plot, the role of the title, compression, language, *feel*, "landing", imagery/metaphor, and experimentation' (Rhodes 2022). While is it no doubt interesting and worthwhile for practitioners to consider style and approach in successful examples of the form, the danger with this taxonomic approach is that it can simply lead to an unhelpfully strict set of criteria. For example, the feeling of 'compression' noted by both Fish and Rhodes might not be found in pieces which deal with very brief moments; those in which part of the effect is to portray a fleeting moment or incident in great depth (to expand and explore, rather than condense and distil). Lydia Davis' story 'Passing Wind' (2009, 561), and Deb Olin Unferth's 'Likable' (2012), are examples of this kind of short fiction.

In his craft-focused chapter on flash fiction in *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, Tony Williams seems to suggest, as others have, that many of the elements of flash fiction differ from the traditional short story in degree rather than kind. Williams notes the way the form requires even fewer characters, and that anyone other than the protagonist

might be better placed 'off-stage' – that just a single reference to them might be enough (2014, 318). Williams does find something distinctive about the language of flash fiction though, believing that there is something about the 'feel' of stories under 750 or so words. By 'feel' he means 'something about the pace, structure, cadence' (Williams 2014, 316).

Perhaps the most thorough and boldly taxonomic study on the difference between short fiction and 'very short fiction' is 'Microfiction: what makes a very short story very short?' by William Nelles (2012). Using Norman Friedman's (1958) essay ('What Makes a Short Story Short?') as a reference point, Nelles argues that microfiction (his preferred term – although he sees it as synonymous with other terms such as flash fiction), is not just quantitively but qualitatively different from the short story. In terms of length, Nelles states that he is thinking of stories that are 'shorter than […] say, around 700 words' (88). He identifies six key narrative areas where a generic distinction may be drawn: action, character, setting, temporality (especially duration and order), intertextuality, and closure. I will look more closely at these in the light of a specific story later.

More recently, writers have been thinking about flash fiction in relation to prose poetry, and about what it is that can be said to distinguish the two. A popular approach in teaching the craft of flash fiction in relation to poetry is to think about narrative movement and dynamism. For example, David Gaffney (addressing would-be entrants of the Bridport Prize) describes the form as 'linear', in that 'something happens, then something else happens' (Masterclass with David Gaffney 2021). Kathy Fish reiterates the idea (often applied to short stories) that 'something needs to have changed or shifted by the end' and says that flash fiction writers, in comparison to poets, are more 'beholden to story' (2022).

In *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, Kim Chinquee suggests that flash fiction might be better called a prose poem if 'it settles its focus on language, setting or character' (Masih 2009, 111), presumably at the cost of story or narrative. Reluctant to be too restrictive, Chinquee adds:

> Prose poems can be flashes and flashes can be prose poems – they are more inclusive than exclusive of each other […] In a scale of black to white, most would be grey, but some darker grey than others. (Masih 2009, 111–112)

A sliding scale, rather than strict taxonomic boundaries feels a reasonable way to think of it. But while I agree that there is undoubtedly overlap between the two forms, I believe it may be possible to identify those texts which function as 'narrative fiction' by looking more closely at Nelles' categories of action, setting and temporality through a Stylistics lens.

Flash fiction writer and poet Tania Hershman sees flash fiction as balanced on the 'flimsy boundary' between the two forms: 'a flash story must feel like it is on the side of story, even if only just. A poem might describe a moment, an object, a sensation; it has no obligation towards narrative. A story does' (Hershman 2014). This is something writer Ron Wallace investigates in more detail in 'Writers try short shorts!', his highly readable article originally published in the *AWP Chronicle*. Wallace looks closely at two short pieces; 'The Colonel' by Carolyn Forché (which he identifies as a prose poem) and 'The Custodian' by Brian Hinshaw (flash fiction, or to use Wallace's terminology, a 'short-short'). His summary of their differences gives a good insight into what might fruitfully be thought of as the key differences between prose poetry and flash fiction:

> Language is used differently: in Forché, it's an end in itself; in Hinshaw, it's a means to an end. The narrative mode is different: in Forché, the narrative is evoked through a rhythm of repetition – we overhear the narrator; in Hinshaw, the story is told through a rhythm of continuity – the narrator talks more directly to us. The concern for character is different: in Forché, the characters are types and less important for themselves than for the emotions they evoke; in Hinshaw, the characters are more important as individuals. The structure is different: Forché moves by repetition and juxtaposition; Hinshaw uses a variant of the classic story form, moving from the middle of an action, through several scenes, to a revelation or epiphany for the central character'. (Wallace n.d.)

Wallace's distinctions and definitions of flash fiction do not fully align with Nelles' ideas regarding 'character' and 'closure'. Wallace sees these aspects still functioning as they would in a traditional short story. It could be said that Wallace has chosen texts from the two ends of Chinquee's sliding scale, making the distinctions easily drawn. Nevertheless, this proves a useful exercise, and his descriptions feel precise and tangible.

Leah McCormack has opened up further fruitful discussion on the distinctive character of flash fiction in her article 'Flash Fiction: A Study in Temporality' (2021). McCormack looks at theorists such as Genette and Bal who she feels are relevant because 'time touches everything in fiction' (3). McCormack sees the understanding and deft handling of time as of the utmost importance in flash fiction and as one of the ways in which writers starting out in the form can get to grips with it. Through annotation and close reading of several short texts, McCormack models an exercise in the labelling of narrative time to help writers hone their skills and 'to show how fictional time functions, specifically in the unique genre of flash fiction' (4).

I think the key to determining whether flash fiction qualifies as 'a story' lies in its use of time and space. The emphasis in flash fiction is usually on the telling of a story which involves the need for something to happen, then something else to happen, but such 'action' needs a time and a place (a story world) in which to unfold. Drawing on the ideas of Nelles, Wallace, and others, I will now consider how the linguistic phenomenon of deixis and the practice of deictic analysis might help shed light on the workings of flash fiction, both in regard to its distinction from other forms, and as a unique form in its own right.

2. Time, space, and action in flash fiction

In linguistics, the term 'deixis' refers to the notion that, in verbal and written communication, an understanding of the meaning of certain words and phrases is dependent upon contextual information. Although the semantic meaning of deictic language is fixed, its denotational meaning, or meaning in practice, varies depending on numerous contextual factors. Classified by theorists Stephen Levinson, John Lyons, Charles Fillmore, and others, the main categorises of deixis are usually considered to be time, place, and person.

Time deixis encodes temporal relations in an utterance through elements of language such as tense, adverbs, and adverbials (now, then, soon, yesterday, tomorrow, later), and through prepositional structures (at bedtime, in the morning). Place deixis encodes spatial relations (here and there), demonstratives (this, that, these, those), place adverbials (inside, downstairs, above), and prepositional structures (up the hill, inside the house).

Personal deixis is predominantly reflected in the grammatical categories of the personal pronouns of first, second, and third person (I, me, you, he, him, she, her, we, us, it).

In the field of stylistics much has been written on the operation of deixis in the literary text. Because language originates from face-to-face communication (what John Lyons (1977) calls 'the canonical situation of utterance'), it can be played around with in written contexts, and certain effects exploited. Karl Bühler, in his early work in the field, looked at how a narrator may render different types of 'fictional world' within a text (1934/1990). Much fruitful work has since been conducted (e.g. by Lesley Jeffries, Elena Semino, Sandrine Sorlin), often using corpus linguistic methods and concepts from the overlapping field of Narratology, which naturally deals with ideas around use of time and point of view. The work of theorist Gerard Genette (1980) is also frequently cited in relation to deixis for its insights into fictional time and narrative structure.

Work on the operation of deixis in poetry is also relevant here, given flash fiction's kinship with poetry. Keith Green (1992) and Elena Semino (1992, 1995) in their respective papers on deixis and the poetic persona, explore the use of the present tense and the 'dramatisation of situation and self' associated with lyric poetry. Green sees the lyric poem as 'a particular discoursal site' (1992, 121) where deixis can be seen to operate in a particular way. He coins the useful terms 'coding time' and 'content time' (and the corresponding 'coding place' and 'content place' (126–127)) to distinguish between the time and place of the encoding of the utterance and the time and place evoked in the 'story' or unfolding action of the poem – noting that in lyric poetry these are often presented as synchronous (126–127). The ontological paradox sometimes presented by the use of the present tense in literary texts (both poetry and prose fiction) has been addressed by numerous scholars. Jeremy Scott, for example (drawing on Genette), considers what happens when 'homodiegetic narration […] occurs simultaneously with the unfolding of the story's action' (2019, 94). Here Scott is referring to the, sometimes stylised, effect created by first-person present tense narration, where the narrator seems to be engaged in the action of the story while simultaneously narrating it.

While Green, Semino, and others focus on deixis in lyric poetry, I have previously undertaken a study of deixis in the dramatic monologue (Roche-Jacques 2013). Dramatic monologue is a type of poetry which intersects with the literary forms of short fiction and drama. Dramatic monologues are most easily categorised as poems in which the speaker of the poem is a *character*, distinct from the poet. I have argued that viewing this as the key feature of the form is problematic because it relies on the converse idea that the 'I' of lyric poetry may be easily equated with the poet, an idea which is obviously simplistic and outdated.

Alan Sinfield describes dramatic monologue as a hybrid form which 'lurks provocatively' between first-person lyric and narrative fiction (1977, 24). Drawing on Kate Hamburger's work on fictional narrators, Sinfield suggests that when reading a dramatic monologue, we are forced to posit simultaneously 'the speaking I and poet's I', resulting in what he calls a 'divided consciousness' (32). He suggests that this comes about precisely because we are reading *poetry*, in which the 'first person usually signifies the poet's voice' (25). These complexities around the interpretation of dramatic monologue feel highly relevant to interpretive issues around the communicative context of flash fiction. I would suggest that the typographical appearance of a text on the page 'as poetry' or 'as

prose' is of critical importance here. As Stuart Dybek observes: 'a form carries with it certain built-in expectations, certain predictable possibilities for both reader and writer (Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories 1986, 241)'. Dybek believes that the short-short story 'frequently inhabits a No-Man's Land between prose and poetry, narrative and lyric, story and fable, joke and meditation, fragment and whole' (241). I believe this contextual ambiguity has implications for our interpretation of flash fiction, including interpretation of deictic elements. To consider these ideas further, it makes sense to apply them to specific texts.

3. A typical example: 'Letting Go' by Pamela Painter

'Letting Go' by Pamela Painter is typical of contemporary flash fiction in its use of first-person present tense. First published online in *New Flash Fiction Review* (2015), the piece was subsequently selected for inclusion in Shapard and Scotellaro's *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction* (2018). The piece uses mimetic time (i.e. it appears to unfold in 'real' time, moment by moment) to dramatise a scene in which the narrator is approached by a couple of tourists at the Grand Canyon and asked to take their picture. Due to miscommunication, the couple step back and fall over the edge, disappearing into the canyon, and leaving the narrator to look at the pictures she took before they fell. Painter evokes time, place, and character with deftness and economy, and in just 299 words manages to establish a strong sense of place and to convey an impressively rounded sense of the speaker's life beyond the confines of the scene. The deictic language Painter employs and the way it helps her to immerse us in the world and to structure the piece is worth looking at in detail.

The piece opens with the phrase: 'I'm standing at the south rim of the Grand Canyon, photographing florid undulating rock walls [..]'. This use of the present progressive tense (rather than the simple present of 'I stand') immediately sets up the expectation of a chain of events. This is what Loy D. Martin (in his work on deixis in the dramatic monologue) refers to as 'proximity time relations'. When made progressive (or perfect) a verb's action is not whole but incomplete and 'viewed from inside the time sequence in which it occurs' (Martin 1979, 61). This 'view from the inside' of unfolding action implies temporal extension beyond that moment, and creates the impression of a soon to-be-dynamic moment. The opening also works to root us in space and place. Using a location that is well-known world-wide may well help the reader to picture the scene more fully, but even if we are unfamiliar with the setting, the information 'standing at the south rim' and in sight of 'florid undulating rock walls that sink to alarming depths' works to establish a detailed setting from the start.

With the next sentence ('But it is almost checkout time at my hotel and I want to take a tub and use all their emollients, a habit my ex deplored'), Painter not only tells us more about the 'clock' time of the story, but expands the 'story world' by way of spatial reference to the hotel where the narrator is staying, and its bathroom specifically. The narrator's desire to move from the current setting to 'take a tub' at her hotel adds dynamism and (a low-key) urgency to the piece. It also, importantly, helps us picture where the narrator is going at the end of the piece when she places the phone on the bench and (presumably) leaves the Canyon – adding to the sense that the speaker's life continues beyond what we read here. The phrase 'a habit my ex deplored', while not highly

deictically charged, is deictic in its introduction of the past tense – it sets up the all-important sense of backstory.

The next section, in which the young couple 'approach' and ask the narrator to take their photograph, shows us action happening in the present moment, in the setting established in the opening. However, we are quickly moved into the mind of the narrator; she *wants* to say that she is not the park photographer (but doesn't) and instead moves into narration of what might be labelled the 'general past': 'this happens to me everywhere – in the Boston Gardens, along the banks of the Charles'. This builds on that sense of the narrator's life outside the moment of the story (she has visited many places, seemingly as a solo traveller). To move from this memory, back to the present, Painter skilfully merges the memory with the couple in the present of the story (and helps us picture them more clearly); 'like *this* couple, with their multi-pocket hiking shorts and sturdy clarks' (my emphasis).

From this point on, there is quite a bit of narrative action in (what Leah McCormack refers to as) the 'base time' of the story (McCormack 2021, 5), all narrated in the simple present tense ('I let my Nikon dangle from the beaded lanyard round my neck and take their fancy smart phone'). Before the main action of the piece though (the happy couple falling to their deaths), there is one more, key, piece of information from the past. This time from a specific moment in the narrator's personal history, rather than what *generally* happened. It comes in the form of reported speech and comes immediately after we are told the narrator is 'heeding the instructions' from the couple. At this moment we expect any direct speech to be from the couple, but instead (and perhaps, tellingly) it comes from the narrator's ex: 'You were always a good listener' my ex once said, 'but sometimes you just have to let things go'. The past tense here is two-fold. We have the reference to a specific moment from the narrator's past ('my ex said *once*') and also the ex talking in the past tense: 'you *were always* a good listener' about the relationship (my emphasis). The use of past tense in the reported speech sets up reference to a time frame in which the narrator and her ex are talking about the relationship at a point in time after they have split up. It hints at further backstory, perhaps implying the narrator was not willing to 'let things go' when the relationship ended, holding on to and reliving grudges and grievances, which would fit with the subtle bitterness or coldness which manifests itself throughout the story in her reaction to the 'couple in love' and subsequently, their unfortunate fate. The narrator's inability to 'let things go' is of heightened significance given the title of the story: 'Letting Go'. The active action of the title suggests that we are witnessing the incident which causes the narrator to achieve this state of finally having 'let (things) go'. The unexpected incident prompts her to an (unexpected) epiphany.

The dramatic action in what McCormack (2021) would call the 'base time' of the story is even more swift and deftly handled from this point. The 'device' of taking a photograph allows Painter to manoeuvre the couple around the setting, through the lens of the camera, which has the useful effect of showing us round the immediate story world. The narrator going on 'hands and knees' to the cliff's edge to peer down and the description of the backdrop of the pictures on the couple's phone further helps us orient ourselves in the setting. The detached manner in which the narrator describes the couple she sees in the pictures using the historical present ('they are young, expectant … then a blur') sets up a reference to an earlier time; the moments just before the couple

plunged their death, which works to further establish the callousness of the narrator. The final act of placing the phone on a bench for someone to find rounds off our visualisation of the setting, and the final sentence (a statement about the placing of the phone) culminates in the highly deictic words 'the only evidence *the three of us were here*' (my emphasis). And what an incredibly vivid sense of *here* we have.

The piece is extremely swift and economic, yet in its dynamism and pragmatic use of language it feels closer to short story than poetry. Looking back to the six key narrative areas in 'very short fiction' identified by William Nelles (action, character, setting, temporality, intertextuality, and closure) it is useful to consider them in relation to the techniques used by Painter in 'Letting Go', and to relate them specifically to the deployment and operation of deixis in the piece.

4. Considering William Nelles' six features of very short fiction

Nelles argues that in microfiction 'action' tends to be proportionally 'large' and that major changes and reversals can take place (2012, 90). This certainly seems to be born out in 'Letting Go'. The main action (a couple plummeting to their death) is large and dramatic, creating a major change in the story world (although part of the effect is the narrator's low-key reaction to the event). The idea that something large or dramatic happens (or has happened) and that the character has an unexpected or strange reaction to it, seems to be a common approach in flash fiction (see David Gaffney's darkly comic *Sawn-off Tales* (2006), for example). Where the action is large, this may be because the rest of the story has been sliced away, leaving us with only the crescendo or moment of crisis, catharsis, or epiphany. Much of the story will take place outside of the 'frame' of the piece.

Secondly, Nelles suggests characters in flash fiction are usually 'anonymous adults of unspecified age' (92) and that 'character flattens out and recedes as circumstance becomes dominant' (92). It is true that in 'Letting Go' we do not learn the names or ages of anyone in the story. We cannot even be sure that the narrator is female (nor that the 'ex' is male). Yet, given the carefully inserted backstory and distinctive voice and attitude of the narrator, 'anonymous' does not feel accurate. Due to its brevity it is not usually possible to learn much about a narrator in terms of 'concrete facts' in flash fiction, and this means small details must work harder and be absolutely central to the piece. In 'Letting Go' the first-person perspective puts us right inside a specific 'mind', creating an immediate empathy (what Robert Langbaum identifies in the dramatic monologue as the 'power and pull of the first-person narrative' (1985/1957, 202)). In his thoughts on anonymity, Nelles may be thinking of a certain style of flash fiction (practiced, and perhaps, popularised by a celebrated and prominent exponent of the short form, Lydia Davis[3]). In 'Letting Go' the character certainly does not flatten out 'as circumstance becomes dominant'. In fact, the opposite is true; circumstance *reveals* character, throwing it into sharp relief.

About setting, Nelles says that we 'seldom see distinctive settings; instead they are "familiar and representative" and "virtually blank"' (93). As described in my analysis above, the setting of 'Letting Go' is fully realised, with many references to the physical details of the setting itself as well as further use of place deixis to show the speaker moving about within the setting. However, Nelles' 'familiar' is right – the setting is a famous tourist spot, which the reader is likely to be able to visualise to some degree already. This ties in with Nelles' other key feature of 'intertextuality'. In current practice,

I would suggest more common than using well-known geographical settings is the technique of drawing on myths and fairytales. Perhaps popularised by the slow-burn success of Gwen E. Kirby's 'Shit Cassandra saw that She Didn't Tell the Trojans Because at that Point Fuck Them Anyway' (2017), this is a strategy frequently suggested in flash fiction workshops. Such stories allow writer and reader to share pre-existing contextual information and backstory through intertextuality. In 'Letting Go' Painter's choice of setting helps establish both geographical landscape and a ready context for the speaker's activity (that of a tourist).

The setting in 'Letting Go' is distinctive and certainly not 'left blank'. However, I believe the amount of 'dramatic realisation' of a story's setting will depend on the focus of the story. Flash fiction must be highly focused, but the nature of that focus will obviously vary from piece to piece. In some stories, the setting might be largely unimportant. Something else will be the focus (the forementioned stories 'Likable' (2012) by Deb Olin Unferth and 'Passing Wind' (2009, 561) by Lydia Davis are both much more concerned with psychological thought processes than with establishing setting). However, while setting may be indistinct in some stories, I would argue that the encoding of *some* sort of setting (either in content time and place, or coding time and place) is vital in order for a story to unfold. The mobilisation of a story world through time and place deixis, even if largely implicit, is a requirement of narrative fiction.

Like the dramatic monologue, flash fiction sometimes has a colloquial or verbal quality ('The Custodian' by Brian Hinshaw, for example) which gives the impression of the story being 're-told' conversationally, in the 'canonical situation of utterance' (face-to-face). The story 'Gareth' by Tony Williams is an example of a piece which overtly reveals the 'coding time and place' of the utterance. Here the narrator has been telling the story of his estranged son, and it is only in the final line ('here take another bottle for when you wake up. You'll need it' (Williams 2012, 79)) that the reader comes to understand that the story has been being related to a sleeping homeless person.

The pieces by Hinshaw and Williams have already mobilised the story world of their speaker, but complicate it by adding another narrative layer. It is interesting, however, to note that a piece might only actually mobilise a story world in the very final moment: 'The swan as a metaphor for love' by Amelia Gray (2012) is an example of a piece that seems to read as a playfully factual poem. The piece is comprised of detailed information about swans and their anatomy and behaviour, but the context is 'dramatically realised', and a whole story world mobilised, purely through the final sentence:

> 'That's all for today about swans.'

Regarding temporality, Nelles suggests the timespan is usually brief (a few minutes, a few hours). As noted, 'Letting Go' uses mimetic time. This is a common technique in flash fiction, but by no means the only approach. Nelles acknowledges this, giving examples of compression; such as stories spanning a whole life-time. In addition to techniques of compression, it is certainly possible for writers of flash fiction to utilise what Genette terms 'summary' and 'ellipsis'. McCormack (2021) highlights this through close textual analysis. Drawing on Gerard Genette's ideas on temporality in narrative discourse, Nelles says that the 'duration of discourse' is (by definition) tightly restricted in microfiction, and that regarding 'order' (or chronology) stories in microfiction are usually linear and, unlike the conventional short story, do not normally provide 'expository analepses to close

informational gaps and explain motives' (95). This seems an odd observation, and perhaps reveals the amount of experimentation and innovation which has taken place in the field of flash fiction in the last ten or so years. As McCormack (2021) illustrates, a lot can be done with time in flash fiction. Even those stories which focus on one moment, such as 'Letting Go', may well make use of 'expository analepsis' (Painter's narrator thinking back to the conversation with her ex, or thinking about earlier excursions).

Nelles says the deployment of temporality in flash fiction usually 'discourage[s] much consideration of what precedes and follows the narrated event' (93). He sees the characters as trapped in 'time loops' (94), either literally or figuratively. Given the increasingly diverse and ingenious ways in which writers play with time in flash fiction, it feels difficult to make any hard and fast declarations, and as Nelles acknowledges: '[i]n those cases presenting longer expanses of story time, writers find inventive ways to keep the duration compressed' (93).

Linked to this is Nelles' final feature of narrative 'closure'. Nelles sees flash fiction as employing relatively closed endings, concluding that '[t]he combination of brevity, flat characterization, brief time frame, and a single generic setting combine to limit the writer's options for introducing the ambiguities, nuances, and symbolic resonances that function so effectively in most open endings' (96). I disagree and do not see closed endings as a distinctive feature of flash fiction, although I agree it is imperative to find a suitable 'stepping off' point.

The sheer brevity of flash fiction means that texts usually function as a tightly woven whole. In *Reading for Storyness* (2003) Susan Lohafer discusses how, following in Poe's footsteps, many critics (herself included) thought 'the imminence of closure was the signature feature of the short story genre' (15). She goes on to investigate the idea of 'storyness' or 'narrative wholeness' by shifting the focus from 'closure' to what she calls 'preclosure'. Lohafer asks readers to identify points of 'preclosure'; places where a particular story *could* feasibly end, but doesn't. One of the texts she examines is 'The Orientation of Cats' by Julio Cortázar (1983). Although not labelled as such, at only 34 sentences long, the text qualifies as flash fiction. Lohafer identifies the story as having fewer opportunities for preclosure than longer pieces of short fiction. For me, this reinforces the idea that flash fiction is more likely to function as a tight, organic whole, regardless of whether the ending is open or closed. The idea of 'imminent closure', and the effect that has on the reader, as a feature of the short story form, also has interesting implications for flash fiction where the end is in sight right from the opening.

In successful flash fiction endings must resonate or give some kind of pay-off, but there can be many 'ways out', both open and closed. I don't see endings as functioning differently in the short story or the poem. It is worth noting that, aesthetically, contemporary tastes in both short fiction and poetry seem to have moved towards open endings. Student writers are generally advised to end on a striking image or idea, rather than to wrap things up too neatly. Early critical analysis of flash fiction focuses on the idea of a twist or showy ending, but this seems to have since been rejected by practitioners. Due to the limited space in flash fiction, a popular and effective technique seems to be to have the protagonist 'thinking forward' beyond the end of the scene; to use 'deictic projection' into the future. An immersive world will give us the feeling of our protagonist carrying on into the world beyond the page. In 'Letting Go', the final phase ('that we were ever *here*') 'reactivates' deictic relations with story world as a way out.

5. 'The Colonel' by Carolyn Forché and 'poetic flash'

If 'Letting Go' is closer to a short story in its style and approach, then what about pieces considered to be at the other end of the spectrum, closer to poetry? 'The Colonel' by Carolyn Forché (1981) is just such a piece. There is some ambiguity as to what Forché herself considers the piece to be in terms of form. Ron Wallace discusses its origins (it appears within a collection of poetry), noting that it is usually referred to as a prose poem (Wallace n.d.). His succinct differentiation of flash fiction and prose poetry (quoted previously) highlights 'The Colonel's kinship with poetry in the way it might be said to use language (as an end in itself), narrative (a rhythm of repetition, rather than of continuity), character (as type, important more for the emotions they evoke), and structure (juxtaposition and repetition). While 'The Colonel' is a first-person, past tense narrative, the opening sentence ('What you have heard is true.') draws attention to the ensuing text as 'story', addressing an unspecified 'you', located outside the story world which is about to be evoked. To use Green's terminology, this opening mobilises and clearly delineates a 'coding time and place', separate from 'content time and place'. The second sentence ('I was in his house.') sets up the move to the 'content time and place' and from then on, a series of observations of physical setting and activity unfolds in terse declarative sentences. The first-person perspective has been set up and helps us to locate the speaker as an observer in the house, even though there is no further explicit use of the first-person until later in the piece. The syntactical patterning of short descriptive sentences creates a stylised effect, and the description of the moon ('The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house') stands out as both highly poetic and as complicating the perspective deictically: the speaker is inside the house observing the activity *within* it, and so to see the moon 'over the house' the speaker seems to employ deictic projection to imagine the house from the outside.

The piece is written in one long paragraph and does not delineate action and new scenes in the way we might expect of fiction. For example, the introduction of another character into the scene ('my friend') comes out of nowhere and is not referred to again. Direct speech from the Colonel himself is reported, but not set out as dialogue, reminding us that this is a retelling of the story, not a revivified dramatisation. The reference to poetry itself is interesting. That the narrator is referred to by the Colonel as a poet might make us even more likely to interpret what we are reading as 'poetry', but of course poetry is not the only way poets communicate. Viewed through a poetic lens, the piece can be seen to function as a dramatic monologue. The first line does a lot of heavy lifting in this respect. Although the 'you' is unspecified, rather than implicating the reader it seems to set up a sealed fictional world, in which a specific you is addressed. The fact that the 'you' has already heard some version of the story ('what you have heard is true') creates the sense of a fictional, silent 'auditor' or listener (in the tradition of the dramatic monologue) located within the coding time and place of the story (or a specific 'recipient', if we imagine the context to be a written one).

Unlike lyric poetry, which often presents coding and content time as synchronous, 'The Colonel' establishes separate 'occasions'. The emphasis throughout the piece is on the unfolding story; the relentless one thing after another (whether observation or action). As readers, we would be able to relate 'what happened' in the story if we were asked, one of the tests that is sometimes thought to set texts out as narrative fiction. Caution

is needed with this approach though. It is not my intention to imply that the more 'action', the closer a piece is to fiction. I do not think that much action is necessary. As long as the mobilisation of a story world takes place, it is more the *possibility* of action that is important; the action could even take the form of 'thinking in the present' of the story world. A woman could be lying on a bed looking at a tree – the action would be woman looks at tree, and if the story world is deictically mobilised then that would be enough. The very short piece 'The Singing' by Jon Mcgregor (2012) is a good example of the kind of piece I am describing.

I believe Forché's 'The Colonel' functions as both flash fiction and prose poetry because of the way it situates itself in terms of spatio-temporality. As Robert Olen Butler observes 'fiction is a temporal art form' [..] 'a story has to exist in time – a poem is an object made of words' (Masih 2009, 102). Narratologist, David Herman (2009) identifies one of the features of narrative as 'situatedness' – the way in which a text refers to the context of the act of telling. 'The Colonel' clearly functions as narrative in the way that it sets up time, place, and spatio-temporal relations within the story world. A prose poem may or may not do this. I believe a piece of flash fiction *must*. As Joan Silber puts it:

> A poem can carry out its investigations within an endless moment, it can abide in stillness if it wants to, but fiction pretty much has to unfold in sequence. A story can arrange events in any order it finds useful, but it does have to move between then and now and later. (2009, 5)

The way in which Forché's deployment of deictic language mobilises a story world (content time and place), and the way in which the direct address to the 'you' of the opening establishes a sense of narrator as storyteller (in a separate coding time and place), marks this piece as flash fiction, regardless of the *poetic* quality of the prose. As I have noted, this does not bar the piece from the category of prose poetry. As Kim Chinquee notes, (with her idea of a sliding scale from black to white) the two are not mutually exclusive and tend to be more inclusive than exclusive of each other. However, I am perhaps, in one important respect, a little more prescriptive than Chinquee in my approach. In order for a piece to qualify as flash fiction, I believe it has to deictically mobilise a story world, (as both 'Letting Go' and 'The Colonel' do in their different ways). To illustrate what I mean by this, I will conclude my textual analysis by looking briefly at a couple of well-known pieces which are usually categorised as 'flash fiction' but which I do not believe are best categorised as such.

6. The (mis)interpretation of short texts

'Collective Nouns for Humans in the wild' by Kathy Fish is a much-celebrated piece, usually categorised as flash fiction. It was first published in the online flash fiction journal *Jellyfish Review* (2017), was subsequently selected for *Best Small Fictions 2018* (Bender and Flick 2018) and appears in Fish's collected works *Wild Life* (2018) – a collection of short fiction.

The piece consists of a list of creative definitions of collective nouns. it opens:

> A group of grandmothers is a *tapestry. A* group of toddlers, a *jubilance (see also: a bewailing)*.

The first six definitions are presented as one paragraph. After that some lines stand alone, giving the impression on the page of poetry. The discourse is purely 'factual' and

information-driven (part of the effect coming from the merging of this factual discourse with the playful and creative coinage of terms). The only place where we get anything other than straight statements of definition is the sentence:

> Humans in the wild, gathered and feeling good, previously an *exhilaration*, now: a *target*.

Here the piece takes a step back to introduce the wider category of 'humans in the wild'. The next phrase 'gathered and feeling good' seems momentarily to introduce spatio-temporal relations, but is revealed, as the sentence unfolds, to be a description of the humans' behaviour for the application of the collective noun. Further temporal relations are brought in with the words 'previously' and 'now' ('previously an *exhilaration,* now: a *target*'). However, although locating the narrative voice in time, this use of time deixis feels like an extension of the established discourse of the piece; a historical description, referencing etymology, rather than the mobilisation of a story world. This is confirmed by what comes after; the closing section of the piece:

> A *target* of concert-goers.
>
> A *target* of movie-goers.
>
> A *targe*t of dancers.
>
> A group of school children is a *target*.

Overall I would suggest the effect is that of poetry. Firstly, the piece uses the white space of the page in ways a poem might, with the separating out of sections creating the appearance of stanzas. More importantly, the piece is concerned with exploring *an idea* rather than establishing a 'representation of a "possible world"' as Monika Fludernik puts it. Fludernik sees narrative discourse as requiring the instantiation of a possible world 'at whose centre there are one or several protagonists […] who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal directed actions' (2009, 6).

In this text the absence of the mobilisation of a 'content time and place', presented either as synchronous or distinct from 'coding time and place' means that readers are not invited to 'immerse themselves in a different world and in the lives of the protagonists' (Fludernik 2009, 6). It is the absence of such a story world which I believe disqualifies this piece from categorisation as narrative fiction (of which flash fiction is a subcategory). Unlike Amelia Gray's 'The Swan as Metaphor for Love' (2012), this piece does not reveal, at the end, or anywhere else, anything about the *context of utterance*. Fish does not establish 'proximity time relations' and does not deictically mobilise a story world.

However, because Kathy Fish is known as a writer of flash fiction, and because the piece is brief and written in prose, it is usually referred to as flash fiction.[4] Here we see how powerful context can be in guiding readers in their interpretation.

Another, very different, piece which further illustrates this point is 'Asthma Attack' by Etgar Keret (2021). The piece is very brief (116 words) and looks like prose on the page, taking the form of one short paragraph, but, just like Fish's piece, it does not deictically activate a story world in any obvious way. It opens:

> When you have an asthma attack, you can't breathe. When you can't breathe, you can hardly talk. To make a sentence all you get is the air in your lungs. Which isn't much. Three to six words, if that. You learn the value of words.

The piece continues in this manner; the 'you' functioning as the more informal version of the impersonal pronoun 'one'. While it is to be inferred that the utterance comes from a speaker with first-hand experience, the text remains hypothetical and free of reference to any specific actions undertaken by the 'encoder of the utterance' (narrator does not feel the right word). The piece has more in common with non-fiction in the way deixis functions. It is concerned with conveying factual information rather than presenting a moment or situation. The issue of 'doubleness', noted by Genette and others, in regard to fictional narrators does not come into play here. There is no realisation of a 'content time and place' in relation to 'coding time and place', and the situation of utterance (coding time and place) remains unrealised, aside from the mimetic effect of a frank, conversational voice addressing us. There is no movement, as Joan Silber puts it, 'between then and now and later' (2009, 5).

Keret is an Israeli writer ('Asthma Attack' is translated from Hebrew), known for his quirky short fiction, graphic novels, and screenwriting. Somewhat confusingly this piece seems to have appeared in full on the cover of his first short fiction collection 'Pipes'.[5] In that context, it works as a rather engaging fragment. Although Keret presents 'Asthma Attack' as a discrete piece, it feels somewhat like a fragment from a longer text, one which may or may not function as narrative fiction.

7. Conclusions

In attempting to distinguish this increasingly popular form from prose poetry, the general consensus among writers and critics seems to be that in flash fiction something should *happen*, that there should be some sense of movement forward, rather than the circling of an idea, and that there should take place the creation of some kind of fictional world, using language as a means to an end, rather than simply an end in itself.

Looking through a stylistics lens, I have framed this as the requirement for flash fiction to 'mobilise a story world', that is to utilise the deictic power of language to orient a character or narrator in time and space. Much poetry does this too, but *not all*. For me, this mobilisation of a story world is the key to distinguishing flash fiction from prose poetry.

Although there is much overlap, it seems flash fiction is more easily distinguishable from prose poetry than from the traditional short story. Here most critics and writers seem to suggest the difference is more in degree than kind – the sheer brevity of flash fiction meaning a heightened demand for precision, allusion, and for one small detail to stand in for something larger. Its brevity also means flash fiction can experiment more freely with gaps and ambiguity. Painter doesn't have to pin down the sex of either the narrator or the 'ex' – such an attempt to keep things 'open' in this way is more difficult to achieve and might feel more laboured or self-conscious in a longer story.

The work of William Nelles stands as an ambitious and thorough attempt to be more specific in pinning down the differences between the short fiction and *very* short fiction. However, some of his distinctions do not fully hold in the light of the last ten years of creative practice in the field. This is not surprising given the huge explosion in practice and popularity of flash fiction. Yet Nelles perhaps comes closest to putting his finger on something in his identification of 'temporality' as a distinctive feature of the form. Leah McCormack in her more recent craft-focussed article on temporality in flash fiction observes that

the form's compelling 'combination of density and vibrancy […] is only possible through deft handling of time'. Sherrie Flick (one of the editors of *Flash Fiction America* (Thomas, Flick, and Dufresne 2023), the latest anthology in the Shapard et al legacy) has also suggested, in a craft-based piece for writers, that time can be manipulated more easily in flash fiction than in longer stories. Flick advises writers to 'move gracefully through [their] world of simultaneity' (Masih 2009, 122) and not to complicate their verb tense. She advocates for use of the simple present for flash fiction, so as not to get stuck 'in some dead-end past tense' (Masih 2009, 123), believing the last thing the reader should notice about the sentences is their structure. Flick suggests the use of the simple present tense 'unfetters' the writer, feels 'active', and allows the writer 'to be complex elsewhere' (Masih 2009, 123).

As an avid reader of flash fiction, I have noticed the prevalence of the simple present tense. Looking at the archive of all first- and second-place winners in the *Bath Flash Fiction Award* (an established and prominent award for flash fiction in the UK), it is worth noting that simple present is the tense most frequently used in the winning stories. Perhaps, as Flick points out, because of the simplicity and sense of immersion it offers.

However, it also seems that the brevity of the flash fiction form perhaps affords the writer greater freedom to play and experiment. The deft use of deictic elements can be seen as a way of establishing swift immersion and/or negotiating the spatio-temporal layers and landscape. The winning story in the *Bath Flash Fiction Award* in June 2019, 'Cleft' by Gaynor Jones, is a good illustration of this, in the way it seems to deftly condense and merge past, present, and future. This is something which I believe deserves further attention in both theory and practice.

At the heart of the linguistic phenomenon known as deixis is context dependency; the way deictic language can shift in meaning radically, or subtly, depending on where and when it is discovered. The unique communicative context evoked by this slippery, hybrid form means that its use of deictic language may be interpreted differently depending on the reader's knowledge and previous experiences of literary form. This depends on factors such as where the piece is published (see my previous examples by Fish and Keret) and its appearance on the page, as discussed in the pieces by Fish, Keret, and also 'Cleft' by Gaynor Jones (2019), mentioned above, which looks similar to poetry in the way it utilises the white space of the page, perhaps making the reader more likely to interpret the 'I' as the 'lyric I' of the poet, and the present tense as the stylised 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' associated with the lyric mode.

My previous research and practice in the field of dramatic monologue led me to conclude that some readers overcomplicate and misinterpret texts due to pre-existing assumptions about the 'difficult' nature of poetry, with its often complex use of time and space. Flash fiction's presentation as prose at least gives it the advantage of appearing more straightforward and accessible to the uninitiated. I would suggest that the interpretive context in which a reader encounters flash fiction is of great importance to their understanding of the text itself. The writer Jayne Ann Phillips observes how '[t]he poem in broken lines announces itself as a poem, but the paragraph seems innocent, workaday, invisible' (Masih 2009, 37). The unique communicative context evoked by flash fiction, balanced on the edge of fiction and poetry, is part of what makes it such a fascinating and appealing form, and is perhaps why it seems to be of growing interest to writers, teachers and scholars alike.

Notes

1. This is perhaps because of the restrictive word count of many flash fiction journals and prizes.
2. The importance of punchy terminology in gripping the public consciousness is not to be underestimated. As Peter Wilding, chair of the UK thinktank 'British Influence' laments, on his accidental coinage of the powerful term 'Brexit': 'Imagine being the leading Remainer before the referendum and gifting the Leavers their catchy trigger to unleash the demons that followed!' (Wilding 2018).
3. *The Atlantic* sums up Davis' rather detached style by noting how her stories often 'dispense with conventional narrative and character in favor of astringent wit and aphoristic insight' (Lydia Davis's very short stories 2014).
4. It should be noted that on her website (KathyFish.com) Fish herself refers to it as a 'flash/essay/hybrid piece' – which does feel more fitting.
5. Keret gives this information as a note alongside a reading of the piece on his website (Asthma Attack – by Etgar Keret – Alphabet Soup https://etgarkeret.com) – I was unable to locate the book itself, which he notes was 'published in Hebrew almost thirty years ago'.

Notes on contributor

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