THE SHORT-SHORT STORY

A Report of a Senior Study

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ABSTRACT

In an age increasingly marked by 140-character “tweets,” Facebook “status” updates, and text messaging, brevity is the key to success. Conversation is reduced to a jumble of nigh-incomprehensible letters and symbols. Complex ideas have to be reduced to broadcastable sound bytes. Who has time in their busy schedule to pause for anything of great length?

Perhaps it is this constant crunch of time, this short-attention-span culture, that has allowed the short-short story to wriggle out of obscurity and into some degree of prominence. “Twitterature” has begun to appear online. National Public Radio regularly hosts three-minute story contests. Online literary journals dedicated solely to extremely short stories have sprung up, and many established print journals have begun to publish greater numbers of short-shorts.

The short-short story is a nebulous form, ill-defined because it is still emerging, still lurking at the fringes of recognition as a true literary form, but begging to be pursued and explored. Despite its brevity (or rather, because of it), the short-short story can be quite powerful. The following study is an examination of this form on several levels, ranging from the academic (establishing a working definition) to the creative (producing original samples of short-short stories).

Chapter I, “An Emerging Form,” is an overview in which the short-short story is described in relation to other types of literature. Its proper name and most basic technical characteristics are established, and a working definition is proposed. A brief history of the form with an eye toward the short-short story’s future possibilities is also provided.
Chapter II, “Literary Characteristics,” is an exploration of the short-short story’s various types, the qualities which set it apart from other types of writing, the way it treats particular literary characteristics, and the techniques which writers use to produce exceptional short-short stories.

Chapter III, “Theory in Practice,” is just that: the application of the previous two chapters’ research to the production of a small short-short story collection. This collection, entitled “Resistance,” represents an attempt to write short-short stories that are unlike the majority of those found online or in anthologies in that they pair the form with the historical fiction genre. The result is a collection that in some respects veers off the path of the “traditional” short-short story (if such a nebulous form may be said to have a “tradition”) while at the same time taking advantage of some of the form’s strengths.

The power of the short-short story to appeal to many in a time-crunch society should not be ignored. Rather, this form deserves the space and attention to expand and evolve. Far from being a “trick” form or a type of consumerist word candy, the short-short story challenges and stimulates both readers and writers in ways that other forms of literature cannot. It may be the most suitable literary form for satisfying the needs of a society that is pressed for time but still hungry for potent stories.
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CHAPTER I

THE SHORT-SHORT STORY: AN EMERGING FORM

In the study of short-short stories, as with the study of any other subject, beginning with a comprehensive definition of the form being scrutinized seems appropriate. Parameters must be set, the baseline marked, the reference standard established. Otherwise, how can any sort of continuity in the study be guaranteed?

Unfortunately, the short-short story resists definition, partly due to its novelty and partly because it is an evolutionary form, prone to – and embracing – experimentation and constant change. Because practice of the form precedes its definition, and the form itself is unsettled and amorphous, any attempt to create a single unified definition is doomed to abstraction, if not utter failure. Still, in an examination of the short-short story, it is necessary to set parameters describing which pieces of literature fall within that category and which are excluded. To that end, it is useful to examine four aspects of the short-short story form: its relationship with the conventional short story, its appropriate categorical name, the length of the stories falling within this category, and its sub-categories.
“Short” Versus “Short-Short”

What is a “story”?

In her guide to writing narrative fiction, Janet Burroway defines the necessary features of a story as conflict, crisis, and resolution. “Once conflict is sharply established and developed in a story,” she says, “the conflict must end. There must be a crisis and resolution” (3-5). A story follows a simple structure: a situation is presented in which a conflict exists; the conflict leads to an action; and the action results in a significant change, a resolution of the conflict (7).

When a reader or writer talks about a “story” as a literary genre, what he or she often refers to is a category that has a discernable plot – that is to say, a narrative in which those primary elements of conflict, crisis, and resolution exist. The story itself may be much longer than the information provided to the reader in the plot, encompassing, for example, a character’s entire life. The story is also inherently linear, progressing in a sequence of cause and effect, whereas the portion described to the reader by the plot might move back and forth in time to emphasize a particular theme or create a certain mood. But to speak of the story as a literary genre is simply to describe a form that includes a conflict, crisis, and resolution. It is in this way distinct from the vignette, the sketch, or the prose poem; unlike these forms, the story contains a forward movement, a change, rather than just a static description or meditation on a subject (Burroway 13).

Differences from the conventional short story

In their introduction to the anthology Short Short Stories, Howe and Howe say it best: “The one thing we can be sure of is that the short short is shorter than the short story…Our short shorts are indeed like most ordinary short stories, only more so – but
that’s just the point, only more so makes for important differences…” (x). Some would argue that the short-short is a literary genre unto itself, separate and distinct from the conventional short story. This argument truly hinges on how one defines a genre. If a form can be called a genre based solely on its length, then yes, the short-short stands as its own genre, separate from the short story. This, however, is a problematic approach, demanding an infinite number of genres to describe, for instance, the various lengths of novels. On the other hand, if a genre is defined based on its effect, and on the techniques which it employs to achieve that effect, then a short-short may more rightly be considered a subgenre or a type of short story. Consider Brander Matthews’s description of the short story in “The Philosophy of the Short Story”:

A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression. In a far more exact and precise use of the word, a Short-story has unity as a Novel cannot have it…A Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation…The Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of episodes. Thus the Short-story has, what the Novel cannot have, the effect of ‘totality,’ as Poe called it, the unity of impression. (May 52)

The short story, then, is a genre defined by the “unity of impression” wrought by its very shortness. Burroway describes other qualities also associated with brevity: a short story cannot waste words; it cannot deal with many consciousnesses, actions, or digressions; it is “tight, sharp, economic, well knit, and charged” (15).
The short-short story shares these very same qualities, but it is *even shorter* – hence, perhaps, *more* unified, *more* focused, and *more* charged, like the burning light focused to a point through a magnifying lens. But its techniques are the same as the conventional short story. Its effect is essentially the same. A short-short story, therefore, is a *type* of short story, not a genre in its own right.

**What’s in a Name?**

For a form which, until fairly recently, has received relatively little attention, the short-short story has acquired an astounding number of names. Each writer, reader, and publisher chooses one according to his or her personal preference, often judging by completely different standards and picking the name which emphasizes qualities he or she enjoys most in these stories. As a result, there is little agreement. This is problematic because, as Steven Heller puts it in the Afterwords of *Sudden Fiction*, “we cannot know a thing, cannot truly possess it, until we call it by its right name” (Shapard 245).

Without an agreed-upon name, no two writers, readers, or critics can be certain they are indeed discussing the same form. Besides “short-short story,” which will be used throughout this study for reasons to be explained presently, the names most commonly used in the United States are “flash fiction” or “sudden fiction.” But the uses of these names vary from person to person. Some use “flash fiction” to refer to pieces of less than 1,000 words, while some allow for a more generous 2,000 words. Others use “sudden fiction” and “flash fiction” interchangeably. Both of these names – and the ideas about their appropriate word counts – originated from the publication of early anthologies. The name “sudden fiction” was coined by Robert Kelly, one of several critics and writers whose correspondence with anthologists Robert Shapard and James Thomas is printed in
the 1987 anthology *Sudden Fiction*. Fortunately, Kelly’s suggestion usurped the original working title, *Blasters*, which never caught on as a label for the form. It is difficult to imagine any category with such a title, embodying, as Shapard puts it, “vulgarity, casualness, [and] simple mundanity” (xv), being accepted as a legitimate form in literary circles. Other correspondents involved in *Sudden Fiction*, while largely reviling the word “blasters,” generally agreed that the term “sudden fiction” effectively describes the form because the stories, in the words of Kelly, “are all suddenly just there” (Shapard xvi). These stories are, as Shapard elaborates, “unforeseen” and “swift” (Shapard xvi).

Another name, “flash fiction,” originated with the 1992 publication of the anthology by that name, which features even shorter short stories than those published in *Sudden Fiction*. James Thomas, who also edited this anthology, justifies the different name by claiming that the increased brevity of *flash* fictions results in their amplified impact: they offer a quicker, brighter “flash” of insight (12). Now the names “sudden fiction” and “flash fiction” are often used interchangeably, along with variants on “—fiction” beginning with “postcard,” “minute,” “furious,” “fast,” “quick,” “skinny,” and “micro.” The French call short-shorts “nouvelles”; the Chinese prefer “story” over “fiction” and add the prefixes “little short,” “pocket-size,” “minute-long,” “palm-sized,” and “smoke-long” (Casto). Do all of these names actually refer to the same form? And what do the different labels suggest about the form itself?

While all of these names offer some sense of brevity, most of them read like catchwords, not names for a literary form. While they share with “blasters” a certain casualness, a visceral stabbing at the “feeling” or nature of these short writings, they lack specificity. For anthology titles they may suffice, but for labeling an entire category they
fall short; all of these terms are loaded with potentially misleading implications about the characteristics of the form. Not all the stories included in this category “flash”; some are far more subtle than this active word implies. Similarly, not all are “sudden,” rushing from beginning to end; some meander. The term “fiction” is also in itself problematic. Not all very short pieces are necessarily fictitious, which calls into question nearly every label currently preferred by English speakers. Furthermore, “fiction” as a category includes a wide variety of literary types – for instance, the sketch, the vignette, and the prose poem – which ought to be considered separately from stories. All these forms might be grouped together under the umbrella term “short-short literature,” but the sketch, vignette, and prose poem are distinct from short-short stories in their structures. The best name for the category examined in this study, the name which accurately describes the form’s trademark brevity while focusing on a specific structural type, is therefore “short-short story.”

This name is not itself flawless. It can be misleading to those who remember the early modern forms of the short-short as light, entertaining, plot-driven “trick” stories that featured a surprise ending and lacked literary substance (O’Connor, in Shapard 243). However, that the form has evolved is hardly cause for renaming it; it is cause for celebrating that writers have breathed new life and quality into a tired old form. Besides, though it is not given much attention by selective writers or readers interested in quality literature, the surprise-ending trick story is still enjoyed by many entertainment-seekers, especially readers of and writers for online publications. The “low art” version is as much a short-short story as a paperback romance is a novel; it must simply be recognized as a lesser-quality piece of writing.
The Long and the Short

Parameters

When examining a form that is defined by its length, some attention ought to be given to how long (or short) it might be. Among writers, readers, and publishers, there is no more agreement about the short-short story’s size than there is about its name. Maximum word counts range from 600 (Smith and Kachelries) to 1,500 or more (Casto; Gurley; James Thomas). Some venture to establish a minimum, such as 100 (Casto), 75 (Gurley), or 55 (Popek; Moss), but usually they concede that stories may be even shorter than this; many cite Ernest Hemingway’s classic six-word example, allegedly penned in response to a bar bet, yet a source of great pride for the author: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” (Horne). For the purpose of this paper, stories up to approximately 750 words, the upper limit established in Flash Fiction, will be considered short-short stories. This seems to be about the border at which the immediacy and vitality of the short-short story blurs, beyond which it reads like the conventional short story. No lower limit will be established; if a complete story can be told in only six words, who is to say it couldn’t also be done in three?

Categories

It is also worthwhile to briefly consider the range of sub-categories contained within the short-short story form. In terms of length, James Thomas was on to something when he drew a distinction between “sudden” and “flash” fiction; very short-short stories differ qualitatively from those pressing the upper boundaries of the word limit. With the publication of Micro Fiction in 1996, Jerome Sterne introduced the term “micro fiction” to describe stories up to 300 words in length. It is useful to distinguish these extremely
short-short stories from the somewhat longer ones; while they use many of the same
techniques as their longer counterparts, micro stories read differently, have a greater
impact when especially well-written, and also have a greater tendency toward either
failure or mediocrity. The distinction may be illustrated by comparing two short-short
stories containing similar themes and images: Ernest Hemingway’s six-worder, “For sale:
baby shoes, never worn,” and Susan O’Neill’s longer “Memento Mori,” which ends with
the image of unworn baby booties. The stories might have been written about the same
pair of shoes, the same tragic scenario in which a baby dies and leaves the would-be
parents bereft. Hemingway’s story demands much more of the reader than does
O’Neill’s. O’Neill provides details about why the baby dies and how the parents cope by
doting on their young niece (54-55), whereas the reader of Hemingway’s six-worder must
decide for him or herself the circumstances of the child’s death and how the parents will
move on after they have sold the shoes.

To further complicate matters, many micro stories requiring specific word counts
have emerged: the “drabble” (exactly 100 words), the 69er (exactly 69 words), and 55
fiction (exactly 55 words), among others (Kotzin; Moss 6). Some are based on sentence,
rather than word, counts (Casto). These types approach the threshold of poetry and blur
the lines between the two forms. In fact, some writers and critics do not draw a
distinction between short-short stories and prose poems (Kotzin; Renshaw). However, as
Steve Smith and Kathy Kachelries, founders of the short-short story blog
“325tomorrows,” say, not all short prose counts as a short-short story. “Unlike the
vignette or the prose poem, flash fiction adheres to the same conventions as a short story
or novel” (Smith and Kachelries). The form, though often approaching poetry in its use
of vivid figurative language or word counts, excludes that which is not prose and that which does not follow the previously outlined structure of a story.

All the various sub-categories of short-short stories vary not in word count alone, but also in characteristics – and in quality. It would be too broad a generalization to say that all short-short stories based on a word count are inferior or gimmicky, and that all longer short-short stories are superior in literary merit. It might be more accurate to say that many amateur writers are attracted to the word count-based variety, or that many writers think an extremely short micro story will be easier to write than a longer short-short story, and that there is a resultant plethora of mediocre-to-bad short-short stories in the shorter sub-categories. As well, micro stories are especially conducive to the “trick” form – the snappy, surprise ending, old-fashioned style of short-short story that reads more like a joke with a good punchline than a piece of quality literature. However, for the rare few that are done well, these especially short-short stories can have an even greater impact than some of their lengthier counterparts. Because they are apprehended in a matter of seconds, the insights they offer are delivered with a particular force and precision which may be felt less strongly in longer short-short stories. Producing such a high-impact yet compact piece is simply more challenging than producing a somewhat longer but equally poignant piece, so the rate of failure at the micro level is far higher.

A Proposed Definition

Taking into account the relationship of the short-short story to the conventional short story, the name of the form, its length, and its sub-categories, the definition of the term “short-short story” which will be used throughout this study is: a category of prose literature including pieces up to 750 words which follow the formal structure of a story.
(that is, consist of a conflict, crisis, and resolution). This is a deliberately broad definition, intended to be inclusive while providing some general parameters by which pieces of short-short writing may be categorized and judged. Given the long history of the form’s development, described in the following section, it would be presumptuous to suggest a definition any more limited than this.

History

The short-short story, while seemingly a newly-emerging form of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, is not truly so recent as that; its history is more complex and far-reaching. The form is simultaneously new and old, drawing on ancient oral traditions and literature but adapting them to a modern context. The emergence and evolution of short-short stories over the past half-century represents not the birth of a new form, but a renaissance: a forward-looking and experimental adaptation of literary forms first developed in antiquity.

Ancient Origins: The Oral Tradition

When considering the origins of the short-short story form, it seems natural to assume that the short-short story evolved from the standard short story (Shapard xiii). Certainly the short story has contributed to the short-short’s development and to the form’s modern recognition as an authentic literary form. However, the predecessors of the modern short-short story can be found much farther back in history. Consider such ancient forms as fable, parable, anecdote, and even joke. Some, if not all, of these forms preceded written language. They taught lessons, acculturated children, expressed joy and anxiety, relieved tension, and preserved history – all through short, simple storytelling (Stern 16-17). Jesus’s “Parable of the Mustard Seed” and Aesop’s “The Fox and the
Grapes” are early written examples of what has, centuries later, evolved into the modern short-short story (Sterne 17; Shapard xiv).

19th Century Revival: The Short Story

The history of the short-short story does not, however, progress in a straight path from antiquity to modernity. It has woven back and forth, in and out of popularity, as literature has evolved from its ancient oral origins. The early forms of short-short stories eventually became somewhat longer stories, which in turn transformed into epics and novels (Shapard xiv). Though short works never ceased to exist, they were typically dismissed as lightweight pieces inappropriate for expressing the most serious of human concerns. The length of a work came to be associated with its gravity and importance, and many readers and writers assumed that “size lends weight” (Goodstein).

However, that began to change in the 19th century, when writers rediscovered the unique charms of shorter forms of writing and, conversely, the limitations of longer works. Many writers believed their readers incapable of comprehending the “prolonged ecstasy” of long, brilliant works (Goodstein; Poe 47). They divided “long expanses of excellence” with inferior, “purple” passages, scattering “islands of beauty in a sea of dross” (Goodstein). Then came the thought: why bother with the “dross”? Why not write shorter passages of greater excellence? Thus was born the modern short story (Goodstein).

Edgar Allen Poe is credited as the original master of the short story as a modern art form. He theorized that brevity is at the heart of greatness in literature because it preserves the “unity of effect or impression”; a work that can be read in a single sitting enjoys “the immense force derivable from totality” (Poe 46-47). Other writers, such as
Chekhov, Maupassant, Kafka, Hemingway, and O’Connor, continued to develop this form throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. They explored techniques for suggesting meanings using minimal words, relying on the reader to draw connections and read between the lines. Meanwhile, early versions of the short-short story began to emerge as a diverting “trick” form in magazines – lesser in literary value than the short story, yet still part of the vital “literature of everyday life” (Stern 17-18).

20th Century Evolution: The Short-Short Story

What allowed the short-short story to come into its own was the marriage of ancient forms with the refined techniques of the modern short story. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the very short stories published in magazines and newspapers were written and published for a single purpose: to entertain. Written in relatively unadorned journalistic language, these stories lacked the artistic craftsmanship expected of true literature. Most did not pursue the complexities of human life; rather, like a good joke, they passed a few moments of spare time, only to be forgotten thereafter (Hall, in Shapard 234; Sterne 18).

But these early short-short stories, like their longer counterparts, began later in the 20th century to evolve. In the 1960s, writers accustomed to producing longer works began to experiment with brevity, composing “fictions” (very short pieces characterized by wordplay) and writing stories of only a few lines. In the 1970s and 1980s, anthologies like Short Short Stories and Short Shorts1 collected very brief pieces by well-known authors, among them Franz Kafka, Guy de Maupassant, and John Updike, demonstrating growing awareness of a “new” form already in the making. Simultaneously, literary

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1 Short Short Stories edited by Jack David and Jon Redfern, 1981; Short Shorts: An Anthology of the Shortest Stories edited by Irving and Ilana Weiner Howe, 1982
magazines began to publish more pieces that followed the same trend of brevity (e.g., *TriQuarterly*, which published a “Minute Stories” issue in 1976) (Sterne 18; Shapard xiv).

Competitions sprang up: The World’s Best Short Short Story Contest, which limited stories to 250 words (a single typewritten page), in 1986, and The Drabble Project (the origins of the 100-word “drabble”) in 1987 (Sterne 19; Langford). The short-short story truly emerged as a (yet-to-be-named) form at that time, and it has continued to grow in popularity and prevalence since.

**Present Popularity and Future Possibilities**

Why now? What about this particular point in history has allowed the very short story to shift from the realm of common, “everyday life” writing to a literary form in its own right? Writers and critics of short-short stories offer several theories as to why the form is particularly suited for this time – or perhaps why this time is perfect for the form.

One of the most popular theories is that the fast pace of modern society has created a niche for literature that can be both written and consumed quickly between more pressing time commitments (Johnson, in Shapard 232; Goodstein; Smith and Kachelries; Casto; Griffith). However, *storySouth* founding editor Jason Sanford disagrees, calling this theory a mere “rationalization.” He elaborates:

> For a county that supposedly lacks time, we're reading more full-length novels, short-story collections, and nonfiction books than ever before. Granted, most of these volumes don't measure up to even the lesser works of Cormac McCarthy, William Faulkner or Toni Morrison, but they are still hundreds of pages in length. This means the American reading public continues to understand and love the longer forms of narrative.
While yes, the fast-paced U.S. American life might contribute somewhat to the burgeoning popularity of short-shorts, the incredible popularity of lengthy series like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* poses a strong counterargument. If short attention spans are responsible for short-short story success, they are certainly not *solely* responsible.

Others suggest that the short-short story’s popularity is a product of the information age, in which readers are sick of consuming large chunks of data. Furthermore, readers’ exposure to radio, television, movies, and various other media has equipped them with such a broad “vocabulary” of situations, characters, etc. that they no longer require the aid of much exposition (Baxter, in Shapard 229; Kelly, in Shapard 240; Horne). While this media-fueled “vocabulary” can be beneficial in that it allows short-short stories to flourish, the story saturation may also be problematic, says Sanford, referring to a *New York Times* op-ed by Neal Gabler, “When Every TV Show is a Rerun.” These days, he says, all the stories sound the same. Gabler explains: “Primal narratives like "The Iliad" or "Romeo and Juliet" obviously endure because they are rich and complex and touch each of us differently. But to fill the maw of the mass media, most of the plots, by necessity, are formulaic. Writers and producers find elements that elicit a predictable response in an audience, and they keep recycling them.” Though Gabler speaks to a television programming crisis, the impact of media saturation can also be felt in the literary world. Short-short stories may have become popular because they are well-suited to a society that has already heard every story retold hundreds of times and is in search of flashes of insight. However, they may themselves quickly become passé if too many short-short writers follow the trend of regurgitating the same tired stories over and over again.
Still others note the commercial motives of them in magazines to increase the variety (but not the length) of a publication (Johnson, in Shapard 232; Hall, in Shapard 233-34; Casto; Griffith). Writers also love them for this reason, says Sanford, because they provide a “quick road to publication. After all, why write a 6,000-word short story when you can write ten 600-word pieces in the same time?” Writers can use short-shorts to get around the “catch-22” of having to be published before an editor will publish them, and editors seeking diversity have to make only a minimal time investment to read dozens of short-shorts and select the right ones.

Finally, some believe a shifting collective mentality is at work: people no longer believe in the future explored by longer works (Baxter, in Shapard 229), or they realize now that truth comes not in lengthy passages, but in flashes (Casto). “These are tunes for the end of time,” says a melancholy Baxter. “The future has narrowed, become so small a tunnel that no one feels like crawling into it” (Shapard 229). This is certainly a possibility, especially in conjunction with the saturation of stories resultant of the information age. Nothing is new, as readers and writers are all too aware; all that remains are, as Casto puts it, those brief “flashes” of insight.

All of these suggested causes are likely at play, perhaps to varying degrees, in the rise of the short-short phenomenon. Due to its brevity, the short-short story is highly accessible. Its size makes it ideal for Internet propagation since each story fits onto a single screen and may be easily e-mailed or posted to a blog (Horne; Casto; Goodstein). It can be written by commuters on the go, as it is in China, where people produce “minute-long stories” on their cell phones (Griffith). The age of electronics offers a wide and ever-increasing variety of ways to promulgate short-shorts: already they are
beginning to appear not only in written form, but also as audio podcasts, for which they are the perfect length (Horne). As people face increasing limitations on their time, continue to be “wired” to global information networks, and avail themselves of new technologies, the short-short story will likely take even greater hold over readers, writers, and publishers worldwide.
CHAPTER II

LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

While writers, publishers, and readers have yet to settle upon a unified definition of short-short stories, nearly all of them agree that there is *something* different about these little stories. The word “brevity” is tossed around a great deal, along with “intensity.” Some talk about a surprise ending, lasting impact, and the erasure of everything nonessential. In *Fast Fiction*, a guide to reading and writing short-short stories, author Roberta Allen describes short-short stories according to their types, unique qualities, and treatment of literary elements (41-56). This framework is a good place to start, but Allen’s categories for analysis can each be expanded considerably to better describe the ways in which short-short stories differ from other types of writing.

**Types**

Allen describes four types\(^2\) of short-short story: “single incidents,” “stories that compress time,” “stories that reveal a mind,” and “stories that defy ordinary reality” (51-56). To those four, a fifth should be added: “protean” forms. “Stories that compress time” should also be renamed, “stories that *defy* time”; while many short-shorts compress the events of days or years into only a few minutes of reading time, some short-shorts are

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\(^2\) Allen’s types are likely based on Irving Howe’s categories, which appear in the same order under different names in *Short Shorts*: “one thrust of incident,” “life rolled up,” “snap-shot or single frame,” and “like a fable” (xv-xvi).
so focused on a single moment that they actually seem to *lengthen* it. Though any given story might exist within two or even more of these categories, usually it fits one better than the rest. Determining the story’s dominant type is the first step in recognizing its content and purpose.

**Single Incident**

*Single incident* stories are the most common of the five types. They span at most a few hours’ worth of action and typically cover even less time, so they are especially well-suited to the short-short story form. In a single incident story, the entire action pivots around one focal point, one inciting event or significant moment, often leading the protagonist to a discovery or revelation. Even a writer of incredible skill would have difficulty making an interesting novel out of a single event or moment; longer works, by virtue of their length, must pursue more complex plots, subplots, and digressions in order to remain sufficiently interesting. A conventional short story may focus on a single incident, but it often lacks the intensity wrought by the compactness of a short-short single incident story. The writer may spend little time on initial exposition, describing complex characters and their backstories. All of that is stripped away, leaving the moment of epiphany in sharp focus; the reader must supply significant portions of the background based on sparse textual clues or conjecture (Allen 51-51; Howe xv). In Molly Giles’s “The Poet’s Husband,” the reader initially meets an image of the protagonist (a large, seemingly nice man who listens) and his circumstances (sitting on the front row, listening to his wife). Giles does not directly offer any description of the man’s life, his marriage, or whether or not he is happy. She provides little information about the circumstances themselves. She weaves clues into the picture of this single
incident – watching, or perhaps suffering through, his wife’s poetry reading – but leaves most of the details to the reader’s interpretation (Stern 24-25). Giles might have begun with, “Like so many nights before, he drove her to the club, wondering which part of her soul she would reveal that she hadn’t bothered to show him first.” Instead she implies these details – the protagonist’s familiarity with the situation, his silent suffering, his wife’s carelessness and self-exposure – in between the lines of the story itself. The exposition is stripped away to virtually nothing, and the poignancy of the final moment, in which the neglected husband stares at a similarly neglected spot on the window, is intensified as a result.

The shorter the story, the narrower the incident it is likely to represent. The majority of the 55-word pieces in The World’s Shortest Stories are single incidents, such as the opening piece, “Bedtime Story” by Jeffrey Whitmore, which consists of only a few vital lines in a conversation between a soon-to-be killer and her oblivious victim (13). The scene plays out in real time as it is read; it takes no more than half a minute. Mike Ibeji’s 100-word story, “The Least of my Children,” spans a little more time – the amount required for the protagonist to take a poor man to a café and eat a meal with him – and is told largely in dialogue (with one break between “scenes”) such that it is also read nearly in real time (“The Drabble Project”). Longer short-short stories might give more attention to exposition, but in so doing they sometimes sacrifice the compactness that intensifies the short-short story form. Dan O’Brien’s “Crossing Spider Creek” fits the length parameters of a short-short story, but it reads a bit more like a conventional short story. The second paragraph, in which the setting and the protagonist’s situation are clearly revealed (1987, elk season, a camping trip on horseback, riding a colt belonging
to his wife, trapped on the wrong side of a swollen river), might be removed entirely without the story suffering. In fact, the story might be better for its tightness. The only essential detail that is not implied elsewhere in the story is the year (or at least that “this is not the Old West” which is the reader’s initial impression), and that information could easily be revealed through a reference to some object or incident that would be anachronistic in the 19th century (28-30). The most successful single incident stories leave out this kind of detailed exposition and allow the reader to deduce more based on implication.

**Time-defying**

_Time-defying_ stories either compress or expand the reader’s experience of time. Often short-short stories compress days or years into only a few moments of reading time. Condensed-time stories rely even more heavily on implication and reader participation than do single incident stories, as they must cover a much broader expanse of time in the same limited space. The writer picks out symbolic details from significant episodes, creating a story that may cover the same span of time as a novel within the space of a poem (Allen 52-53). “Roseville,” by William Heyen, is a self-consciously time-condensing story consisting of three episodes in the life of a couple: the moment they meet, the early days of their relationship, and their golden anniversary (James Thomas 34-36). All three episodes are linked by the story of the day the couple met, creating a sense of unity and focus. The characters are typified, made general and highly relatable; characterization is sacrificed so that more time might be covered. Heyen transitions from scene to scene with the conversational cues, “To make a long story short…” and “To make a very long story much shorter…” (35). These signals simultaneously propel the
reader from event to event and assure the reader that he or she is missing nothing of great
importance. The effect is a complete, unified story that spans the larger part of two
people’s lives within only a few moments.

Rarer among short-short stories is the expanded-time story, in which a single
incident lasts far longer than it ever would in reality. Joanne Avallon’s “All This” is one
such example. Though it rushes from beginning to end in a single sentence, mimicking
the fraction of a second in which the event occurs, it cannot help but slow the moment
because the act of reading it takes much longer than does the action of the story. The
protagonist, who is about to strike her child because it has bitten her, is mentally
transported beyond the immediate moment and into memories of the past that describe
her father’s and grandfather’s similarly violent punitive actions. Avallon provides
sensory details that serve to slow the moment, causing the reader to reflect, along with
the protagonist, on what is happening: the two-year-old’s sharp incisors; the bike the
protagonist left in the rain when she was five; the bleeding of her father’s ear after her
grandfather struck him; the tenderness of her daughter’s thigh (66-67). Whereas the
condensed-time story skims over the details of many moments or years, pulling particular
events together to demonstrate their unified significance, the expanded-time story
meditates on the details of a single moment so that the moment is drawn out much longer
than it would be in reality.

Mind-revealing

Mind-revealing stories emphasize narrative voice over other elements. This type
often takes the form of a monologue. A single event may happen, as in a single incident
story, but the consciousness of the protagonist takes precedence over the plot (Allen 54).
The primary conflict of the story takes place within the protagonist’s head. Often these stories are written in first person, as in Jerome Stern’s “Morning News.” Sterne’s narrator focuses on a single traumatic event – being diagnosed with a terminal illness – and the immediate internal dilemma of how to respond. The first person perspective creates an illusion of reality; the narrator seems like a real individual dealing with complex thoughts, and the story appears to be true. But mind-revealing stories are not always written in first-person perspective. Joanne Avallon’s “All This,” representative of the expanded-time story, also exemplifies a mind revealed. Told in the second person, the protagonist is an unnamed “you.” While in Stern’s story the reader is compelled to sympathize with an individual distinct from him or herself, the effect of Avallon’s second-person perspective is a generalization and externalization of the protagonist’s internal horror at her own action. Avallon invites – perhaps forces – the reader to put him or herself into the protagonist’s shoes, to imagine going through the same thought process. A particular mind is not so much revealed as is a kind of mind, a type with which the reader feels intimately connected and for which he or she feels a particularly strong sense of sympathy.

**Reality-defying**

*Reality-defying* stories hearken back to the ancient origins of the short-short story. They are modern-day fables and parables that force the reader to release attachments to the real world and willingly suspend disbelief (Allen 55; Howe xvi). This act of suspending disbelief requires more of both reader and writer in short-short stories than in longer stories or novels. There is little time for world-building exposition. The writer of a short-short cannot hope to create a world as complex as Earthsea or Middle Earth in
only a few lines. Instead, he or she must succinctly and clearly convey un-reality within the scope of the story itself, relying on conventions established by folk tales, fantasies, horrors, and science fictions. The reader must be especially attentive to clues left by the writer.

Beverly A. Jackson’s “The Dead” rides the line between realism and fantasy. The protagonist, an old woman who still thinks of her unborn child (likely regretting an abortion) sees a baby girl in a tree. Is the baby truly there, a ghost or angel that pulls this story into the realm of the spiritual and fantastic? Or is it just, as she first presumes, “a mirage” (18)? The question is never resolved, but it does not need to be. Jackson’s matter-of-fact presentation of the image allows the reader to accept it for what it is – a symbol of absolution, a signal for the protagonist to move on – just as the reader of a folk tale unblinkingly accepts the appearance of symbolic talking animals (the sly fox, for example). This method of unapologetically introducing unreal elements is perhaps the most effective for convincing the reader to accept them. Many micro stories employ this technique, along with a reliance on genre conventions. The reader knows immediately what kind of story to expect when reading Dean Christianson’s 55-word story “There’s No Place Like It,” which opens with the sentence, “The President was rushed to the Arizona desert to greet the arrival of the huge alien spacecraft” (150). Similarly, in Brian Newell’s 55-worder “What the Devil Wanted,” the clue is in the title, and the first sentence confirms that the devil is literally Satan (172). Neither story is a great literary gem, though each does offer some social commentary on the human race’s assumption of global superiority and on individuals’ willingness to (in this case, literally) sell their souls for money. Though they depict the fantastic, these stories, like their longer reality-
defying counterparts, speak to themes and messages that are highly relevant in the
everyday real world. But unlike the conventional short story or the novel, short-short
stories which incorporate fantastical or other unreal elements must immediately compel
the reader to temporarily suspend disbelief despite an absence of detailed exposition.

Protean

Protean stories, while neither common nor unique to the short-short story form,
are more prevalent in this brief form than in longer writing. Stories of this type ignore
ordinary conventions of prose literature, such as paragraphs, and assume forms which are
not commonly used in storytelling. John Updike’s “The Widow” is written almost
entirely like an interview printed in a magazine, “Q & A” style. It somewhat resembles a
script, but near the end the narrator breaks out of the “Q & A” model, returning
momentarily to the conventional prose model to assess the situation as an outside
observer (142-45). “The Widow” also represents a single incident – an interview – but its
unusual form is its most distinct feature. Tom Ford’s micro story “Vox Populi” describes
a family’s conflicts and woes in a 55-word answering machine recording (125). Perhaps
the classic example of a short-short story is Hemingway’s famous six-worder, which
describes both the conflict and its resolution through the structure of an advertisement. It
is easy to imagine longer stories framed as ads, or writers using other unconventional
forms – letters, text messages, or even Facebook statuses – to tell stories in new ways.
This type of story would, however, be difficult to sustain for long; it is nearly impossible
to imagine an entire novel written in a protean form achieving much success. It would be
hard for either writer or reader to take in large doses, but it can work well in short-short
stories. The unusual form forces a slow, reflective, responsive read because the reader
must fill in the gaps between morsels of information supplied by the writer. This puts even more responsibility on the reader than do the other types of short-short story.

Qualities

Regardless of their type, most short-short stories share several qualities. These qualities may be found in other forms, but they are especially prominent within this one. Allen describes three “unique qualities” of short-shorts (brevity, intensity, and surprise), as well as several “secondary qualities” (compression, indirection, immediacy, a single focus, tightness, and precision) (46). Her paradigm, while on the right track, needs restructuring. All short-shorts by definition share the first of these qualities, brevity. While most are also, to varying degrees, intense and surprising, these qualities both originate partly from the form’s shortness. In fact, all other qualities of short-short stories originate from brevity, the only primary quality. Beneath brevity in the hierarchy are several other secondary qualities, to borrow Allen’s term. Intensity and surprise are among them, but they also include unity, a poetic style, and reader involvement. When evaluating a short-short, it is important for the reader to be aware of how each of these five secondary qualities functions and interacts with the others, and with the primary quality of brevity, within the piece.

Brevity

The quality of brevity resides at the heart of the short-short story form and of all the form’s other qualities. It is achieved through erasure of everything nonessential, which creates unity, intensity, and poetic style. The short-short story encourages and often demands surprise in order to make up for its shortness. And it requires more reader involvement than do longer types of prose. It also demands more of the writer. The
writer who composes short-short stories, says Philip Stevick, “does not merely choose; he strains, resists, contends against the compulsion to write long” (Shapard 242). This Spartan writing leaves little room for detailed development or digression. The short-short story writer creates unity through sacrifice – the sacrifice of time and detail – which allows the story to, as Mark Strand puts it, “do in a page what a novel does in two hundred” (Shapard 247). When the writer resists writing long and confines him or herself to 1,000 words, or 100, or 10, he or she must remove all but the most essential words from the piece. “There is no room,” says S. Joan Popek, “for extra adjectives or much description.” What Steve Moss, author of The World’s Shortest Stories, says of writing 55-word stories applies to all short-short stories: “Paring plot and narrative down to their utter essences and thinking hard about each word and judging its appropriateness are part of the…process” (8). Robert Kelly describes the same process as “the deft excision of what the reader expects, but does not need, to be told” (Shapard 240). What remains is a distilled essence, a single, unified piece which is all the more compelling for its brevity.

Unity

Unity is achieved through this carving away of excess. A short-short story does not allow the space for a writer to develop a complex plot; rather, it offers a single idea, played out in only a few words. It is incredibly focused on a single theme. Short-shorts also enjoy a different kind of unity, one specific to their form: unity of time. Because length – hence, reading time – is eliminated in the paring away of the nonessential, the reader may consume an entire short-short story in a single sitting – or even, says Jack Goodstein, before sitting. Edgar Allen Poe believed this temporal unity to be essential to
the success of the short story. In his “Review of *Twice-Told Tales*,” he says that “in almost all classes of composition, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting” (46).

Why “one sitting”? Why is this vague standard so important to the short-short story? In “Why Short Stories Are Essential and Why They are Seldom Read,” Charles E. May elaborates on Poe’s unity of time and its effect. May describes a somewhat contentious relationship between “sequence” – that is, the chronological order of events in a story – and “significance,” or theme. The reader of a short story, he says, must understand that the sequence of the story’s events is *not* as important as the theme it is meant to communicate. A writer wishes to convey an idea, something that is atemporal, but he or she is bound by the inherently temporal nature of the written word, which the reader digests in sequential time. The short story, by virtue of its very shortness, may be apprehended at once (or, at any rate, fairly quickly), such that the reader perceives the whole all at once. This is a very different experience from reading a longer story, such as one laid out in a novella or novel. The reader of a short story is not so distracted by questions of what happens next and is more intent upon the underlying thematic significance of the events (14-16). Poe objected to “extreme brevity,” which he believed would “degenerate into epigrammatism” (47), but perhaps he never encountered a poignant piece such as Jerome Stern’s “Morning News” or Mary Giles’s “The Poet’s Husband.” These stories illustrate that the short-short story is potentially even more effective than the conventional short story in redirecting the reader’s attention from events to a single, focused theme. These stories are seen in their entirety before they are
even begun. They are finished almost as soon. With so few events to entertain the reader, the themes of *carpe diem* and of unhappy marriage truly take precedence and shine.

Today, for many people, a sitting is closer to ten minutes than to Poe’s two hours, and the short-short story is the ultimate prose form for achieving the temporal unity which Poe so highly valued.

**Poetic style**

A *poetic style* is another aspect of brevity which appears in many, if not most, short-short stories. This is because short-short stories share many elements of poetry. Allen discusses “poetic language” as an aspect of brevity, saying that short-short stories demand the use of metaphorical language in order to make connections in the small space allowed by the form (47). Brevity also lends itself to the sustained use of other types of poetic language, such as alliteration, assonance, and consonance. Consider an example of consonance from Jerome Stern’s “Morning News”: “Feast or fast? I feel a failure of imagination. I should want something fantastic – a final meal atop the Eiffel Tower” (125). Taken to an extreme, sound repetition may come across as gimmicky, as in Glen Starkey’s 55-word micro story, “Werling”: a string of words which all begin with the letter *W* and which constitute a simple (and remarkably unimpressive) story (67). Here the writer has focused more on form than story, and the story’s quality suffers as a result. When used appropriately, though, poetic techniques enhance the vivacity and impact of short-short stories.

Poetic language is only one part of the picture. Rhythm and voice, says Joyce Carol Oates, are other points of similarity. In short-short stories, as in poetry, narrative voice may take precedence over the dramatization of experience (Shapard 247). In “The
Nicest Kid in the Universe,” Chuck Rosenthal writes in a childlike voice that mimics the simplicity of his protagonist. The narrator may be imagined as one of the kids on the street with whom Franky Gorky, the protagonist, shares his toys and candy – even though the narrator, who describes Franky Gorky’s thought processes, clearly possesses an omnipotence that no such child would have. In the very last line he reverts from storytelling to moralizing: “This is what happens when you try to explain something” (154). The effect is that of a curtain coming down and revealing the backstage mechanics of a play. Suddenly the reader is reminded that this is a story, not necessarily true, and that it has a point beyond the cause and effect of its plot. In this example, the narrative voice first draws the reader further into the story by imitating the protagonist, then abruptly ejects the reader at the end. In many stories, syntax plays a major role in the author’s voice. Both Molly Giles’s “The Poet’s Husband” and Joanne Avallon’s “All This” consist in their entirety of single sentences. The effects are quite different. Giles’s story is paced by repeated words and sounds, while Avallon’s rushes from beginning to end, mimicking the speed of the moment it describes (Stern 24-25; 66-67). While a distinct narrative voice is important to all forms of writing, the author’s voice plays an especially significant role in very short pieces like poems and short-short stories. In these, with so much else carved away, it is given more room to shine – and it must rise to the challenge, lest it fail to capture the reader’s imagination.

The size of the piece is another commonality; brevity lends itself to the poetic style. Kelly describes the short-short story form as a point somewhere between poetry and prose, in which “the energy and clarity typical of prose [is] coincident in the scope and rhythm of the poem” (Shapard 240). Furthermore, some of the most minute forms of
the short-short story, such as the drabble, the 69er, and 55 fiction (or 55-word story), share a rigid structure with older forms of poetry, like the sonnet and the haiku. When read aloud, these extremely brief forms may even be mistaken for poems. The presence of a complete plot and the absence of line and meter requirements sets the short-short story apart from poetry, but the dividing line is very thin, and occasionally some pieces – such as a narrative poem with a complete plot – may balance precariously atop that line.

Intensity

*Intensity*, too, proceeds from erasure. Removing everything nonessential leaves behind a story that is “highly compressed and highly charged,” in the words of Joyce Carol Oates (Shapard 246). Many writers and critics associate intensity with a limited number of words: “When you’re talking about a few hundred words,” says Goodstein, “you had better make sure that every word is there for a purpose.” When writers write short, they write powerfully, selecting their words with surgical precision. Inexact or weak words cannot be hidden within a sea of other words or behind a complex plot or character; each word is a stone in an archway, and if it is weak, the entire structure fails.

A short-short story cannot begin, as does Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, with a meandering description of prison, rose bush, and drab crowd, images which, by the end of the tale, have long since faded into the background. It could not indulge in the lengthy initial characterization of Hester Prynne’s emergence from the prison (45-51). The short-short version of the story would immediately zoom in on the most striking image: the letter itself. It would also highlight a particular scene, perhaps the climactic moment when Arthur Dimmesdale ascends the scaffold and claims his sin (Hawthorne 218-19). The whole story might be told in that scene, with key moments leading up to that moment.
hinted at in the memories of Hester and Arthur, or alluded to by the narrator. The short-short story captures the intensity of such a scene and uses it to reveal the story in its entirety (or gives the reader enough material with which to construct the rest of the story). Because of its incredibly tight, precise language and its brevity, a successful short-short story hits with an impact felt long after the reader reaches the end. Miriam N. Kotzin compares reading this type of story to looking into a flash bulb: “an after-image floats for a while in your field of vision.” Unlike the novel, whose plot and characters become fuzzy around the edges once it is finished, a short-short story maintains its sharp contours because it is so brief and so well-crafted (Griffith).

Surprise

Surprise, usually in the form of a twist ending, is a debated quality of the short-short story form. Some writers and critics consider it an absolute necessity; others believe the trick ending is merely a convention of the early 20th century short-short and is not especially desirable in contemporary short-shorts. O’Connor says that even by the 1960s, the old trick-ending short-short, which required a rigid structure filled with clues leading to the trick ending, had fallen out of vogue with both writers and readers (Shapard 243). On the other hand, Playboy editor Alice K. Turner thinks that a “snap” ending is essential. “It’s out of fashion now,” she admits, “considered dated and a bit corny. Still, it satisfies...In my opinion, if it doesn’t have that snapper at the end, it isn’t a short-short, just a very short story” (Shapard 254). Sam Ruddick falls somewhere in between. “We need to be surprised,” he says, “not by a trick ending, but by the feeling we get from reading the piece. At their best, these stories will make you pause, tilt your head and say ‘oh,’ providing a tiny revelation, a new way of seeing, or a new way of
saying something you’ve seen and been unable to articulate.” The surprise of a short-short story may be found in a trick ending, but it may also occur in “twists throughout the story” (Casto). The impulse to include these twists, suggests Steve Moss, stems from the writer’s awareness of his or her spatial limitations. Short-short story writers realize that the brevity of their work “demands something extra to create a satisfying payoff” (7).

Surprise may take the place of careful character and plot development which are sometimes, by necessity, eliminated in short-short stories (G. W. Thomas). However, it must not be the sole defining quality of the story. Short-short stories which depend entirely on surprise endings tend toward superficiality; many of the 55-word stories in Moss’s book suffer from this problem. Jeffrey Whitmore’s “Bedtime Story,” one of the better pieces in the collection, reads much like a good joke with a clever punchline: the man who plans to have his wife murdered finds himself in bed with the woman his wife has hired to kill him (13). Surprise is a significant quality in many, if not most, short-short stories, but the degree to which it is prominent must be carefully managed so that it does not become the only significant quality in the story. In “The Poet’s Husband,” Molly Giles leads the reader through a series of more subtle twists. As the husband endures his wife’s all-exposing poetry reading and her drunken exuberance afterward, the reader may be shocked as the wife-poet’s carelessness is revealed bit by bit: His wife is actually admitting to having an affair – still – in front of her husband and an audience? Now she has the audacity to ask what he thought? These are as much twists of a knife in a wound as they are twists of plot. Then, when the husband lies awake in bed, staring “at the moon through a spot on the glass that she missed,” the reader stops abruptly:

Oh! …What did she miss? The ending is not quite a surprise – certainly it is no “trick” –
but it poignantly reveals a great deal about the characters’ marriage and the husband’s feelings, ending with enormous impact (24-25).

**Reader Involvement**

The final major quality of short-short stories is *reader involvement*. This quality has been alluded to in previous sections in the context of the short-short story’s popularity today and its heavy reliance on implication. Says *Linnet’s Wings* editor Ramon Collins, “Short story readers are used to being led by the little hannie through the plot, while Micro readers must participate in the story.” Because they leave out so much detail, short-short stories involve readers in a way that longer stories do not. It is up to the reader to fill in the information suggested between the lines. Steve Smith and Kathy Kachelries use the example of Hemingway’s six-word story to illustrate this point:

A reader imagines the person who wrote the ad: a parent torn apart by the loss of a stillborn or miscarried child. The reader senses the conflict: an incomprehensible feeling of loss, made all the more poignant by the fact that it is not directly addressed. Even the resolution is contained within that six-word masterpiece. By framing it as an advertisement, Hemingway allows us to see the protagonist’s coping mechanism: an attempt to distance him or herself from the loss by selling the only physical evidence that such a loss exists.

Another reader might draw different conclusions. What if the person selling the shoes is a grandparent or friend, not a parent? What if the shoes are only being sold because they were made for a girl-child, and the parents were surprised with a boy? What if they were merely forgotten in a box? These may not be the most *likely* interpretations, but they are
possibilities. In a story of this length, the reader wields a great deal of power. He or she must collaborate to make the story successful. Scott McCloud, author and illustrator of *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, describes reader response as it applies to the comic form, but his observations apply to short-short stories equally well:

> All of us perceive the world as a whole through the experience of our senses. Yet our senses can only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete. Even the most widely travelled mind can only see so much of the world in the course of a life. Our perception of ‘reality’ is an act of faith, based on mere fragments…This phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It’s called closure. (62-63)

McCloud goes on to describe how readers must interact with the comic medium in order to understand the full story. Between one frame and the next is a space in which *something* happens – but that *something* is left to the reader’s imagination. The author and artist may imply a particular sequence of events, but it is up to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions (62-69). Short-short stories work the same way. So much detail is eliminated that the reader *must* supply additional information to achieve closure. Rather than filling in the spaces between panels, the reader fills in between words and lines, making up sensory and plot details. This give-and-take between author and reader makes the short-short story form particularly engaging. Says McCloud, “Participation is a powerful force in any medium…Closure in comics fosters an intimacy surpassed only by the written word, a silent, secret contract between creator and audience” (69).

Readers today are especially well-prepared to engage in this participatory story-reading process because of media proliferation; the base of stock material with which
both reader and writer are familiar is broader than ever before. This works in favor of the short-short story because, as Charles Baxter says, “in the abruptly short-short story, familiar material takes the place of detail. Oh yes, the reader says: a couple quarreling in a sidewalk restaurant, a nine-year-old boy stealing a Scripto in Woolworth’s, a woman crying in the bathtub. We’ve seen that before. We know where we are. Don’t give us details; we don’t need them” (Shapard 229). The omission of details makes the short-short story a more interactive type of literature than longer works. For all that short-shorts are brief, they demand more effort on the part of the reader than do the conventional short story or the novel.

Elements

Just as short-short stories share unique qualities that set them apart from longer stories, they also treat the basic elements of literature differently than do other forms of writing. Some of these have been previously discussed: the use of poetic-sounding figurative language; the particular attention paid to narrative voice; and the emphasis on theme versus a series of events. In addition, plot, setting, and character are often presented differently in short-short stories than they are in longer stories.

Plot

The plot of a short-short story, as defined in Chapter One, must include the basic units of any other short story: conflict, crisis, and resolution. While longer stories usually follow, at least roughly, the linear story format of exposition – complication – climax – falling action – resolution, the short-short story condenses many of these parts until they are nearly indistinguishable from one another. It is common for the writer to forego a discernible exposition and complication. Falling action is almost always brief.
A non-resolution, or rather, an implied resolution, is common. Some stories, especially micro stories, may seem to be almost nothing but climax. In Avallon’s “All This,” for instance, the climactic moment is contained within the very first sentence: “Your arm and hand cock back instinctively…” (66), and the rushing, stream-of-consciousness pacing of the story sustains this moment until the very end. Scant details about the protagonist’s violent family history are provided, but they appear later as part of her stream of thought. There is no complication to speak of, nor is there a falling action. The resolution, that the protagonist will in the future be more mindful of her own actions so as not to repeat a violent history, is implied in her fearful reaction to her own violence, but it is never explicitly stated.

Avallon’s story represents a typical (though, of course, not universal) pattern in short-short stories: sucking the reader into the middle of the action with a compelling, middle-of-the-story point of attack, then cutting the story off just short of an explicit resolution. Says WriteGallery managing editor and webmaster K. L. Storer, “Often many of the classic elements [of a story] are missing, with one momentous exception: the point of attack. The vitality of sudden fiction…is the immediacy of sudden fiction. Suddenly you’re in the event, it began before you got there and you’ve no choice but to get involved or move on.” Dan O’Brien accomplishes this with an immediate and unambiguous opening line that strikes directly at the conflict of “Crossing Spider Creek”: “Here is a seriously injured man on a frightened horse” (28). Jerome Stern opens with a similarly active line in “Morning News”: “I get bad news in the morning and faint” (124). In “Memento Mori,” Susan O’Neill opens abruptly, “The baby was born with a hole in her spine…” (54). Not every short-short story begins thus, but nearly all writers of short-
shorts choose a point of attack that almost coincides with the climax. Most also end abruptly, leaving the reader with a only a sense of resolution, not a “happily ever after.” In “The Least of My Children,” Mike Ibeji cuts off just after the revelation of the beggar’s identity as Christ. Jeffrey Whitmore ends “Bedtime Story” without describing the sound of the gunshot – though the reader is left with it ringing in his or her ears (13). The visible plots of all these examples are significantly foreshortened from the conventional mountain-shaped plot structure of longer short stories; they represent only the very peaks of the mountains.

Setting

As a result of the missing exposition in short-shorts, setting is often sacrificed as well. Again, K. L. Storer explains: “Rarely is setting explained for you. It’s there, part of the landscape of the work. You pick up on it or you don’t. Setting is actually often completely ignored by the prose; at least, no time is allowed to acknowledge it out loud.” Setting is never described at all in Avallon’s “All This.” Giles reveals a bit more in “The Poet’s Husband,” indicating a performance space with rows of seats (the protagonist sits on the front row) and a stage. Is it a large theatre, a night club, a coffee shop, or a banquet hall? Indoors or outdoors? Giles does not specify (24). In “Roseville,” Heyen only offers the most scant details: an opening scene at the Paradise Mall antique show, a final scene at the Senior Center (34-36). Occasionally, as in O’Brien’s “Crossing Spider Creek,” the setting is vital, and the author must spend some time describing it for the circumstances to be fully understood (though arguably, O’Brien could spend less time doing so without sacrificing meaning or impact). Usually when the author makes this decision, the setting has some symbolic significance as well. In this example, the harsh
Rocky Mountains and the rushing creek represent an emotional distance between the protagonist and his wife. In “Roseville,” Paradise Mall may well foreshadow the protagonists’ long and blissful life together. In most short-shorts, though, setting is one of the first elements to be sacrificed.

**Character**

In most conventional short stories, as well as in longer works, *character* is considered to be of utmost importance. Stories which are “character-driven” are deemed superior to those which are “plot-driven.” But short-short stories limit the writer’s ability to develop characters. Because the reader encounters a character only briefly, the writer may (but does not always) use familiar stock or stereotypical characters. Characters often function not as individuals, but as symbols for particular attitudes and states of being (Allen 41). They “tell us more about the way people as a whole behave than the way that particular individual behaves” (Baxter 20). The significance of the individual is diminished in favor of representing a broader idea (Howe xi).

Rather than making such characters seem fleshless and distant, this abstraction may render them more relatable to the reader. This is once again similar to the comic medium; readers can identify more readily with a simply-drawn stick figure than with a photorealistic character because the stick figure represents *any* person, not a particular individual. Says McCloud, “The more cartoony a face is…the more people it could be said to describe” (31). Similarly, a reader of short-short stories may identify more readily with characters about whom few details are provided. The barely-defined character becomes a blank screen on which the reader may project his or her self-image or the images of other people with whom he or she interacts. Ibeji’s protagonist in “The Least
of My Children” is only unique in that, unlike many people, he or she takes the time to help a poor man. He or she is not even given a gender, so any reader can easily imagine him or herself in the person’s shoes. Avallon’s “All This” protagonist is somewhat more fleshed-out, being given a history and a gender, but she is still highly accessible to the reader. Virtually anyone can imagine him or herself as a parent trying to navigate the challenges of parenthood and to not repeat the mistakes of his or her own parents. Karen and Konrad, Heyen’s “Roseville” protagonists, have a bit more personality yet. Heyen reveals Karen’s preferences in pottery at the beginning and Konrad’s senility at the end. But they are still only lightly sketched-in, leaving the reader to project onto them his or her own hopes for finding a good mate and living a happy life together. The short-short story form, by virtue of its erasure, lends itself to an abstraction of character that allows the reader to engage in the story more directly than he or she may with a longer story.

What Makes a Great Short-Short Story?

With the ever-expanding popularity of short-shorts and their appropriateness for Internet-based publication, there are thousands upon thousands of short-short stories available online. Both amateur and professional writers blog them, submit them to contests, publish them in webzines, and post them on a variety of websites built for specific types of short-short stories. The democratizing power of the Internet allows both trained and untrained writers to post, publish, and discuss their work in an interactive environment. This is excellent for writers and readers interested in giving and receiving feedback, and it makes wonderful practice for a writer of any skill level. However, the majority of the stories posted online are of poor, if not terrible, quality. In fact, many of the stories published in printed literary magazines and anthologies are less than
spectacular. This is because, contrary to popular belief, short does not mean simple. Says author Gordon Weaver, “I would argue that the shorter the fiction, the greater become the odds against the success of the endeavor. That is why, I think, most shorts-shorts fail” (Shapard 229). Most writers do not have the skill to tell a high-impact story in a tiny space, so they produce low-impact, mediocre short-short stories instead.

What, then, are the distinguishing characteristics of a good – or even a great – short-short story? There can be no single, conclusive answer to that question. The previously described forms, qualities, and elements of short-short stories may be successfully combined in thousands of ways, with emphasis being given to one aspect or another. What works in one story may not be effective in another. However, for short-short stories which truly succeed and have a lasting impact, the following four statements are always true: 1) They focus on a short-short subject. 2) They avoid clichés. 3) They encourage rereading and reflection. 4) They downplay the weaknesses of the form.

Short-Short Subjects

To say that short-short stories focus on short-short subjects does not mean that short-short stories are only appropriate for small-minded topics or that they cannot address complex, powerful themes. Short-short stories can be every bit as poignant and thought-provoking as much longer stories – and, when well-written, are maybe even more so. But the subject must be tightly-focused. G. W. Thomas, in “Writing Flash Fiction,” advises would-be writers, “Look for the smaller ideas in larger ones. To discuss the complex interrelationship of parents and children you’d need a novel. Go for a smaller piece of that complex issue. How kids feel when they aren’t included in a conversation. What kids do when they are bored in the car. Middle child. Bad report
card. Find a smaller topic and build on it.” A short-short that attempts to address a too-
large topic will lack the impact of a tightly-focused moment and will, like a joke that
drags on for too long, fall flat.

Clichés

Avoiding overused material can make for a delicate balancing act, especially in
the shortest of micro stories. After all, drawing on that which is familiar allows many
short-short stories to succeed by making them accessible to readers. But certain
situations or approaches to themes have simply been done to death – for instance, the
jealous understudy-turned-murderer, as played out unoriginally in Sheree Pellemier’s 55-
word story “The Understudy” (19). Also overdone are trick ending stories, in which the
final sentence, delivered like the punchline to a joke, reveals everything before it to have
been a clever illusion. This rarely makes a spectacular short-short story. In Priscilla
Mintling’s “Death in the Afternoon,” another 55-worder, a deadly duel is revealed at the
last minute to be only children’s play-acting (21). “Harry’s Love” by Bill Horton appears
to feature a lustful man entranced by the body of his female lover, but “she” turns out to
be his trumpet (130). These “stories” (sketches, mostly, not even true stories) might
amuse for half a second, might register momentarily as “clever,” but they are dismissed
and forgotten immediately because they lack any true originality. The key is to approach
old themes, characters, or situations in a fresh way. What if the understudy was framed?
What if the poison he gave to the lead actor failed? What if he killed the actor not out of
jealousy, but out of some misguided and fanatical attempt to make sure the lead actor
“went out” at the highest point in his career? While perhaps none of these alternatives
would make a truly great short-short story, they would at the least be more interesting
than Pellemier’s tired old story.

Reflection

A very good short-short story will leave its readers thinking, says Pamelyn Casto
in “Flashes on the Meridian.” “The best flash fiction lingers in the mind long after the
story has been read – the way of all great literary works of art.” Writer John L’Heureux
puts it differently, describing a high-quality short-short as one which “we can’t help
reading fast, and then re-reading, and again, but no matter how many times we read it,
we’re not through it quite yet” (Shapard 228). It does not have to have an unresolved
ending, like O’Brien’s “Crossing Spider Creek,” to accomplish this effect. Nor does it
have to have a “Bedtime Story” type trick-ending. A great short-short story needs to end
on a high-impact note inspiring contemplation. With the final line, “This is what happens
when you try to explain something,” Chuck Rosenthal asks his readers, “Is there any
greater meaning to be found in Franky Gorky’s death (or in anything else, like the phases
of the moon, for that matter), or is it just a meaningless tragedy?” (154). Jerome Stern’s
narrator in “Morning News” leaves the reader pondering the question “feast or fast?” and
wondering if he, the narrator, has chosen wisely (125). Readers of Mary Giles’s “The
Poet’s Husband” ask which spot, exactly, the poet has missed, and go back to find out
(25). While a longer short story or a novel draws the action out long enough to force a
reader’s ongoing attention and contemplation, the short-short story must encourage the
reader to re-engage with the piece after it has already been read. Otherwise, after it is
read, it is immediately forgotten, its message lost.
Weaknesses

Finally, the great short-short story must take advantage of the form’s strengths while downplaying its weaknesses. Its strengths include that which has already been discussed: the high impact of condensed writing, the thematic and temporal unity, and the potential for reader engagement. Brevity also lends itself to rereading, so the writer of a short-short story can be reasonably assured that, if he or she does manage to write an adequately thought-provoking piece, it will be reread multiple times. After all, the story may be reread in only a matter of seconds or minutes. The reader may then appreciate the minute details of the story, not just its broad shape. This is far less likely with a longer story, such as a novel, in which a reader may skim over details and is not likely to return for a second or third read, particularly if he or she was left uncertain about the piece after the first read.

Brevity, however, has its share of weaknesses. The one from which the vast majority of short-short stories suffer is “forgettability.” A mediocre novel might hope to be remembered by virtue of the time the reader has invested in consuming it; a mediocre short-short story, having taken only a few seconds or minutes to read, may be just as quickly dismissed. Another weakness, and one of which the writer must be particularly aware, is that of limited emotional impact. A short-short story cannot hope, says Sam Ruddick, to make you cry: “There simply isn’t time to get as invested in the characters as you would need in order to be heartbroken. Flash fiction that attempts to elicit this kind of response from the reader seems maudlin; it asks too much. It can be poignant, but…it’s not going to make you weep, and even if it does it’s not going to change your life the way a novel might.” For example, in Scott Long’s 55-worder “Getting to Know
You,” two best friends plan to go to an abortion clinic – one to protest, the other for an abortion. The tragedy of personal loss is felt less than is the irony of the oblivious activist offering her pregnant friend a ride (127). “The Poet’s Husband” stirs sympathetic pity; “All This” and “Crossing Spider Creek” provoke anxiety; “Morning News” and “The Nicest Kid in the Universe” inspire bitterness. All are compelling and deal with sad subjects, but none brings the reader anywhere near tears. A short-short story derives its strength from quickly exposing a point, like tearing off a Band-Aid. It may feel raw, but it does not inspire tears. Emotionality requires a greater time commitment, one which the short-short story cannot – and is not intended to – offer.

Awareness of the myriad literary characteristics of the short-short story form – its types, qualities, and elements, as well as the techniques that can make a short-short story great – is valuable for understanding the form itself and for analyzing individual stories, but it is even more vital for the writer of short-short stories. Arguably, most writers of short-short stories do so for fun and do not consider the unique characteristics and challenges of the form. They are aware of brevity, of course; they can churn out story after story without dedicating much time to the exercise, and they can post them online, where readers will just as quickly consume the stories and offer feedback. Most of the stories written and published in this manner do not represent high-quality literature. But the short-short story does have the potential to achieve the same literary greatness as its much longer counterparts. The writer with the technical skills, imagination, and awareness of the form required to accomplish this feat is rare. The following chapter represents an attempt – not to achieve “literary greatness,” per se, but to approach the
short-short story form with the awareness that marks the difference between cheap entertainment and true literature.
CHAPTER III

THEORY IN PRACTICE

The first two chapters of this study have outlined the history and nature of the short-short story. This final chapter is intended to provide a sample of short-short stories written with the previously described characteristics and techniques in mind. It is not a comprehensive sample, which is to say that these pieces may not represent every category or type of short-short story. However, they are written with an eye toward the techniques that allow short-short stories to achieve excellence, and they aim to approach the short-short story from an angle that most short-short writers seem to avoid.

In collections of short-short stories, examples of historical short-short stories are few and far between. There may be many reasons for this, but a likely primary culprit is the necessity of exposition in historically-based writing. For the story to be truly understood, some background knowledge of historical events is necessary. A writer may feel uncomfortable with producing a piece based on an assumption that the reader will have the historical background to grasp the events leading up to the story. In some respects, however, the writer’s ability to assume that the reader will already possess the requisite background knowledge – or will at least be able to look it up on the Internet or in reference books – may make the historical fiction genre especially well-suited to
partnership with the short-short story form. Just as short-short story writers are able to avoid lengthy exposition by drawing on common cultural elements popularized by the proliferation of media, so too they may utilize the universality of historical facts to cut to the chase and get to the heart of the story.

The following short-short stories, collectively titled “Resistance,” represent an attempt at pairing historical fiction with the short-short story. All of the stories take place in Warsaw, the capitol of Poland, during the Nazi occupation (1939 - 1945). Some are set within the Warsaw Ghetto, the largest Jewish ghetto established over the course of World War II. Others take place outside the ghetto walls. In the interest of not frustrating the reader by assuming an exceptionally detailed knowledge of life and events in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, several of the stories are followed by explanations of relevant historical facts.
Mariem winced at the mirror. “I look so…” She floundered for a diplomatic word. “So…different.”

Aniela laughed as she corked the bottle. “You’ll do.” She patted the younger woman on the shoulder. “It will be better soon, you’ll see. We can treat it again in a few days, and the color will come lighter. Less orange. Until then, keep to the house and stay out of sight.” She gestured to the broom in the corner. “Sweep up for me, will you? I need to start dinner before Piotr comes home.”

When Piotr returned, he would hand her a sheaf of documents containing a name and history she did not recognize, a life Mariem would have to make her own. The father in these papers had not been shot by a sour-faced officer for refusing to dance in the street. The brother had not been sent to a labor camp, and he had not ceased sending letters a month ago. The mother and sister had not been herded into a box car bound for Treblinka. The husband had not stayed behind.

Mariem had not watched it all helplessly.

She would be someone else, someone with a different name, someone who could move freely through the streets, see the outside of the ghetto wall, monitor the movements of the SS troops. Someone with a name and a face, someone with an identity, someone who registered as more than just a two-legged animal in pumps.

She would be someone who could fight back, quietly, in every tiny act performed throughout the day, with every smile, every breath, every single heartbeat.
Someone who could defy the Germans just by living.

Alone, Mariem stooped to pick up one dark lock from the floor, fingerling its sable softness, so much like her mother’s – so different from the fragile frizziness of the abused hairs left on her head. Rising, she tucked the memento into her skirt pocket and swept the rest aside.

_The Warsaw Ghetto was established by German decree on October 12, 1940. All 350,000 Jewish residents of Warsaw were required to move into this 1.3 square mile district. In November 1940 the ghetto was sealed off from the rest of the city by a 10-foot-high fence topped with barbed wire and broken glass. More Jews were brought to the ghetto from nearby towns, and its population swelled to over 400,000. The food rations allowed by the German authorities were too meager to sustain life. Life in the ghetto was characterized by starvation, infectious disease, exposure, harassment by German SS troops, and day-to-day uncertainty. Beginning in July 1942, German authorities began “resettling” Jews “in the east” – which is to say, sending them to the gas chambers of the Treblinka killing center (“Warsaw”)._

_While anti-Semitism was pervasive in Poland even prior to the 1939 invasion, many Poles were sympathetic to the plight of their Jewish friends and neighbors. Some, like Jan and Antonina Żabinski, the non-Jewish owners of the Warsaw Zoo, risked their own lives in order to deliver aid to the ghetto, free the Jews living there, and hide them from the German authorities. The penalty for helping a Jew was death – not just for the individual caught helping, but also for his or her entire family and neighbors (Ackerman 116)._
The Parasite

The men sized each other up across the table in the room Izrael and his sister shared.

“You’re with us, then?” demanded Szymanski. His glistening, beady eyes reminded Izrael of a rat. A Jewish rat.

“Of course. How could I refuse? Sura is ill.” He sighed. “We need the extra zlotys.”

Szymanski rose and clapped him on the shoulder. “Good man, Izrael. Family first, that’s what I say. You won’t regret it.” He squared the police cap on his balding head. “Come to headquarters at eight o’clock sharp.”

Those greedy eyes flicked past Izrael to the curtain that separated Sura’s side of the room from the space where Izrael slept. “Tell your sister I wish her good health,” he added. Izrael forced a smile.

“Thank you, Szymon, for thinking of us. We will not forget it.”

As Szymanski’s footsteps faded down the stairwell, Sura emerged scowling.

“Why, Izrael?”

“You shouldn’t be up.”

“Why?”

“Sura…”

“I’d rather die than let you join them! Beating their own people in the street – turning a blind eye to all this suffering – for what? A few lousy zlotys? A pat on the head from those German swine?” Her eyes blazed feverishly. “Let me die instead!”
Her hysterics ended in a coughing fit that wracked her spindly form. Izrael caught her before her legs gave out and bore her back to bed. “Why, why?” she muttered, over and over, tears leaking from bloodshot eyes.

“Because,” he said, covering her and smoothing back her hair, “I am weak. I cannot fight them. But,” he added, cutting off her objection, “I can play their game. I can be the flea on the back of that vermin. You are sick, so you know well…even a small thing may do much from the inside.”

Shortly after taking over Poland, the Germans ordered the formation of a Jewish council, called the Judenrat. Through this body the Nazis imposed their policies – such as the formation of the ghetto and the organization of deportations from the ghetto – on the larger Jewish population (“Warsaw”). One of Judenrat’s duties was to establish the Jewish Order Service, also known as the Jewish Ghetto Police. In the Warsaw ghetto, this force numbered about 2,000. Its duties included directing traffic, supervising garbage collection, supervising sanitation, preventing crime, and operating a court within the ghetto. Members of the police force were also required to aid in deportations, rounding up their fellow Jews and loading them onto boxcars bound for the Treblinka gas chambers (Webb). Jews living in the ghetto joined for a variety of reasons, some altruistic but many self-serving. Many behaved cruelly toward their fellow Jews. Jewish historian Emmanuel Ringelblum, who founded “Oneg Shabbat” (“In Celebration of Sabbath”), a clandestine organization to preserve records of life and events in the Warsaw ghetto, described the cruelty of the Jewish Police as “at times greater than the Germans” (qtd. in Collins).
Passover 1943

The doorposts have already been smeared red more times than I can count. Our tears ran dry long ago. We have no bitter herbs for seder. No one has sold or burned the chametz; we must eat it to survive. Stale crusts replace matzo. For wine we have tepid water.

The pistol glints as Dawid turns it over again and again. He is thirteen and has never killed a man. Aron feigns sleep in the corner, his breath hitching. Noach stares at the Tanakh. He hasn’t turned a page in an hour. Near the entrance, the older men sit on sacks and whisper. The air tastes stale with apprehension.

“Blessed are you, Adonai Eloheinu, king of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.” My voice surprises me, cutting into the silence of the bunker. My brothers-in-arms stop and stare, but I continue.

“Blessed are you, Adonai Eloheinu, king of the universe, who chose us from all the nations…” One by one they creep out from the shadows into candlelight, hardened faces melting in the glow. “…And you gave us, Adonai Eloheinu, with love, Sabbaths for rest and festivals for happiness, holidays and times for joy, this day of the Festival of Matzos, the time of our freedom, a holy convocation, a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.”

We have no salt water, no herbs, no wine. Drawing together, we also have no fear.

Hope remains.

“Why is this night different from all other nights?”
The doorposts have already been smeared with the blood of lambs. Tomorrow we will splatter them again.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the first urban uprising of the Holocaust and was also the largest revolt initiated by Jews during that time. On April 19, 1943 – the day before Hitler’s birthday, and also the eve of Passover – SS troops, on orders from Heinrich Himmler, entered the Warsaw Ghetto with the intention of liquidating it once and for all. They were met with an unexpected level of armed resistance. Two Jewish resistance organizations, the Jewish Military Union (Żydowski Związek Wojskowy, ŻZW) and the Jewish Combat Organization (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa, ŻOB) had united and acquired weapons from the underground Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa). They held off the Nazis for nearly a month. It wasn’t until May 16, after the SS troops had burned the ghetto to the ground, that Jürgen Stroop, leader of the Nazi forces, finally declared “mission complete” – although surviving Jews continued to harass patrols for many months to come. Over the course of the Uprising, Stroop reported killing 7,000 Jews and capturing 56,065, most of whom were deported to either Treblinka or to concentration and labor camps. Despite the ultimate defeat, this uprising held enormous symbolic appeal. It inspired similar revolts in other ghettos and killing centers ("Warsaw Ghetto Uprising").
It hadn’t been hard to catch their eyes. She sashayed by the table where they dined each day with a spring in her step, a smile, a bob of her head. Sometimes the grey-coated loiterers outside catcalled as she came and went. She laughed into her glove or, if she felt daring, waved back.

It worked. Soon they stopped her to chat, gave her their names, called her Helene – a properly German name. Soon she could even waltz by after curfew without worrying that they would ask to see her papers or to check her purse, guaranteed instead the offer of a cigarette or a sweet from the “homeland.” She laughed at every joke, drawing glares from the other Poles who passed by, unaware that she still fought for their cause. She pretended not to care. The greycoats worshiped her golden hair, her laughing blue eyes, her cloying charm.

She knew that honey was best for trapping flies. And she relished the thought of their surprise when, in the end, they realized – too late – the secrets she carried, and the depth of her guise.

While the worst of the Nazis’ nastiness was directed at the Jews, they were by no means kind to the Poles, restricting their activities and the amount of food and money they could keep in their homes. However, Polish-born citizens of German heritage were classified as Volksdeutsche (as opposed to Reichsdeutsche, Germans living within Germany). The Volksdeutsche who registered with the Volksliste (“German Folk List”) enjoyed a status and privileges similar to the German occupiers. Some accepted this classification willingly; others only did so under compulsion (“Volksdeutsche”).
Cyanide

The door slammed shut as he sank against the far wall, clutching his arm. Broken. The first in a long series of injuries he would have to endure as the Gestopo tried to twist out information about the Underground. He pressed a palm against his chest, drawing out the capsule he kept stashed in his breast pocket.

Aniela’s face swam to the surface of his mind. He hesitated. *I won’t tell, my love,* he promised, dry swallowing the pill.

The door slammed open as he slouched over, breathing rapidly. “Scheisse!” the guard hissed, then shouted down the hall. Piotr smiled.

*Polish armed resistance to the Nazis did not end when the Germans took over Poland. The Polish government went into exile but maintained contact with the Polish forces that remained in Poland. The Polish army went underground. It underwent several changes of name and command, but in early 1942 it received the proper name by which it is most commonly known today: Armia Krajowa (“Home Army”). Informally it was known as the Underground. The AK absorbed and united other groups dedicated to resisting the Germans. Its primary goals were to prepare for a national uprising and, in the meantime, to conduct daily acts of resistance such as aiding Jews, sabotaging German transports, destroying bridges, and collecting intelligence (Paczkowski). Soldiers in the Home Army often carried cyanide tablets in case of capture. In The Zookeeper’s Wife, both Jan Żabinsky and his wife, Antonina, carry these pills with them at all times (Ackerman 209).*
Mercy

Dachs has stomped halfway down the stairs when something thumps in the wall behind me. I freeze. “What was that?” he calls up. Downstairs, I hear Anselm and Jochen rifling through drawers in search of loot to line their pockets. I turn around to face the wardrobe – more than large enough to conceal a door.

My mind wanders to another room, two weeks prior, on my first patrol under Dachs. A “lucky” one. We find a family hiding in the attic. Dachs is thrilled, especially since there are children. Dachs loves children.

The little girl looks just like my Gisa. Giant almond eyes, wide, soul-searching. Dark honey curls. Stubby fingers clutching her mother’s skirt and her little brother’s hand. She doesn’t hide, like the little boy peering around from behind her, but stands still and stares expectantly at us. The boy and the baby, clutched in the mother’s arms, cry; she does not. Her dry eyes latch onto mine, and I notice a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. Like Gisa’s. Has my girl sprouted more since I left? Maybe her whole face is covered by now, brown from playing in the summer sun.

Dachs shoulders past me into the room. “Well, well!” he grins. His gaze fixes on the girl and her brother. “Everybody out!”

On the street outside, the owners of the apartment already lie in pools of blood. Anselm and Jochen stand sentinel. I join them. Dachs draws his pistol and shoots the eldest son first – a youth still struggling to grow stubble. Next the father. Dachs likes to save the little ones for last, Jochen says. The mother cries and begs in broken German, curling around her baby. She collapses on top of the child; it stops screaming. The little
boy clings sobbing to the girl who still, remarkably, doesn’t cry. When Dachs orders them to run, she hesitates before scampering after her sibling. They nearly make it to the end of the row of apartments before Dachs takes down the boy. The girl stops.

*Go,* I urge her. *Run! Maybe you can still make it!*

She turns to look back at us, over her shoulder. Her eyes again meet mine. The afternoon sun catches in her curls.

“Stupid girl!” Dachs spits, then shoots.

“I said, what was that?” Dachs saunters back into the room. He stops, scanning the scene. “What happened?”

I rub my head, shielding my eyes. “I stumbled.” I pretend to nurse a sore spot.

The girl falls sideways. Her curls fan around her like liquid bronze. She lies still.

“Too much vodka last night,” I add. Dachs studies my red-rimmed eyes, then breaks into a grin.

He doesn’t look back as he leaves the room. Following, neither do I. But I know that the girl is there, in the room behind the wardrobe. She is still alive and smiling.

*While Nazi troops were subject to bribery, it was likely uncommon for them to aid Jews purely out of a sense of humanity. However, it was not unheard of. In The Pianist, real-life protagonist Władysław Szpilman survives with the help of German Captain Wilm Hosenfeld, who brings him food and does not reveal his hiding place (The Pianist).*
“Marry?” Rabbi Irlicht’s eyebrows met his hairline. “Now?”

The man and woman standing before him exchanged uneasy glances. Mariem hung her head. Rafal squeezed her hand. The rabbi’s gaze softened.

“Have you spoken to your families?” Rafal looked as though he’d bitten into a lemon.

“Yes.”

“And they don’t approve.”

“No.”

Rabbi Irlicht sighed and tugged at his beard. “What can I tell you? With things as they are now – no. You cannot be married without their consent. Who can blame them?” He paused. “Where will you live? It will be a great hardship on one family to take in another person. Do either of you have room in your homes?” He already knew the answer. Who among them all had enough space for their family?

And yet, they made do.

Rafal opened his mouth, but Mariem laid a hand on his arm and spoke for the first time, lifting her chin.

“They took away our homes, Rabbi. They took everything we couldn’t carry. They took our dignity with these silly armbands, our freedom with that wall. I walk past dead children on the street every day.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I lost my own brother to a labor camp. My mother is wasting away. They are taking away our humanity, Rabbi. Can’t we do this one thing to gain a little back?” She made no effort to stop the tears
spilling down her cheeks. Rafal wrapped his arm around her shoulders and gave her his handkerchief.

The rabbi considered. Had he not said himself, at every secret Shabbat meeting, that staying alive meant more than feeding the body and warding off illness? Had he not counseled his flock to nurture every seed of hope, no matter how small? No one could be certain of survival. Why should these two not at least be allowed to take comfort in a shared fate?

The couple watched him reach a decision.

“Bring your parents here so I may speak with them. You must have their blessing in this. It will be hard for all of you, but I will do what I can to persuade them. If it brings joy into your lives, if it gives you hope – then surely it will please the Lord.”

In the Warsaw Ghetto, Kiddush ha-Hayyim (“Sanctification of Life”) replaced, for some, the earlier emphasis on Kiddush ha-Shem (“Sanctification of God’s Name,” often interpreted as martyrdom in the name of remaining faithful to Judaism). Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum taught that the best way to resist the Nazis, who wished to destroy the Jew’s body, was not to sacrifice one’s life, but rather to enrich it with “everything that gives it meaning and dignity” (Polen). Not everyone in the Warsaw Ghetto heard Rabbi Nissenbaum’s teachings, but many nonetheless responded to Nazi atrocities in the same manner, by tenaciously preserving religious values and traditions and by nurturing every positive thing in their lives.
To Life

You have come an awfully long way to see me. What if you had come here and found me passed on? Well, never mind – sit.

Aah, yes. I have seen this picture. That was a long time ago, a year or two before the war. Your father was a handsome man, wasn’t he? He had all our father’s looks – and left none of them for me! And your mother was beautiful, too. So happy. That was before they were married. They were married in the ghetto, you know.

Was this the only photograph she had? Aah, yes…I suppose she couldn’t carry much. Have you heard the story, Haim, of how she escaped? Clinging to the bottom of a rubbish wagon! Can you believe it? Your father arranged it with the Underground, maybe through the ŻOB. The man who drove the wagon was a Pole, but a friend of the Jews. She had to cling down underneath like a bat until the cart made it past the guards, through the gate, and out of sight. Who knows how long she held on there? She was a strong woman, your mother.

She cried the night before, with all of the family there in the room. It couldn’t be helped. There was nowhere else to go. Your father smiled at her, just like he smiles there in your picture. He promised he’d meet her on the other side. He told her they couldn’t both go at once – it would be too risky. And she had to go first, since he had all the connections, and she – well. She had you to think of.

Ay, Haim, she believed him. She had to. But he didn’t go after. He didn’t even try, and nobody questioned it. We knew. He felt he had to stay, to fight. He was with the ŻOB. He couldn’t flee to safety while his comrades-in-arms fought. So he stayed.
I don’t know how long he lasted. Maybe through the Uprising. He sent me away, too, not long after. I was too young to fight, and he packed me off in a dead man’s coffin so I wouldn’t be underfoot. But the rest of them stayed. All my brothers.

I saw your mother after. Not for long – she left for America after the war, and I stayed behind. But when the Germans finally left we both returned to Warsaw. I saw you then, in her arms. You were a happy baby, I remember.

She cried again when she saw me. She begged for answers, but what could I say? “He had to stay,” I told her, but of course it didn’t make sense. “What right did he have?” she kept saying. “He lied to me. He was supposed to be with me!” I think she hated him then. I’m not sure she ever stopped. She didn’t want to see me any more; I reminded her too much, I think. And then she left.

Haim, people here will say that your father was a hero because he gave up his life to resist the Nazis. And they’re right. It’s a good thing that you’ve come back looking for his story.

But remember this: your mother was also a hero. She suffered all alone, but she lived. And she made sure you lived. She probably never held a gun in her life, but she fought back just as hard as your father did. Remember her story, too.
Author’s Note

This collection of short-short stories was initially motivated by a desire to explore the short-short story form, but it quickly grew to encompass broader goals. It was inspired by Diane Ackerman’s creative nonfiction book *The Zookeeper’s Wife*, which describes real-life acts of defiance and heroism in the face of Nazi oppression in World War II Warsaw. The idea of different forms of resistance – not just blowing up trains and firing guns, but also showing mercy, preserving happiness, and simply *living* – fascinated me. I wanted to share this perspective on the idea of “quiet heroism” through my short-short stories.

In this spirit of education, I began to add historical background notes at the end of each story. I wondered then if I was “cheating” in some way. If part of the goal of writing short-short stories is to cut out the expository information, did including the exposition outside the story proper defy the nature of the form? I think not. Each of the stories contains enough clues, sans historical explanation, that it can at least be understood on a basic level without the background information. Even if he or she does not approach the stories with much knowledge of Poland during the Holocaust, a well-motivated reader might run a few searches online and quickly learn most of the details needed to more fully understand the subtler details of the collection. It is my hope that some readers will *still* do this, even with the framework of historical facts I have provided – but I also recognize that it is unreasonable to expect such an effort from all readers. I feel the background information is necessary not so much to improve the stories themselves, but to achieve the secondary goal of educating and piquing the interest of my readers.
In order to gauge the success of my stories, I shared them with a variety of readers, from peers to parents to professors. Their reactions motivated some revisions but also caused me to think more about two aspects of reader response: the role of a reader’s preconceptions in understanding the short-short story, and readers’ general assumptions about “short” versus “long” forms of literature. Some also inspired thoughts about how short-short stories function in a collection versus how they work as completely standalone pieces.

I found myself, in writing these stories, building connections based not only on theme and setting, as I had originally intended, but also on recurring characters. I made some of the connections explicit through repeated names; others I left ambiguous, allowing the reader to decide for him or herself if, for instance, Haim’s mother in “To Life” is the Mariem of “Peroxide” and “Kiddush ha-Hayyim” and if the protagonist in “Passover” is her husband. This approach confused some readers and was lost on others, though most understood, at least partially. One reader attempted to find direct character connections among all the stories, which understandably left her confused. Another did not notice any of the repeated names, treating all of the stories as completely standalone. Most fell somewhere in between. Some noted the explicit connections but wondered why not all of the stories are linked in this way; others asked for another story about this or that character; still others incorrectly assumed that one character was the same as another. I find that I am satisfied with this level of ambiguity and with leaving readers wanting a bit more. I have made some revisions to clarify instances of confusion – where, for instance, a reader thought that the naturally blonde Volksdeutsche protagonist of “Courier” was Mariem, who lightens her hair in “Peroxide” – but others I have
deliberately left vague, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions and create their own connections. Individually, short-short stories demand a lot of the reader, forcing him or her to imagine elements such as setting that are not explicitly described. I see no reason why a whole collection of short-short stories should be different in that regard. For the reader, one of the joys of the short-short story form is the challenge of teasing out meaning from hints and clues. Surely a collection of short-short stories should offer the same challenge.

The most shocking (but pleasing) reader response came from a friend who told me that, despite Sam Ruddick’s claims as to the emotional limitations of the short-short story – with which I express agreement in the previous chapter – my stories did in fact make her cry. I have to consider that her statement does not completely debunk my previous claims or indicate that I have produced breakthrough short-short stories; after all, this same friend had recently watched The Pianist with me, and she made it through three stories into my collection before getting choked up. I don’t know that any of my stories by itself could inspire tears, but I believe the fact that the stories exist in a collection of similarly-themed pieces gives them a stronger collective impact. Emotionally, they build off one another. Producers of short-short story anthologies and editors of literary magazines that publish these pieces would do well to consider the collective impact of the short-short story form. Perhaps one alone cannot inspire tears. But what about three or four dealing with the same subject or theme, or following repeated characters? The potential for creating high-impact collections is enormous. On the other hand, the risk of diminishing emotional impact simply by arranging the stories poorly is equally great and must not be ignored.
Finally, the reactions of some readers to the stories’ very shortness intrigued me and reinforced what I already suspected about most readers’ attitudes toward short-short stories. More than one person said something to the effect of, “This sounds like the introduction to a story, not a whole story” or, “When you write something longer, I want to read it.” I mentally translated these comments as meaning, or implying, “When you write a real story, not just these little toy stories, let me know. This is a good start.” I by no means felt personally dismissed, but I thought those comments by and large reflected the still-prevalent public preference for longer tales. For all that exceptionally short writing has become popular online, short-short forms of writing have yet to achieve the same level of generally accepted literary prestige as the longer short story or the novel. Most people still believe that, where literature is concerned, size lends weight. I still maintain that less is (or at least can be) more, and I think that short-short stories are a valuable end unto themselves, not just an exercise by which one may improve one’s lengthier writing projects. Perhaps these comments mean that my stories are not prime examples of “great” short-short stories; perhaps I chose subjects and developed characters that demand more room. On the other hand, perhaps these comments are a matter of readers’ personal preferences for length versus brevity.

I hope that this preference will change with time. The short-short story is uniquely qualified to deal with the fast pace of modern society and the foreshortened communication styles popularized by text messaging and Twittering. In a time when original approaches to storytelling are increasingly difficult to find, the short-short story’s ability to cut to the heart of an issue is a great strength. As more writers attempt them
and more readers are exposed to them, I hope to see an expanding appreciation for the short-short story not just as an entertaining diversion, but also as a respected literary form.
WORKS CITED


