

# Flash Fiction – Literary fast food or a metamodern (sub)genre with potential?

Bente Lucht

Institut für Klassische Philologie  
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität  
Muenster, Germany  
bente.lucht@wwu.de

**Abstract—In today’s fast-moving digital age, everything is in flux. This observation also holds true for, on the one hand, authors, literary forms and genres and, on the other hand, the consumers, the readership. This essay looks at a rather young kind of (sub-)genre, namely flash fiction. It focuses on the origins and development of flash fiction, its place in today’s literary culture and link to the new media in order to show and elaborate on its usefulness not only as to genre questions but also as to didactic questions by highlighting both potential qualifications and (didactic) possibilities.**

**Keywords -- flash fiction, epigrams, fables, genre, short short stories, readership, didactics, internet, new media**

## I. INTRODUCTION

From the late 1990s to today, the relations and correlations between literature and the internet as literary space (with special focus on social networks such as *Twitter* and *facebook* as well as on the new media in general) have become a topic of major interest and increasing importance. Especially in the English-speaking world, the internet, social networks and the new media are highly frequented and used. According to the market research company Mintel, Great Britain is doubtlessly “a nation of *facebook* addicts” and *Twitter*, too, counts among the fastest growing websites in the UK [1]. Just like video games, the internet and social networks create “imagined spaces”/ “imagined communities” [2], which can act as platforms for literary interaction: many authors like, e.g., Bernardine Evaristo (who claimed to be a “*facebook* addict” [3]) use the networks both as private persons and as authors in order to promote and discuss their writings and other literary activities.

The internet and social networks have had a huge influence on literature in general and on the short story or storytelling in particular: Asked after his attitude towards the internet and its possibilities, Paolo Coelho answered that due to the internet “[t]oday everybody can tell a story. That is magical because everybody can express themselves” [4]. One area of storytelling, in which the “democratisation of communication” [5], which is made possible by the internet and the new media, has led to fundamental changes, is the further development of the (sub)genre of *flash fiction* (German: “Kürzestgeschichten”): very short stories (mostly 300 words or less), which are not fragmentary, but complete in and for themselves and, therefore, possess all features of ‘traditional’ short stories: protagonist, conflict, obstacles or complications and resolution. Unlike with traditional short stories though, some of these elements

may need to be merely hinted at or implied in the written story. Although this genre is anything but new (compare [short] short stories by Ernest Hemingway, Jorge Luis Borges, Richard Brautigan, Lydia Davis or Raymond Carver, to name but a few), it has experienced a new significant upturn and propagation via the internet and new media. As a consequence, there are various different labels (e.g. *short short fiction*, *nanofiction*, *micro fiction*, *hint fiction*, *sudden fiction*, *skinny fiction*, *minute fiction*, *drabble fiction*, *ficlet*), various different definitions and also magazines and e-zines (online services in the style of magazines), which dedicate themselves invariably to *flash fiction* per se (e.g. *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*; nanoficton.org). Moreover, developments such as the English *National Flash-Fiction Day* and other writing competitions such as (amongst many others) the *Lightship One-Page Prize*, the *Lightship Flash-Fiction Prize* or the *Fish Flash Fiction Prize* merely add to the obviously growing importance.

This article aims at a closer circumscription of the emergence of *flash fiction*. In doing so, topics such as genre definition, its development, its producers and consumers will be broached and, finally, its potential qualifications and (didactic) possibilities will be focussed.

## II. DEVELOPMENT

Short pieces of (prose) literature have enjoyed great popularity especially from the birth of the short story in the 19<sup>th</sup> century till today; today, it seems, the genre of short fiction even has an impressive revival – just compare last year’s Nobel Prize-winner Alice Munro, whose oeuvre consists of short stories exclusively. However, the required density of (short) short fiction blurs the generic lines: thus, *flash fiction* – or *short short fiction* – can also well be analysed and interpreted in terms of (prose) poetry. This approach highlights the correlation between this rather “new” (sub)genre and its predecessors, which go as far back as to Greek and Roman antiquity. Thus, Aesop’s (~600 BC) and Phaedrus’s (~15 BC-AD 60) fables or Catull’s (~84-54 BC) and Martial’s (~AD 40-104) epigrams can legitimately be seen as forerunners of today’s *flash fiction*. One example that combines the style of an invective and generic criticism is one of Martial’s epigrams (Mart. 110):

*Scribere me quereris, Velox, epigrammata longa.  
Ipse nihil scribis: tu breviora facis.*

(You bemoan the fact, Velox, that I write [too] long epigrams. You do not write anything yourself: you [in fact] create shorter ones.)

On a metalevel, this epigram picks as its central theme brevity as one generic feature; however, at the same time, there is a turning point: the lyrical I does not directly deny the criticism aimed at the length of its epigrams, but questions the authority of the person who voices this criticism. Thus, the attack is turned upside down, and the attacker is disarmed and unmasked by way of a short, concise and stylistically flawless piece of writing. Just as *flash fiction*, this epigram possesses all features of a typical short story: protagonists (the lyrical I and Velox), conflict (Velox's criticism on the lyrical I's literary skills), complication (Velox himself does not write epigrams), resolution (ironic/ sarcastic remark directed at Velox).

The same can be seen when looking at the probably best-known piece of early *flash fiction* written in English, namely the *six word-story*: "For sale: Baby shoes, never worn", purportedly written by Ernest Hemingway. These six words have had such an immense impact that its origin has taken on mythic features: allegedly, in a restaurant or pub, Hemingway bet his friends ten dollars each that he can craft an entire story in six words. After writing down the six words on a napkin (*sudden fiction*), he collected his winnings. These examples show that the genre of *flash fiction* itself is part of a dynamic genre development, or, as Lee Rourke aptly states, "hardly a new phenomenon, but the vehicle that facilitates it today – the internet – is" [6]. This statement pinpoints the grounds of renewed interest in this particular (sub)genre and its development.

### III. THE INFLUENCE OF THE NEW MEDIA

The internet and, especially, its "democratisation" [5], i.e. its detachment from a sheer academic/ governmental context and its concomitant entry into both the public sphere and the private household from the late 1980s onwards, has opened new vistas for the dissemination of literature and a completely new and broad, heterogeneous readership [7]. This major change in accessing literature has shown a decisive effect on how literature is read or consumed and which kind of literature is popular. As a consequence, *flash fiction* has found an internet loophole: by way of new digital devices such as smart phones, e-book readers or social networks such as *Twitter* or *facebook*, short and concise fictional texts pave the way for experiencing 'literature to go', literature that can be read, consumed and enjoyed within a very short time span (e.g. when waiting for the train or when sitting at the doctor's), and still fulfil the traditional three main aims of literature: *delectare, docere/prodesse, movere* [8]. Thus, the scope of potential literary forms and readers is broadened and accelerated. In the meantime, the genre's development shows that the generic term *flash fiction* can be seen as an umbrella term for other subgenres such as *postcard/ palm-sized fiction* (fiction that takes no more room than is given on a postcard or the palm, respectively) [9], *smoke-long fiction* (i.e. texts that can be read within the time that it takes to smoke one cigarette) [10] or even *Twitterature* (i.e. texts that are no longer than a *Tweet* allows [140 characters]), a term made popular by Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin [11]. By way of comments,

hyperlinks and 'hashtags' (e.g. #140 novel), the authors and readers can directly start an exchange of ideas or even contribute to one and the same piece of writing that then develops into a short story or even novel, so that the genre distinctions are deliberately blurred. Moreover, typical literary theories are challenged and brought to another level: since the readership's reactions, criticism or ideas can instantly be expressed and transmitted, a dialogue, an imagined community, develops between sender and addressee leading to a new critical reader-response model in a virtual third space or hybrid place of negotiation [12]. This leads to an essentially different understanding and practical implementation of today's feedback culture. Of course, concomitant critical questions must also be posed and examined: In how far does this democratisation of literature lead to 'literary fast food' [13]? If each and every body can write, publish and read 'literature' (for free), does this lead to a deterioration and an (unhealthy) overconsumption of literature?

### IV. METAMODERN LITERARY CULTURE

Obviously, both authors and critics of *short short fiction/ flash fiction* feel the need to somehow contribute and control the vast field that is made accessible by the internet and the new media. Therefore, an urge to somehow participate and, at the same time, lend some quality to this field can be felt. As a consequence, on the one hand there is all the world and the public domain, on the other hand, there are diverse long-standing and highly acknowledged professional writers, but also literary theorists and scholars who feel attracted by this new and utterly versatile metamodern (sub)genre: Margaret Atwood, Elleke Boehmer, Helen Fielding, David Gaffney, Ihab Hassan, James Kelman, David Lodge, Joyce Carol Oates, Ian Rankin and Ali Smith – to name but a few.

Metamodernism, a term and concept promoted by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, is defined as an approach that does not oppose either modernism or postmodernism, but that oscillates between them and reacts on "material events like climate change, financial crises, terror attacks, and digital revolutions" [14] with a neoromantic turn. Moreover, Vermeulen and Akker claim that "architects and artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of aesthetical notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis" [15]. All these elements figure prominently in *flash fiction* that can easily be found on the internet. Here are some examples that belong to the subgenre *six-word stories*:

"Apple?" "No." "Taste!" "ADAM?" Oh God. (David Lodge)

"Megan's baby: John's surname, Jim's eyes." (Simon Armitage)

"The Earth? We ate it yesterday." (Yann Martel) [16]

"Longed for him. Got him. Shit." (Margaret Atwood) [17]

Often, as in the examples above, writers and professional authors are encouraged to write *flash fiction* by literary sections of newspapers and scholarly magazines such as *Flash* [18], or they are asked to sit as tutor or judge in one of the numerous (online) *flash fiction* writing classes that present clear guide lines for interested laymen and students of literature [19] or

*flash fiction* competitions [20]. In addition, the above mentioned constant reader-response feedback framework and its mechanisms automatically lead to some kind of critical regulation. One prime example of a literary magazine that promotes *flash fiction* both in print, but also on the internet and the social media is the above mentioned magazine *Flash*, a biannual literary magazine that publishes “quality flash fiction and reviews of up to 360 words” [18]. Interestingly, the publishers attach importance to the fact that, although they appear on both *facebook*, *Twitter* (@shortstorymag) and *Tumblr*, the magazine is not an e-zine so that copies are only available in print, which might be ascribed to just another kind of quality control and print tradition.

## V. CONCLUSION: (DIDACTIC) POSSIBILITIES

Tying the thoughts above together, *flash fiction* is a highly versatile and productive metamodern (sub)genre of the digital age. Its positive (and negative) characteristics and concomitant phenomena are not only of major importance from an academic point of view, but can also be constructively adduced in the (foreign) language classroom. Combining literary theory (*short story – short short story – flash fiction – six word stories*), literary criticism, critical media skills (digital literature), critical language awareness (language and cultural skills) and creative performance, *flash fiction* is highly productive and fertile when introduced to the curiosity of (young) language learners. One component of the German curriculum for English Sek I (5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade) is the genre *short story*. According to the competence-focused core curriculum, children that attend the ninth grade at secondary schools are supposed to be able to apply basic analytical skills in order to ascertain the effect, impact and value of an authentic text (especially short stories) with its intentional literary (language) techniques and artistic/generic arrangements; additionally, the performative side is stressed: pupils must be able to reshape given texts (e.g. turning a narrative into a dialogue) and to create new endings or their very own texts. Having discussed the genre *short story* in class, the (sub)genre of *flash fiction* can be consulted in order to deepen and broaden the pupils’ feeling and understanding of this literary approach. The advantages are that the pupils can work with short texts that – in their literary technique – are known to them (from the *short story*), but that open new vistas, especially on a linguistic, performative and digital level. One way of introducing *flash fiction* (some further examples are given in the appendix) into the (foreign) language classroom is by promoting explorative learning: by merely presenting, for instance, a *six-word story* to the class (after having introduced the criteria of *short stories*) and by having the pupils investigate and analyse whether or not these six words actually make up a short story, the theoretical skills and language efficiency are deepened and broadened. Moreover, an interdisciplinary approach can be consulted here by using the knowledge the pupils gained in, for instance, their Latin classes when having read and analysed fables (or even epigrams) [21]. Here, the findings of the pupils are of high interest since both answers to the question (“Yes, they are a short story.” and “No, they are not.”) are – due to the dynamic genre development – valid and open for discussion. As a next step, the teacher can ask the pupils to write their own *six-word stories* considering the literary theory that lies behind them, the power of words,

stylistics and emotions – idiosyncrasies that bring the *short short stories* close to poems (prose poetry). In order to broach and introduce the critical role the new media play as to the (sub)genre of *flash fiction*, the online *Smith magazine* (www.smithmag.net) offers a fruitful approach. This magazine promotes *six-word stories* and their pragmatic significance in an educational context. Here, the pupils can upload their (peer-reviewed) self-made stories and get some feedback outside the classroom. If their *six-word stories* are evaluated as worthy and rich in content, the magazine even offers the possibility of including well-done stories in a print edition – literature in real life performance.

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#### APPENDIX

##### A. Further sample of flash fiction

###### Penguin Pigeon

by Steve Cushman

Driving beneath the flyover I spotted a grey bird and said penguin. My wife laughed and said pigeon, repeating it, pigeon, as if speaking to an idiot. She sighed and turned to the window, staring at something I could not see. I considered saying it was a mistake, a simple slip of the tongue, of course I knew the difference between a penguin and pigeon, but the time for stating my case seemed to have already passed. [22]

##### B. Further samples of six-word stories [23]

Mother's Day came, doubling Oedipus' pleasure.

[Bruce Benderson]

Found true love. Married someone else.

[Dave Eggers]

In the end, everything simply began.

[Ali Smith]

"Mind what gap?" ... ..

[Hilary Mantel]