

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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# Characteristics of Short Story and Flash Fiction Genre in “Mirrored” and “Give it Up”

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### **Abstract**

The paper explores characteristics that define short story and flash fiction, which is also known as microfiction, mini-fiction, short-short story, very short story, sudden fiction, quick fiction, prose poem, etc. Two short-short stories, “Give it Up” by Franz Kafka and “Mirrored” by Jennifer Hudak are analyzed. Through the analysis, it is discussed how well the stories by their characteristics can be placed in the field of microfiction genre or the short story genre, which characteristics of genres prevail, how the stories differ in those characteristics, and whether both stories truly fit the criteria of flash fiction or can they be more defined by short story genre, do they appear as a hybrid or borderline type of the two genres, and which of these stories fits more into the short story genre and which one into flash fiction.

**Keywords:** Short story, Flash fiction, Franz Kafka, Jennifer Hudak.

## Introduction

The roots of the short story genre can be traced as far as literature goes, back to the oral transmission of anecdotes, tales, myths and legends, parables, antique epithets and fables, to medieval novellas and the traditional fairy tales of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century. The genre as we recognize it today by its definition was established in the Romantic period, namely by the first short story writer, Edgar Allan Poe. As he declares, a short story is characterized by the “unity of impression”; therefore, it must be written in length that requires a read in only one sitting (approximately a half to two-hour read) for it to have its effect of “totality” on the reader. If a story is long and it cannot be read at once, the literary experience of it becomes episodic, being split in its effect – that is in line with the definition of the novel genre in contrast to the short story; as Brander Matthews puts it: “the Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of episodes” (Mathews 15-16). For it to be read without external interruption and in one sitting so that “the reader can approach it as a unified aesthetic whole” (Spyros 11), the short story focuses on “a single character, a single event and a single emotion or series of emotions called forth by a single situation” (Mathews 15-16). That being said, a short story displays a brief part of a character’s life. The unity of impression is also maintained through a coherent and linear-time structure of the plot, narrower details of characters (avoiding diving into the psychology of characters), the use of narrative ellipsis and abstaining from repetition and descriptive details in narration. The short story originally required intensity in its reading experience and an atmosphere of mysteriousness. By some definitions, it also “has a strong flavour of the unreal or the supernatural” (Pasco 413). The ending of a short story is usually surprising or unexpected and the story favourably contains an “epigrammatic *pointe*”, a brief cohesive message (Pasco 419). Because of the use of metaphor, symbolism, metonymy and connotation, the genre is more poetic and lyrical in its nature compared to a novel. The short story may be divided into three

parts based on its structure: orientation (the introduction of setting, time and characters of the story), complicating action (the conflict that arises for the characters) and resolution (the conflict is solved, or it negatively affects the characters) (Kiosses 11).

What classifies flash fiction as a separate genre from the novel is still a matter of research and discussion, even though many definitions have been explored. It remains a question, do stories shorter than 300-words long or shorter belong to this genre or are they a separate genre or subgenre of flash fiction, for example, the six-word story of Ernest Hemingway: “For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.” With the rise of technology, the genre became much more popular, enabling anyone to express themselves freely on social media, blogs etc. Parallely, writing contests for young writers nowadays frequently ask for flash fiction. The roots of the genre may be traced back to antique Rome. According to Bente Lucht, the predecessor of flash fiction could be epigrams (Lucht 222). Because of their lyrical and metaphorical components, that may be an accurate observation, and both epigram and flash fiction (and short story), contain a protagonist, conflict, complication and resolution (Lucht 223). For this argument, Lucht gives us the example of Martial’s epigram. However, this is in line with a traditional model of the short story, as conflict, climax and resolution in flash fiction (and short story) are not needed after the modern breaking of traditional forms. Like a short story, flash fiction works as a brief and complete whole, and it generally consists of less than 1,500 – 2,000 words, which is the limit for verbal and semantic concentration (Kiosses 12). One of the key differences between a short story and a flash fiction, according to Kiosses, may be that while a short story progressively builds towards the peak moment, flash fiction is already directly set in the peak moment for the reader to observe it (there is no ascent as in the short story). That being said, it is even less fragmented than a short story, as an “instant *in medias res*” (Kiosses 12) – it appears as a “screenshot” of reality, which gives it almost an impressionistic characteristic; and it is very reminding of a prose poem, from which it is hard

to be distinguished from, if we take contemporary and modern flash fiction into account. It is avoidant of detailing space and time, it does not emphasize narrative progression, and it acts as incomplete in the plot and its aesthetic whole (it is in “a state of becoming”). Given these characteristics, it comes closer to poetry than the novel genre, as observed by Joyce Carol Oates and Grace Paley. That is also because it requires a distinct reading from that of a novel – it can be read as poetry, for the length is so short that it can’t be skipped in on sitting, in fact, it can be read more than once in one sitting. The story is compressed in its structure and meaning and therefore needs more focused observation and attention for the interpretation of it, as is similar to poetry.

### **Analysis of “Give it Up”**

“Give it Up”, a postmodern microfiction written by Franz Kafka and published in 1936 appears as a social commentary on the authoritative situation of Kafka’s time and place, and through it, an existential message of the meaninglessness of life (path) and time is depicted. The narrator as a traveller walks in the street by the watchtower, the train station being his destination. He realizes that he is lost and late. He notices a watchman and asks him for the way, but the watchman refuses to answer and laughs, saying “Give it up”.

With its length, the story is easily classified as flash fiction and acquires the “totality of impression” – it is 126 words long, divided into 19 clauses. Its structure is traditional for a short story, as it comprises of a protagonist and even antagonist (the traveller and the watchman), orientation (time and setting – streets of the city by the watchtower in the early morning), conflict (the traveller’s distress for realizing that he is late) and resolution with a negative effect on the protagonist (the watchman refuses to tell what time it is to the traveller, leaving him in distress and unable to find his way in time). As the story begins, the reader is immediately thrown into an “*instant in medias res*” of one setting, one time, two characters, one significant

event (the watchman's denial) and one emotion that has an impact on the traveller (distress). That being said, the writing represents a small part in the traveller's life, which applies as a characteristic of flash fiction. If we fragment this part even furtherly, four distinct moments are captured and emphasized: walk in the street, the traveller's shocking realization when comparing his watch and the watchtower, the interaction between the narrator and the watchman and the watchman's laughter. The fourth, being the climax, expresses the existential meaninglessness of traveller's path and time and the cruel authoritative behaviour of the watchman. These small moments are captured swiftly and without too much descriptive details, only with carefully selected lexis to provide the imagery of the setting, time, distress of the traveller and the authoritative behaviour of the watchman (*very early in the morning, streets clean and deserted, breathlessly, sudden jerk, and laughter*). This may remind of us impressionistic capturing of a moment, a characteristic which differentiates flash fiction from a short story. The watchman's repetition and exclamation of "Give it up!" is what gives the emphasis on the moment and the story's message, adding even more lyricism to the story. There is no focusing on the narrative progression, which is displayed mostly through complex sentences. The time frame of the story is linear and progresses swiftly. Backstory and deeper psychology of the characters are not explored; we only recognize the traveller's frustration and watchman's rudeness. Without the author-oriented, historical and cultural context, there is nothing to be interpreted, only the setting, time and characters are to be viewed in an impressionistic manner. Therefore, the reader, as with poetry, needs to be educated on the matter and has to carefully examine the compressed narrative and lexical structure to interpret the brief message of the story or the "epigrammatic *pointe*". The story gives the reader a sense of mystery, which is a characteristic of a traditional short story. It remains unknown who the traveller is, why he is in a hurry, what he is late for, who the watchman is, why he is rude to the traveller, in which time and place this actually takes place (which city and which historic

time). The ending is open, as we do not know how the traveller's journey will end – will he find his way in time or not, and how will he?

### **Analysis of “Mirrored”**

In “Mirrored”, a short-short story written by Jennifer Hudak, we as the readers accompany a girl narrator – a changeling that is trapped in a forest in a mirror as a reflection of an identical girl with a mother in the outside world. The changeling then recalls the girl on the other side being told a story by her mother of how she was almost taken away by the fairies and replaced by the changeling, but as the mother caught the fairies, and the changeling disappeared into the mirror. As the girl grows up, she has an argument with her mother and the changeling in the mirror wants desperately to be noticed by the outside girl's mother, but a mysterious voice in the mirror does not allow her to make a move or sound different than the girl in the outside world. The girl in the mirror longs to be the girl outside the mirror. At the end of the story, the mother's and the changeling's hands meet on the glass, and the girl in the mirror waits for the glass of the mirror to disappear.

The story consists of 986 words, which makes it fit into the flash fiction genre by length, although, as it will be seen with the analysis, it could be well defined as a borderline of short story genre with its prevailing elements. The first one of those is the mysterious and dark atmosphere, portrayed through the story's mythical nature that reminds us of original dark fairy tales and mythical folktales. That being said, the story has a strong supernatural flavor. Mythical motifs that accompany the story are the changeling (an offspring of fairies that replaces a mother's child), fairies, the motif of parallel worlds (the real world outside the mirror and the mythical forest inside the mirror) and the mirror itself, which frequently appears as a mystical component in well-known novels, myths, fairytales, urban legends etc. (Dracula, Bloody Mary, Mirror on the wall in Snow White, Merlin's Mirror, Vulcan's Mirror in Greek

mythology etc.). Mirrors in many stories are conveyed as portals into another space and time. In “Mirrored”, it works as a portal into a mythical forest where the changeling lives as a reflection of a girl. The forest is speaking with a mysterious and demanding voice to the changeling, which gives the story a dark tone, also evoked by the motif of imprisonment, as the changeling is trapped inside the mirror and is desperately longing to replace the real girl by trapping her instead: “If the forest demands a trade, I will bring it one.” The voice of the forest does not allow the changeling to talk or move by its will, it has to mimic the real girl’s movement. Repetition of the sentence “Gone away forever,” told by the girl’s mother is what adds to the darker atmosphere of the story, for it connotes the hopelessness and despair of the changeling. Despair is also shown in the changeling’s desire to be seen by the mother: “‘See me,’ I whisper with tight lips.” The ending is open and ambiguous, as the changeling’s and the mother’s hands meet, and the changeling says: “I wait for the glass to dissolve.” Is the glass truly about to dissipate and will the changeling be freed and or is it all just its hope, for the glass has not yet started to dissolve. However, even if the ending is open, it gives a feeling of being finite, that the long wait of the changeling is over, and therefore the story as a whole does not give an impression of being in a state of becoming, which is a feature of flash fiction.

The story is divided into four separate fragments; therefore, there is not only one part of the characters’ life portrayed, for we accompany the girl as she grows older. However, the unity of impression is still applied as the fragments are short and work as an aesthetic whole. Four fragments imply four different “screenshots” of reality - four distinct *in medias res* moments. There are four major events that build the unity – the girl is brushing her hair and the changeling is watching her with a longing to be in her place; the mother tells the girl a story of how she was about to be taken away by fairies and replaced by the changeling; the girl and her mother have an argument, and the mother and the changeling touch the mirror at the same time. There are two settings in unity (the girl’s room and the forest in the mirror; they are

connected through the mirror). The time is not always linear as within a classic short story (the second fragment of the story moves into retrospect, when the girl is younger), but otherwise there is a linear progression with the girl's maturing of age. It is unsure whether the changeling is the protagonist or the antagonist. Its despair of imprisonment makes the reader sympathize for it, but its evil intentions depict it as an antagonist. Ironically, the changeling sees the girl as an intruder, believing that she is supposed to be in her place. Conflict (the changeling's longing to replace the girl) builds up with every fragment of the story and reaches climax with her decision: "If the forest demands a trade, I will bring it one." Resolve happens when the mother's and the girl's hands touch, for this event is speculatively going to set free the changeling. With structural characteristic, the writing fits the traditional short story criteria. On a deeper level, the story could be seen as symbolism for the girl's and the mother's psychology, the girl not being the young child she was anymore as she grows up, but her mother wants her to be. This is perfectly portrayed in the sentence: "she looks into the mirror, searching for the daughter she once knew." The mother's wish brings about frustration in the two characters. In this way, the changeling represents a psychological reflection of both, the girl and her mother. Taking this explanation into account, the story somehow disobeys the traditional short story's avoidance of exploration of character's psychology, however this exploration is brief and symbolic, and the reader still does not know much about the characters, as well about the setting and time of the story (names of the characters and who are they really, where do they live, what is the historic time of the events in the story etc.). The story also acquires a lyrical component with its impressionistic detailing of characters and settings, portrayed through lexis of imagery (*whisper, breath, bristle, wind blows, dark clouds, grass strains, dirt under fingernails, icy spray of rain, clean and fresh and sweet-smelling, crusted with mud, rumble with thunder* etc.).



## Comparison and Conclusion

Both stories, “Give it Up” and “Mirrored”, are narrated from the first person point of view, with a protagonist as the narrator. They have a traditional short story structure with a protagonist, orientation, conflict and resolve. In “Give it Up”, the protagonist is too narrowly explored to be evaluated as positive or negative, he appears as neutral, but the watchman who is so rude to him for no reason, can be evaluated as negative and therefore antagonistic. The story is happening in one time and place (early morning in the streets of the city), there is one major event that has an effect on the protagonist (the watchman’s rude denial) and the emotion that affects him is distress. In “Mirrored” there are three characters. The narrator could be evaluated as a protagonist or an antagonist. In the story, there are two settings, which work as one – the room and the mythical forest with a mirror as a gateway in between. Different time frames are explored in Hudak’s writing: time when the girl was only a baby, when she was a younger girl and when she grew up. The main emotions that effect the changeling are despair because of imprisonment in the mirror, constant longing for being replaced with the girl and relief or rather excitement for being freed, as she touches the glass when the mother does. Considering more distinct events, settings and time frames, “Mirrored” is much more fragmented than Kafka’s story and has more events, characters, emotions and settings involved, but being longer for 860 words, that is to be expected. The length and characteristics of fragmentation bring “Mirrored” closer to the short story genre. On the other hand, “Give it Up”, by portraying only one fragment of protagonist’s life, is clearly flash fiction. It captures only one screenshot of reality and has only one *in medias res* moment; therefore, it gives the impression that the story is in a state of becoming. Both stories maintain the unity of impression, for they can be read as a whole in one sitting, and they both depict the impressionistic detailing of the story, typical for flash fiction. Character’s psyches are not being explored in depth, and although “Mirrored” could be symbolically exploring the psychology

of its characters, there is no focus on this exploration. However, overall, the backstories and psychological states of characters are provided much more in detail in “Mirrored”: the backstory of the girl as the reader gets to know that she was meant to be replaced with a changeling at her birth and that changeling was made as a child the girl’s mother always wanted her to be, and the emotions, such as despair, longing and even rage of the changeling and the girl’s and mother’s love and then anger. We now see, that the more in detail the story is portrayed, the closer it comes to the short story genre and digresses from the flash fiction genre. We don’t need cultural and historical context to understand the brief message of “Mirrored”, as we do need in “Give it Up”. A traditional short story and microfiction feature of both stories are their open endings, for it is just speculative what will happen to the characters as the stories end. Besides fragmentation and character detailing, the main thing that deviates “Mirrored” from “Give it Up” and brings it closer to the short story genre, is the focus on the mysterious, suspenseful, and dark atmosphere, portrayed through its mythical attributes (the mirror, the mythical forest, the changeling, the fairies etc.) and the desperate longing and imprisonment of the changeling.

Given the analysis and comparison of “Give it Up” and “Mirrored”, it can be concluded that the latter, even though it is short in length, by its prevailing characteristics could be seen as a writing that is a thin line between a short story and a flash fiction. “Give it Up” on the other hand is quickly to be interpreted as microfiction by being very avoidant to fragmentation and detailing.

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