

FLASH—like a lightning bolt, a very short story can flare intensely and linger in the mind’s eye, stunning the senses and imprinting itself upon the memory. Although very short stories have a long history and have appeared under a number of labels, flash fiction is now the preferred term, one that describes an established genre that continues to grow in popularity. To date, however, relatively little scholarship has been published on it. The present volume seeks to address that deficiency while introducing students and teachers to the genre and to a number of its finest practitioners.

After our introductory essay, “On Flash Fiction,” which sets out some of the genre’s history and development, the volume offers four Critical Contexts chapters to deepen this background. Pamelyn Casto provides an extensive recounting of the major anthologies of flash fiction, from the 1920s to the present. Along the way, she also introduces readers to a number of recent musicians and filmmakers who have adapted flash fiction pieces for an ever-expanding audience. The scholarly response to flash is then taken up in Randall Brown’s essay, which delineates how writers and theorists have grappled with the workings of very short stories to define flash as distinctive from longer fiction whose narrative conventions do not always apply to flash stories. Kristen Figgins then examines contemporary flash fiction through the critical lens of the fable, which offers narrative conventions similar to those found in flash fiction. Figgins argues convincingly that writers of flash have borrowed from fables a number of storytelling techniques to “quickly and efficiently affect the reader.” Megan Giddings continues the discussion of narrative technique in flash by comparing a flash piece by Donald Barthelme, a canonical flash writer, and Amelia Gray, a talented contemporary author. Giddings discusses how first person point of view and tense help each writer to compress narrative time while amplifying suggested meanings.

Following the context chapters, the volume turns to ten essays that take up individual flash fiction authors. These Critical Readings chapters reveal not only flash fiction's extraordinary range, examining a remarkable array of authors with diverse themes and styles, but also its long history as an international phenomenon. In the first of these essays, Robert C. Evans discusses Kate Chopin, whose very short stories, such as "The Story of an Hour" and "Ripe Figs," are often assigned in high school and college literature courses. However, the careful structure of Chopin's very short stories may be less well studied. Evans grounds his insights on Chopin's formal mastery in flash fiction theory and upon deft close readings of selected stories to demonstrate fully their "impressive moral and artistic complexity."

The next three chapters focus on significant international writers of flash fiction. In "Against Short Attention Spans: 'Fragmentary' Fiction for 'Fragmentary' Lives," Santino Prinzi discusses the flash fiction of two Western European writers—Franz Kafka and his early twentieth-century contemporary Robert Walser—to challenge the dismissive criticism that very short stories appeal to very short attention spans. On the contrary, Prinzi argues from the examples of Kafka and Walser that flash stories engage readers in a particular way, one that "complements, rather than diminishes, our contemporary lifestyles." Next, Eric Sterling studies very short stories by Isaac Babel, who employed a minimalist style to represent the oppression of Jews in Russia both before and after the communist revolution of 1917. Intense and open-ended, Babel's flash fiction raised a voice against anti-Semitism in Russia, but as Sterling's moving essay shows, these subtly brief stories were still too loud for the Russian authorities, who murdered Babel to silence him. In the next essay, Laura Hatry continues the focus on international flash fiction, shining considerable light on flash by the Argentinian writers Julio Cortázar and Luisa Valenzuela. Hatry details how these innovative writers have created memorable flash stories by deploying absurdist humor and witty wordplay and, in the process, pushed the entire genre in new, delightful directions.

The final six chapters delight in the artistry of some of flash fiction’s most audacious contemporary practitioners. Perhaps most prominent among these is Lydia Davis, the subject of a searching essay by Julie Tanner. Tanner traces Davis’s development as a flash fiction writer who finds thematic and emotional liberation in this shortest form, one that rewards her considerable linguistic skill. In the essay that follows, Laura Tansley provides equally astute observations about the work of flash writer Amy Hempel. Tansley demonstrates how the brevity of Hempel’s flash stories deepens our understanding of human motivations and character by focusing on the inner lives of female characters and the suggestive possibilities of what they do not or cannot think. The illumination of character is also the focus of Matthew Duffus’s essay on the masterful flash writer Diane Williams. Duffus explains how Williams’s flash stories “elicit emotional responses from readers at the same time that they refuse to provide easy solutions to the problems [her characters] encounter.”

In the next essay, Randall Brown revels in the artistry of influential flash fiction writer Kathy Fish. With considerable insight, Brown demonstrates how Fish employs and refashions traditional narrative strategies to create condensed stories with intense conflicts, high stakes, and deep meanings. In the essay that follows this, David Swann explicates the complex flash fiction of Mary Robison, a writer who dazzles with “prose [that] has been distilled to its essence.” Swann explains how Robison creates drama by resisting hero-worshipping plots to better value characters that are “damaged and vulnerable.” In the final essay of the volume, Jarrell D. Wright explores the limits of flash fiction by imagining a point at which a story may be too condensed to be considered literature. Wright then demonstrates how Lou Beach in his “nanofictions” can flirt with this limit and still convey psychological complexity.

This volume, then, provides an informed introduction to an exciting and vibrant literary genre, and it covers a number of the most important flash fiction writers. Teachers and students will also benefit from an extensive list of flash writers, collections and anthologies, literary journals, and writing guides that concludes the

volume. As teachers and readers of flash fiction, we hope the present volume is both illuminating and memorable, encouraging greater readership and inspiring further study.

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Kate Chopin's Flash Fiction and Flash Fiction Theory

Robert C. Evans

Kate Chopin is arguably one of the most important American writers of flash fiction (often defined as texts of roughly a thousand words or less). It is hard to think of another important American author (until, perhaps, very recently) who wrote more very short-short stories than she did. At least two examples of stories by Chopin that could now be called flash fiction—"The Story of an Hour" and "Ripe Figs"—are frequently anthologized and routinely taught. Her earliest surviving piece of fiction, "Emancipation. A Life Fable," was also one of her shortest, and she continued to write flash fiction throughout her career.

My purposes here are several. First, I will examine how Chopin's flash fiction helps illuminate—and can be illuminated by—certain ideas about flash fiction proposed by various authors and literary theorists. My essay is as much an introduction to (and survey of) flash fiction theory as it is a discussion of Chopin's own brief tales. Secondly, the essay examines several Chopin stories more specifically, focusing particularly on the traits that make some effective and some less effective. Finally, the essay explores various themes and methods that run throughout Chopin's career as a flash fiction writer. As this exploration will reveal, Chopin's very short stories are among her most artistically and morally complex works of fiction.

A conservative listing of Chopin's flash fiction (with word counts in parentheses) would include "A Reflection" (251), "Ripe Figs" (288), "The Night Came Slowly" (295), "Old Aunt Peggy" (317), "Emancipation. A Life Fable" (342), "An Idle Fellow" (374), "Doctor Chevalier's Lie" (385), "A Little Free-Mulatto" (390), "A Harbinger" (401), "Boulôt and Boulotte" (438), "Croque-Mitaine" (524), "A Very Fine Fiddle" (557), "Two Summers and Two Souls" (620), "A Turkey Hunt" (636), "The Bênitous' Slave"

(647), “Vagabonds” (718), “The Blind Man” (755), “Juanita” (799), “Caline” (890), “The White Eagle” (900), “The Story of an Hour” (1009), “The Kiss” (1028), and “Fedora” (1036). In addition, Chopin wrote many other stories that might be considered “flash” (or perhaps “sudden”) fiction if the requisite word count is limited to roughly 2000 words or less. Such stories include “Madame Celestin’s Divorce” (1293), “The Recovery” (1298), “A Visit to Avoyelles” (1329), “A Respectable Woman” (1462), “La Belle Zoraide” (1477), “Regret” (1479), “Odalie Misses Mass” (1848), “The Lilies” (1890), “A Pair of Silk Stockings” (1897), and “Desiree’s Baby” (2160), to mention just a few. However, although Chopin was often invested in the idea of writing short stories that were *truly* short, this aspect of her writing has not been much explored.

Chopin’s Flash Fiction and Flash Fiction Theory

Despite the recent interest in flash fiction and in longer works often called sudden fiction, surprisingly little criticism has been published about it. One fine but brief guide to the genre appears in various “Afterwords” published in *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas (227-58). This book, an early and influential anthology, first appeared in 1986. In the thirty years since then, no comparable survey of commentary has been issued. Flash fiction itself has been published in abundance, but no one has yet succeeded in collecting comments on the form as well as Shapard and Thomas did (hereafter abbreviated “S&T”).¹

Many comments they collected (usually only a paragraph long) can provide helpful insights into the nature and effectiveness of Kate Chopin’s flash fiction. The writer Fred Chappell, for instance, argues that the “short-short story can take as many shapes and moods as the longer short story can manage.” Flash fiction, he continues, is “not necessarily limited to reminiscence, it is not constrained to cover a very brief period of time, [and] it can be voiced in almost any known mode: realism, naturalism, fantasy, allegory, parable, anecdote” (S&T 227). Certainly these comments apply to Chopin’s flash texts. Although many of the stories listed above are realistic, some (such as “Doctor Chevalier’s Lie”) veer toward naturalism, while others—

such as “Emancipation” and “An Idle Fellow”—are either openly or implicitly symbolic, allegorical, or parabolic. Many of Chopin’s smallest fictions (such as “Ripe Figs”) emphasize the anecdotal, while other relevant categories include meditative essays, character studies, local color stories, and tales ending with a final ironic twist (or, as in “The Kiss” and “Two Summers and Two Souls,” double twists).

The tone of Chopin’s shortest stories is often slyly whimsical and subtly humorous. If her shortest tales reveal a common thread, it is a keen, sympathetic, amused, and often amusing sense of human foibles and complexities. Challenging the mistaken criticism that flash fiction lacks nuanced characterization, Chopin’s briefest works often grant insight into the lives of real, complicated human beings, not manikins stuck together to fill out a short episode. Her best short-short stories thus satisfy another of Chappell’s criteria: they *imply* a larger world the story only briefly (but effectively) suggests (S&T 227). Sometimes, in fact, Chopin’s shorter works have *more* power than her longer, more elaborate stories. The sheer concentration of “The Story of an Hour,” for instance, has made it a classroom and popular favorite. Few people who have read it ever forget it. The same might be said of “Desirée’s Baby” and numerous other brief works by Chopin.

Yet Chappell, although claiming that flash fiction can adopt many different styles and tones, seems less convincing when arguing that a good short-short story has to be “troubling.” “*Unease*,” he claims, “whether humorous or sad,” is the intended effect. “Even if the story achieves resolution, it cannot be a simple resolution and it should not give the impression of permanence” (S&T 227). In this case, Chappell’s attempt to limit successful flash fiction seems strained. It fits such well-known Chopin tales as “The Story of an Hour” or “Doctor Chevalier’s Lie,” and it also fits such similarly disturbing or unsettling tales as “The Blind Man,” “Caline,” “Juanita,” and “A Very Fine Fiddle,” to mention just a few. It seems less applicable, however, to some of Chopin’s more obviously whimsical or humorous works, such as “Boulôt and Boulotte” (with its amusing twelve-year-old twins who head off to buy their very

first pairs of shoes), or “Ripe Figs” (with its wise old woman and impatient young girl), or “Croque-Mitaine” (with its credulous youngster afraid of the boogey-man). If Chopin’s shortest fiction is any indication, it seems best to avoid demanding inflexible, single effects from every short-short tale.

Paul Theroux’s double claim that a good brief tale should “not be mistaken for an anecdote” but should be “highly calculated” in “effects” and “timing” certainly seems applicable to the best examples of Chopin’s flash fiction. So, too, does his assertion that an effective short-short story “contains a novel” (S&T 228). “Caline,” about a young rural girl’s disillusioning visit to a city, could easily have been expanded both into the past and into the future. Caline could well be the central figure in an intriguing novel. So could the title character of “Doctor Chevalier’s Lie.” A compassionate physician in a rough part of town, he risks his own social standing to aid the downtrodden. The episode Chopin recounts could easily be just one chapter in a much longer book. And it goes without saying that the “backstory” to the marriage of Louise and Brentley Mallard in “The Story of an Hour” would make an absorbing novel. All the works just mentioned also satisfy another of Theroux’s criteria: like most of Chopin’s best brief works, they are exceptionally well designed. They may be short, but they are not simple.

John L’Heureux’s statements in the Shapard and Thomas anthology also fit many of Chopin’s briefest tales. Works such as “The Bênitous’ Slave” and “Old Aunt Peggy” (both about former slaves living nostalgically after 1865) definitely and memorably “anatomize a character” (S&T 228), as do such stories as “Juanita” (about a mysteriously attractive unattractive woman), “The Kiss” (about a woman finally less clever than she assumes), and “The White Eagle” (about an imaginative young girl who becomes a lonely old woman). Practically all of Chopin’s briefest tales are the kind of stories that, according to L’Heureux, “we can’t help reading fast, and then re-reading, again,” even though “no matter how many times we read [them], we’re not quite through” (S&T 228). Chopin’s most obviously comic tales, such as “Boulôt and Boulotte” and “Croque-Mitaine,” can perhaps be fully digested at one sitting.

But most of her other very short works both stimulate and repay repeated re-reading.

The frequent effectiveness of Chopin's flash fiction is all the more impressive in light of Gordon Weaver's claim that "the shorter the fiction, the greater become the odds against success" (S&T 229). Anyone who has read hundreds of short-short stories might agree with Weaver. He argues, in fact, that "most short-shorts fail" (S&T 229). Perhaps it is better to say that few achieve their full potential. But this is true of practically all writing, and flash fiction is no exception. Even Chopin occasionally falls flat. "Emancipation" seems too obviously simple and too relentlessly didactic. (It was, after all, a very early work.) "A Reflection" seems more a hyped-up romantic essay than an exercise in the subtle irony Chopin so often elsewhere employs. Aside from these two works, however—and perhaps I am being too hard even on *them*—I would willingly read and re-read any of Chopin's other shortest tales. As the enthusiastic responses of my students suggest, Chopin truly mastered the form.²

One especially effective aspect of her very brief fiction is her use of sudden concluding twists. These were often formulaic in her day, especially in writing influenced by Guy de Maupassant. But Chopin frequently manages to surprise us even when we *anticipate* a surprise. In some stories, in fact, she piles one surprise on top of another. In "The Kiss," for instance, a woman tries to manipulate a man into marrying her even though she only wants his money, not him. When, before their marriage, he accidentally witnesses another man enthusiastically kiss her, we assume that her matrimonial schemes will collapse. She manages to convince him, however, that the other man is just an overly familiar friend of her brother. So the duped target not only forgives her but even encourages the brother's friend to kiss her at their wedding. Apparently, then, the woman has doubly triumphed, winning both a rich husband and a continuing sexual affair. Chopin thus creates two surprises: the wedding itself and the kiss the groom not only allows but proposes. Yet Chopin saves the biggest surprise for the very end: the brother's friend resolutely refuses to kiss her, apparently tired of her games. Here is a story that could easily have been inflated into a novel by Henry

James. By being so concise, Chopin gains immediacy of impact, effective emphasis on startling irony, and appeal to a broad range of possible readers.

Chopin's best flash fiction exemplifies many other traits of the flash fiction genre mentioned in the Shapard and Thomas volume. Good flash fiction (says Lydia Davis) has a literal presence: "You don't have time to get used to it (forget it) as you read" (S&T 230). Certainly this is true of many of Chopin's best short-short tales. Her characters, like many people in flash fiction, tend to be (in Davis's words) "unheroic"—that is, common, realistic, everyday persons (S&T 230). Davis suggests that flash fiction is especially appropriate for dealing with such characters, and Chopin's briefest tales confirm this claim.

But Chopin's best works contradict negative assertions about flash fiction made by H. E. Francis. Francis argues that in very brief works, "characters approach anonymity, setting nears irrelevance, situation (however flimsy) almost invariably presides, or tone. Tone and situation are the *prima donnas*" (S&T 231). Francis continues: "The form matches the instant's perception. The brevity is the joy, the Roman candle thrust, burst,—*Ahhh!*—and darkness. As a too-frequent experience, they bore. I seldom find one which bears re-reading" (S&T 232).

Why Francis should feel this way is hard to understand. After all, some of the greatest, most resonant, most thought-provoking literary works are brief poems. Why should a few words arranged in one form be innately more (or less) interesting than a few words arranged in another? Few people tire of reading good, brief lyrics in succession; why should they tire of reading successive short-short stories? The problem is not with any *form itself* but with specific examples. Reading a series of fine poems can be exceptionally satisfying; reading a series of fine short-short stories can be, too.

Chopin's Flash Fiction: Individual Examples

Chopin, of course, wrote some less-than-fully-impressive, short-short tales. Here, however, I want to concentrate on the varied successes she achieved in some of her briefest works. "Ripe

Figs,” for instance, despite being only 288 words long, is one of her most frequently anthologized stories. It is reprinted so widely precisely because it *is* brief. However, unlike other stories such as “A Reflection” (which is rarely read though it is even briefer), “Ripe Figs” is an extraordinarily rich “flash” work that repays frequent re-reading.

Precisely because this story *is* so short, perhaps it is worth reprinting in full:

Maman-Nainaine said that when the figs were ripe Babette might go to visit her cousins down on the Bayou-Boeuf where the sugar cane grows. Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was.

It seemed to Babette a very long time to wait; for the leaves upon the trees were tender yet, and the figs were like little hard, green marbles.

But warm rains came along and plenty of strong sunshine, and though Maman-Nainaine was as patient as the statue of la Madone, and Babette as restless as a humming-bird, the first thing they both knew it was hot summer-time. Every day Babette danced out to where the fig-trees were in a long line against the fence. She walked slowly beneath them, carefully peering between the gnarled, spreading branches. But each time she came disconsolate away again. What she saw there finally was something that made her sing and dance the whole day long.

When Maman-Nainaine sat down in her stately way to breakfast, the following morning, her muslin cap standing like an aureole about her white, placid face, Babette approached. She bore a dainty porcelain platter, which she set down before her godmother. It contained a dozen purple figs, fringed around with their rich, green leaves.

“Ah,” said Maman-Nainaine, arching her eyebrows, “how early the figs have ripened this year!”

“Oh,” said Babette, “I think they have ripened very late.”

“Babette,” continued Maman-Nainaine, as she peeled the very plumpest figs with her pointed silver fruit-knife, “you will carry my love to them all down on Bayou-Boeuf. And tell your Tante Frosine I shall look for her at Toussaint—when the chrysanthemums are in bloom.” (Chopin, “Ripe Figs” 90)

Additional Works of Flash Fiction_____

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