

The Short Short Story - Session 1

Stimulus:

Cindy Sherman pictures: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artwork-changed-life-cindy-shermans-untitled-film-stills>

What are these pictures of?

Photos made to look like B rate movie film stills.

How do they look like film stills?

What brings them to life?

What makes them so captivating is that they build up narrative from a single picture.

We put all our own thoughts, prejudices and experience into these pictures in order to make sense of them. We look at the surroundings, the facial expressions, the clothing and reach conclusions about what has happened for this situation to be the case.

We give them a story.

Flash Fiction (microfiction, microstories, short-shorts, short short stories, very short stories, sudden fiction, postcard fiction, and nanofiction)

Flash fiction is the literary equivalent of the film still. It is a snap shot of a single moment (or sometimes a short series of moments) in time - there is no time to create character development, go into depth about the setting or context, or give a detailed description of the relationship between two people. All that is important has to become apparent in just a few well-chosen words.

Short stories typically range from 1,600 to 20,000 words. Short short stories are generally 1,500 words or fewer.

Examples to read through: (ask for thoughts as you go and what they think happens before and after the stories.

Ernest Hemingway (possibly)

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

The most famous piece of flash fiction. May or may not have been written for a bet; to produce a story in 6 words that would make the other people at the table cry.

- Why does this story work?
- How does it make you feel?
- What makes it seem so sad to most people?

The power of this piece is what is implied rather than what is said. You don't need to spell everything out to have impact. In fact, leaving as much for the viewer/reader to fill in the blanks as possible, is often the most effective way of writing the short story and the short, short story.

Widow's First Year, Joyce Carol Oates

I kept myself alive.

Shorter than Hemingway's, but less famous.

- The title does the hard work. It gives the story context, it defines the lead character, and dictates the mood of the piece.
- The story doesn't need any more words as we have heard this story 100 times before, be it the depressed person who self-medicates on booze or drugs just to keep going, the broke person who sells everything just to pay for food. She does what she has to just to function.

Sticks, George Saunders

Every year Thanksgiving night we flocked out behind Dad as he dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix he'd built out of metal pole in the yard. Super Bowl week the pole was dressed in a jersey and Rod's helmet and Rod had to clear it with Dad if he wanted to take the helmet off. On the Fourth of July the pole was Uncle Sam, on Veteran's Day a soldier, on Halloween a ghost. The pole was Dad's only concession to glee. We were allowed a single Crayola from the box at a time. One Christmas Eve he shrieked at Kimmie for wasting an apple slice. He hovered over us as we poured ketchup saying: good enough good enough good enough. Birthday parties consisted of cupcakes, no ice cream. The first time I brought a date over she said: what's with your dad and that pole? and I sat there blinking.

We left home, married, had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us. Dad began dressing the pole with more complexity and less discernible logic. He draped some kind of fur over it on Groundhog Day and lugged out a floodlight to ensure a shadow. When an earthquake struck Chile he lay the pole on its side and spray painted a rift in the earth. Mom died and he dressed the pole as Death and hung from the crossbar photos of Mom as a baby. We'd stop by and find odd talismans from his youth arranged around the base: army medals, theatre tickets, old sweatshirts, tubes of Mom's makeup. One autumn he painted the pole bright yellow. He covered it with cotton swabs that winter for warmth and provided offspring by hammering in six crossed sticks around the yard. He ran lengths of string between the pole and the sticks, and taped to the string letters of apology, admissions of error, pleas for understanding, all written in a frantic hand on index cards. He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE? and then he died in the hall with the radio on and we sold the house to a young couple who yanked out the pole and the sticks and left them by the road on garbage day.

- In the contributor's notes in "Story" magazine, George Saunders writes, "For two years I'd been driving past a house like the one in the story, imagining the owner as a man more joyful and self-possessed and less self-conscious than myself. Then one day I got sick of him and invented his opposite, and there was the story." (<https://www.unm.edu/~gmartin/535/Sticks.htm>)

- A longer piece of flash fiction, but still considered short enough.
- Despite the lack of words, we still have the story arc -

Exposition: introduced to the pole and dad, (end in 'only concession to glee')

Inciting incident: examples of dad being no fun.

Rising action: girlfriend coming over and the realisation that the pole is weird

Crisis: will they turn out like their dad?

Climax: dad sinking into madness

Denouement: the house has been sold, the pole that had so much meaning throughout the story is disposed of.

- Backstory given through the little asides.
- Many characters, but each to illustrate the point of the story
- Leaves a lasting impression. **Name the mood of the story and the lasting feeling**

Chapter V, Ernest Hemingway

They shot the six cabinet ministers at half-past six in the morning against the wall of a hospital. There were pools of water in the courtyard. There were wet dead leaves on the paving of the

courtyard. It rained hard. All the shutters of the hospital were nailed shut. One of the ministers was sick with typhoid. Two soldiers carried him downstairs and out into the rain. They tried to hold him up against the wall but he sat down in a puddle of water. The other five stood very quietly against the wall. Finally the officer told the soldiers it was no good trying to make him stand up. When they fired the first volley he was sitting down in the water with his head on his knees.

- It is a very powerful picture, leaving quite an impression.
- Probably the closest in nature to the film stills due to the final line. That is the picture that sticks with you.
- The matter-of-fact tone gives it more feeling than if it was written in an emotive tone. Why?

Activity :

Pick one of these paintings to look at...

Mr and Mrs Andrews

Thomas Gainsborough, 1750. (<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/thomas-gainsborough-mr-and-mrs-andrews>)

American Gothic

Grant Wood, 1930 (<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/6565/american-gothic>)

Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy

David Hockney, 1970 (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hockney-mr-and-mrs-clark-and-percy-t01269>)

Mr and Mrs Phillip Wase

George Bellows, 1924 (<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/mr-and-mrs-phillip-wase-1764>)

The Ambassadors

Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533 (<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors>)

The Arnolfini Portrait

Jan Van Eyck, 1434 (<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait>)

- In your own writing book, describe the scene (but not the people or animals) to someone who is blind - try and bring the picture to life through the description, rather than just 'matter of fact' description

(Can be in note form, bullet point or complete sentences, whatever works best for you.)

- Now the tricky part... reduce your list down to 10 words. Share your description with everyone else, but don't tell them which picture it is.

- Can everyone work out which picture you are talking about?
- Has anyone else done the same picture? Is their description similar or different? Have they focused on the same things in the picture or have they gone for something completely different?

- Start looking at the characters in the picture.

- How old are your characters?
- What are their jobs?

- What do they do to fill their days?
 - How affluent (rich) are they?
 - How did they come by their money? or lose it? Maybe they have never had any?
 - How were they educated, if at all?
 - Have any major events ever happened in their lives? E.g. births, deaths, marriages, bankruptcy, illness etc. etc.
 - How are the characters related to each other? Friends, colleagues, partners?
 - What are they doing at the precise moment captured in the painting?
- Write notes again, and then reduce your characters down to 10 words. Share your description with everyone else.
- Think about how the characters think and feel in this precise moment.
 - What are they thinking about?
 - How are they feeling?
 - Why do they think and feel as they do?
 - How do they think and feel about the other characters in their painting.
 - What are they liking or not liking?
 - Do the characters have a happy or contented relationship? Or is it uncomfortable or awkward in any way?
 - How do the other characters react to them?
- Write notes and then reduce each character's thoughts and feelings down to 10 words. Share your description with everyone else.
- Think about what is going on outside of the picture frame?
 - Are there any other characters that are just out of 'shot'?
 - Has someone just left the room? Been on the telephone? Shouting down the street?
 - Is there an ongoing situation that we can't see?
 - Is there a situation that the characters expect to happen in the future?
 - Are there any sounds or smells going on?
- Make a note of this as before and reduce your list down to 10 words. Share your description with everyone else.
- Discuss what you have decided about the situation pictured and how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together.
 - Does it make sense to others in the context of the picture?
 - Have you had to change anything done earlier on to make everything fit as a story line?
 - How far outside of the picture have you gone with your story?
- Now think about how the characters speak.
 - Do they have a distinct voice? Vocal features - tone, ticks, pronunciation, speed
 - What language and accent do they speak with?
 - What subject matter do they talk about?
- If your characters were to speak, what 10 words would they say. Try and write in *their* voice. Share them with everyone else. These words can be in the form of dialogue, thinking out loud, muttered under the breathe, in response to another character, exclamations etc. etc. Some characters might not even speak at all.