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# Engaging Readers Cognitively and Affectively in Flash Fiction

**Abstract**: This article sets out to explore flash fiction, understood as very short forms of prose narrative and taking it to be a mode of writing that only properly developed in recent decades, although not without prominent antecedents going back through centuries of literary history. It addresses the issues of defining flash fiction, as well as its formal features, outlining their typical structures as well as speculating on how flash fiction may engage readers in its own characteristic ways. I argue that while retaining the basics of narrative requirements, such as representing events and being able to generate mental representations of storyworlds, flash fictions chiefly relies on undernarration and fragmentation, narrating in insufficient detail. This requires readers, despite flash fiction's brevity, to be constantly cognitively challenged, as well as to experience highly condensed and intense epistemic narrative emotions.
**Keywords**: flash fiction, very short narratives, reader response, cognition, emotion, cognitive narratology.

One of the literary forms that clearly seems to be more widespread now-adays than in the past and which has gathered significant recognition in the twenty-first century is the ultra-short narrative. What I mean by this is a plethora of rather brief narrative forms that encompass anything that seems to be a relatively unified narrative where the word count is below 2000 or 1500 words, depending on specific definitions. These could range from the Hemingwayan six-word stories, through 280-characters (twittera-

ture), dribble (50 words), microfiction (up to 100 words) and flash fiction covering the upper limits of the 1500-2000 wordcount. There could be infinitely more internal divisions here, as some of these genres are defined by arbitrarily set word-limits, but there is a number of formal and functional characteristics that these forms share and which are more essential than the specific number of words or characters.

In what follows I want to scrutinise these essential formal features of very short narratives and explain them in terms of the mechanics of reader engagement. There is a number of strategies that these forms use in order to engage readers' cognition and emotion in their own peculiar way and I intend to outline them. First, I will talk about the antecedents of flash fiction, then outline what I see as their core formal features and mechanics of reader engagement, and finally I will analyse a prize-winning flash fiction narrative to spell out my points in more detail.

The number of types of short narratives already listed above may suggest I will address them separately or that different conclusions may result from exploring their styles. I will, however, focus on the commonalities of these forms, thus for my purposes it will suffice to address them collectively and only differentiate when highly necessary. Still, it is important to note that there is no uniform terminology to refer to very short forms collectively. Numerous terms in use include microfiction, minifiction, nanofiction, sudden fiction, flash fiction, quick fiction, smoke-long fiction, postcard fiction, short short story, very short story, etc. For the sake of this paper I will refer to all the forms typically included under the 2000 or 1500 wordcount as flash fiction, but as argued later in the paper, the wordcount criterion is necessary, but not sufficient to call a given narrative a work of flash fiction.

## History and Contexts

Even though flash fiction understood as a distinct genre has only become widespread in the twenty-first century, and the first use of the term dates only as recently as 1992,[1] there is a number of esteemed precursors to the genre. In fact, one may think of micronarratives accompanying humanity from its dawn: ancient fables and biblical parables, myths and legends, Anglo-Saxon riddles or Zen koans, but also forms as trivial as jokes. One could

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[1]  Sandra Arnold, "Do it in a Flash: an Essay on the History and Definition of Flash Fiction," accessed March 14, 2024, https://theshortstory.co.uk/do-it-in-a-flash-an-essay-on-the-history-and-definition-of-flash-fiction-by-sandra-arnold.

add the medieval fabliau, nouvelle and lai,[2] and there are other examples throughout the ages, though, until recently, mostly are fairly rare compared to other linguistic artifacts and their connection to flash fiction proper may vary.

One significant step in the direction of the development of flash fiction is of course the emergence of the short story. As the genre was growing rapidly throughout the nineteenth century, one could find occasional examples of very short narratives within it in authors as diverse as Poe, Bierce, O. Henry, Chopin and others. Poe is also important here as a theoretician of the short form whose views have some bearing on understanding and differentiating between flash fiction and other short narrative forms. I believe, following Poe, there are reasons more important than relative brevity that point to classifying flash fiction as a sub-genre of a short story which nevertheless differs from the former by employing partly different mechanics of reader engagement. They may be intuitively obvious, but it is important to clarify them in detail, so as to understand how flash fiction is different from a number of other works that can be counted as short narratives.

Poe's famous discussion in his "The Philosophy of Composition" is at the heart of short story theorising[3] and I believe it is also crucial in elucidating some of the tenets of flash fiction. Moreover, his central claims prove to be particularly important in my discussion, as he sees specific means of engaging readers emotionally and cognitively, rather than strictly formal qualities on their own, as paramount for the short story. In other words, his definition is functional and reception-oriented. Simply put, Poe argues that the difference between short stories and novels is not so much that of length, but that of a different type of aesthetic effect: a sense of unity and totality one experiences when reading a complete work during a single sitting. Reading novels is necessarily interrupted which leads to different type of reader response, involving necessarily a more scattered or dispersed sense of intended effects. One could think of flash fiction's relation to short story as analogous. It shares some properties with it, and by extension, with novels, and with all narratives, but overall, it prioritises a different kind of effect or reader engagement.

One could further expand on the sense of unity and totality associated with short stories, adding the tendency towards a greater sense of focus, be

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2   Marc Botha, "Microfiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to the English Short Story*, ed. Ann-Marie Einhaus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 201–220, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781316018866.016.

3   Spyros Kiosses, "Towards A Poetics of Narrative Brevity: Short Story, Microfiction, Flash Fiction," *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL),* vol. 9, no. 1 (January 2021): 9–18, DOI: https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0901002.

it on characters, events or themes, albeit with a reduced scope, a greater symbolic significance attributed to individual objects, characters or events and a striving towards the intensity of the desired effects required by the brevity of the short story.[4] Correspondingly, if the core epistemic emotions associated with narratives are suspense, curiosity and surprise,[5] then the condensed form of a short story tends to emphasise their operations with a sense of immediacy.

The above surely captures the shared defining features of short stories broadly understood and those of flash fiction, but is yet insufficient in explaining what makes the latter distinct formally and functionally. The distinction can appear particularly muddled when taking into consideration the twentieth century short story developments from modernism through minimalism to post-modernism and beyond. For example, a number of proto-minimalist works by Hemingway would also qualify as exemplary flash fiction, from his roughly 750-word "A Very Short Story" to the six-word-story frequently attributed to him, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." In the second half of the twentieth century one can find very short narrative forms in oeuvres of writers as diverse as Carver, Borges, Calvino, Robbe-Grillet, Wolff, Bukowski and others,[6] before flash fiction became recognised and established as a separate genre.

Taking into account the fuzzy edges between short stories and flash fiction, one could perhaps argue that the difference between them is merely that of an institutionally-based labelling. After all, it is only after the term was established in relevant publications, such as Norton anthologies,[7] or academic articles, literary journals[8] and awards[9] that flash fiction gained its independence, and without them, its separate existence would certainly be put to question.

In addition, the twenty-first century resurgence of flash fiction tends to be linked to the proliferation of digital media, and social media in particular.

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[4]   Kiosses, "Towards A Poetics…," 12.

[5]   Patrick Colm Hogan, *Literature and Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 132–153.

[6]   See Botha's "Microfiction" for a detailed overview.

[7]   For example: *Flash Fiction America*, eds. James Thomas, Sherrie Flick, and John Dufresne (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2023).

[8]   There are dozens of online and print magazines devoted solely to flash fiction. Making a list would be impracticable here, especially considering that flash fiction also gets to be published in magazines that are not exclusively devoted to it.

[9]   The website Reedsy lists over eighty writing contests, most of which are cyclical and which are either solely devoted to flash fiction or accept it as submissions. More than a dozen offer prizes ranging between a $1000 and $3500, accessed March 14, 2024, https://blog.reedsy.com/writing-contests/flash-fiction/?sorted%5Bcol%5D=prize_numeric.

Such ties cannot be overlooked, as some of the affordances of social media, such as length limitation or the rapidity and fleetingness of communication seem to be directly correlated with the central qualities of flash fiction. In this sense, flash fiction as a separate mode would simply be the product of social media affordances along with the general material conditions of its content creation and consumption within the dynamic and highly competitive attention economy of modern capitalism, such as dwindling attention spans, overstimulation, high content selectivity and the need for a stimulus to get its consumer hooked immediately. It would, then, be a prose form apt for a world where "attention has become 'a highly perishable commodity'".[10]

Perhaps it is tempting to see flash fiction through the lens of such a minimalistic explanation and it is clear that the proliferation of micronarratives goes hand in hand with the emergence of social media. There surely is a link between the media affordances, attention economy and the formal qualities of flash fiction, but still, it seems to me that new media affordances can perhaps promote and disseminate such forms and generally be correlated with them, but it would not do justice to reduce them to the material conditions of content consumption.

Not only does flash fiction predate social media, but also many narrative forms perpetuated by modern social media platforms would never count as flash fiction. Finally, the internet age has also witnessed the emergence of twitterature's polar opposites – the meganovel, the sprawling transmedia worlds of modern fiction franchises or the endless fan-fiction works which require extraordinary amounts of deep attention to be consumed in their entirety, eluding any simple reduction of either media affordances or the reception/consumption practices that modern cultural conditions may evoke.

Likewise, I believe the institutional recognition of flash fiction has only solidified a mode of writing that had already earned its independence owing to the distinct functional qualities of its form. Flash fiction obviously shares a family resemblance with short stories and other works of prose, which entails a degree of basic functional similarity with respect to the cognitive and emotional engagement of narratives. Still, there is a set of formal characteristics of flash fiction that result in it encouraging some forms of narrative engagement much more than would be the case in other narrative forms. I turn to a discussion of them in the next section.

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[10] Sibylle Baumbach, "The Economy of Attention and the Novel," in *New Approaches to the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel*, eds. Sibylle Baumbach, and Birgit Neumann (London–New York–Shanghai: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019): 42, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32598-5_3.

## Forms and Functions

Earlier I mentioned that not all very short narrative forms count as flash fiction and given that the seemingly defining feature of that mode of writing is its brevity, it would be instructive to explain why. There seems to be a broad consensus and an intuitive recognition that faux-Hemingway's baby shoes story is an example of flash fiction, whereas "my cat jumped on a window sill" is not, whether I attempt to label it as twitterature or submit it to a flash fiction competition or not. Still, the latter would count as a rudimentary narrative for many,[11] as it represents a single event, that is a change in a state of affairs. Even with a more stringent definition of a narrative requiring two events, the story "my cat jumped on a window sill and knocked down a flowerpot" would not qualify as flash fiction. In other words, brevity itself, just like fulfilling the minimal requirements to be called a narrative is not enough to be labelled flash fiction.

What about slightly more elaborate and complex narrative sequences that one comes across in other media that tend to be called micronarratives? In his early work on narrative structure in video games, Henry Jenkins mentions how the elaborate, interactive fictional worlds of video games display a plentitude of micronarratives that were only used on a smaller scale in narratives in older media.[12] In his account, micronarratives would be any small-scale causal sequences of events with a setup, development and resolution that serve a tangential role to the main storyline. His cinematic example is the Odessa stairs sequence from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), where spectators are exposed to tiny narrative threads involving specific characters on the stairs, as with the famous baby carriage sequence. In video games, he rightly claims, micronarratives like that abound, as players are able to continually see multiple characters performing actions, partaking in conversations or interacting with various minor characters and other non-playables going about their daily business. Games that offer that experience take full advantage of the media-specific affordances to build a lively and engaging storyworld. However, neither the Odessa stairs sequence, nor my accosting and chasing random characters and wondering about their reactions while playing an open-world video game would count as flash fiction, and this is not merely trivially due to media-specific differences.

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[11]  H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 13–27.

[12]  Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," *Computer* vol. 44, no. 3 (2004): 118–130.

To reiterate the central question posed earlier, what makes the following six-word narratives flash fiction as opposed to other examples quoted?

"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)
"Longed for him. Got him. Shit." (Margaret Atwood)[13]

First, the traditional requirements of short stories as formulated by Poe and other early theorists are met here, but they are not met in the narration of a cat jumping on a window sill mentioned above or in an ordinary every-day recounting of how one's holiday or shopping for groceries went. Specifically, the unity and totality should not be understood in a superficial sense of causal continuity or mimetic realism – the six-word narratives are highly fragmented and incomplete, as they only allude to a handful of narrative events, but they are enough to create the impression of a work that is the-matically and aesthetically coherent. In other words, the sense of aesthetic totality and unity of the story represented, along with discourse manipula-tions that aim at managing the core narrative emotions of suspense, curios-ity or surprise, are well met in the six-word examples above.

One could further elaborate on the first point, by expanding on the notion of tellability that originated in the studies of oral and conversational story-telling[14] and which hints at a story's capacity for being context-relevant or simply worthwhile telling. The purposes of telling many micronarratives would typically be purely informational or social, whereas flash fiction, as a type of artistic narrative, would always strive to be rewarding in itself in the context of attending to it as a reader for its own sake without other tell-ability contexts.

Second, what makes flash fiction stories distinct from other micronarra-tives is their ability to evoke their own independent storyworlds.[15] Obvi-ously, flash fiction is not documentary and it does not aim at faithfully rep-resenting reality, but what makes reporting everyday events, telling made--up stories about cats, prose poetry, and cinematic or video-game micronar-ratives different is their inability to mobilise separate storyworlds. Cognitive

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[13] Bente Lucht, "Flash Fiction: Literary fast food or a metamodern (sub) genre with poten-tial," in *2nd Human and Social Sciences at the Common Conference* (2014), 223.

[14] William Labov, and Joshua Waletzky, "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Expe-rience," in *Essays on Verbal and Visual Art*, ed. June Helm (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1967), 12–44.

[15] Shelley Roche-Jacques, "Flash Fiction as a Distinct Literary Form: Some Thoughts on Time, Space, and Context," *New Writing* 21, no. 2 (2024): 171–89, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2023.2293767.

narratology has long established that a narrative is essentially only a set of cues for readers to construct more elaborate mental representations of entire storyworlds.[16] In the examples that do not qualify as flash fiction, all stories are ostensibly set as marginal with respect to the storyworlds that already exist, either fictional or those pretending to be the real world in which the teller is centrally involved. All the flash fiction examples, on the other hand, in spite of their brevity, establish their own storyworlds.

Third, the extreme brevity of flash fiction combined with the requirement of unity and totality results in narrative forms whose essential features include "fragmentation, rupture and indeterminacy of identity and experience, of their perception and narrative (re)presentation".[17] In other words, flash fiction by necessity can only represent a tiny fraction of the storyworld it alludes to, yet it does this so as to ensure readers of the richness of the world in question. This marks what in narrative theory tends to be called undernarration, or when a story is "not narrated in sufficient detail".[18] Put differently, flash fiction narratives are not just brief, they also have to be constructed so as to create an impression that the storyworld they are narrating is fairly complex, puzzling or otherwise interesting, and they only have to allow readers to briefly peek into it, leaving a plentitude of details underreported.

To use a simple illustration, most mainstream action films tend to overnarrate sequences such as car chases or fight scenes, devoting unusual amounts of space to represent them in detail. At the same time, character psychology in such films is not so much undernarrated as minimal in the actual storyworld. Such films do not underreport character complexity – their characters are simply flat. However, it is entirely possible to allude to a complex storyworld design with an intricate backstory, emplotment connections and character depth in action film using a scant amount of narration. Thus, a film such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2009) undernarrates its narrative complexity of elaborate and tangled post-apocalyptic scenarios and social organisations, ideologies and cults, as well as character motivations and development, all of which are clearly alluded to in an extremely scarce way, but enough for the viewers to generate coherent and intriguing mental representations of the storyworld amidst the film's car chase frenzy. That the storyworlds of pseudo-Hemingway's baby shoes or Martell's the Earth are un-

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[16]  David Herman. "Narrative Ways of Worldmaking," in *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, eds. Sandra Heinen, and Roy Sommer (Berlin–New York: De Gruyter, 2009), 71–87, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110222432.71.

[17]  Kiosses, "Towards a Poetics…," 14.

[18]  Gerald Prince, "The Undernarrated and the Overnarrated," *Style* 57, no. 2 (2023): 133, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/901161.

dernarrated is clear. They hint at a complex and intriguing content of that world, but only scarcely represent it.

When it comes to longer works of flash fiction, it is evident that they undernarrate most of the storyworld while drawing attention to one chosen aspect of it, which is then represented in a more fine-grained manner. To use a term that entered literary studies and narratology from cognitive semantics, flash fiction has a very unusual use of granularity – the detailedness of the description of an aspect of the storyworld.[19] Most of the represented world is highly limited in scope and coarse-grained, undernarrated. However, a few aspects of it remain fine-grained, foregrounded and put in the spotlight for readers' attention. This marks a high level of deviation from standard everyday perception and cognition of the world we experience where such differences in the perception of various aspects of the world are highly uncommon.

By extensively relying on undernarration, flash fiction then opts for high cognitive engagement of readers who are encouraged to fill in narrative gaps, establish patterns and connections and remain active while constructing mental representations of the storyworlds. Their cognitive capacity is further stretched when the storyworlds are made of an unusual mixture of coarse- and fine-grained content that deviate from everyday experience of the world. In the final section of this article, I will analyse an award-winning flash fiction narrative demonstrating how the genre's typical formal features discussed so far may engage readers cognitively and affectively in elaborate meaning-making operations and solving cognitive challenges. I will generally follow in the footsteps of early reception theory as represented by Iser,[20] focusing on the gaps and indeterminacies and the operations of an implied reader generated by the text. However, I will use it as it tends to be developed via more recent work in the tradition of cognitive narratology and literary studies as in the sources quoted earlier, tracing more specific cognitive and affective ways of reader engagement.

## *Taylor Swift*

The story I chose is the winner of the 2015 Donald Barthelme Prize for Short Prose, one of the top awards for flash fiction, organised by the Gulf Coast literary magazine, which accepts submissions of works of up to five

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[19] Cf. Leonard Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

[20] Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP: 1976).

hundred words: *Taylor Swift* by Hugh Behm-Steinberg.[21] I believe the story is exemplary of flash fiction in a number of ways and definitely meets all of the flash fiction criteria outlined earlier. At the same time, of course, flash fiction is a rather broad category, and there is a number of stylistic features pertinent to this story only that are not easily projected on to others.

As explained by Steve Almond, a judge of that year's award, he was concerned that the consumer-celebrity culture theme of the story may be too banal or transient, but he was mesmerised by what he thinks is reminiscent of Barthelme's short story writing: "it casts a spell. It extradites us to a realm of strange wonders and incantatory rhythms,"[22] labelling it a Barthelme-like fairy-tale or parable.

As expected, the information about the storyworld is scant. Readers may infer that the story is set in a cyberpunkish world that is either alternative reality or futuristic: cloning exists and clones are easily obtainable commodities one can buy with one click and get delivered to one's home. The only clones we know about, however, are clones of the billionaire superstar pop-singer Taylor Swift that all of the story's characters (two, that is) have at home as companions, lovers, servants and entertainers, etc. The clones apparently come in various forms, as one of the centrally important ones is a clone with wings that practises her nightingale routine and dreams of being noticed and loved one day by the original Taylor Swift.

The above is roughly all we have and it is evident that the world of the story is undernarrated, as there is a strong sense that it only alludes to the socio-economic complexities of what seem to be existential nightmares of a late-capitalist consumerist cyberpunk dystopia. The narrator, however, never points directly to any economic or social realities. They are merely broached and scattered throughout the story as when the first sentence mentions swiping the phone and ordering clones, or when, in the last one, the winged clone's dreams of meeting the real Taylor Swift in her New York City tower. Whatever the rough sketches of the storyworld imply, they require the readers to continually adjust and update their schemas in a non-linear way and merge the scattered crumbs into a coherent picture mostly by means of bottom-up processing of schema formation.

Unusually not just for flash fiction, but for any kind of narrative, the story is told in the second person, which is seen both as historically problematic

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[21] Hugh Behm-Steinberg, "Taylor Swift," *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*, 28.2 (Summer/Fall 2016), accessed March 14, 2024, https://gulfcoastmag.org/journal/28.2/2015-barthelme-prize-winner-taylor-swift/.

[22] Steve Almond, Introduction to "Taylor Swift," *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts,* 28.2 (Summer/Fall 2016), accessed March 14, 2024, https://gulfcoastmag.org/journal/28.2/2015-barthelme-prize-winner-taylor-swift/.

to conceptualise for narrative theory, but also slightly confusing and potentially uncomfortable for readers, not just because its rarity, but because it is composed of opposing effects of distancing and proximity/participation.[23] Adding to this unusual voice is a protagonist that is unnamed, unaged and ungendered. We only know that they are in love with their neighbour, Tina, of which we learn towards the end and that they order their clones as part of a scheming strategy to win her affection.

Even the story's opening sentence indicates the undernarrated complexity and density of the actual storyworld along with a skillful manipulation of narrative emotions:

You're in love; it's great, you swipe on your phone and order: the next day a Taylor Swift clone shows up at your house.

One can see how readers are forced to change their cognitive schemas and bodies of expectations about possible developments and meaning with almost every phrase. The transitions from being in love, through swiping and buying, to having Taylor Swift clones arriving on the following day is extremely unusual, indicating an intense dynamic of epistemic narrative emotions of anticipation and surprise at work. The working of curiosity, another central narrative emotion, is clearly heightened in the story, too, from the very beginning, making readers ask narrative macro- and micro-questions about who or what the object of love is, and what ordering and Swift's clones have to do with it. The first paragraph ends with another mysterious claim that the protagonist hates Taylor Swift, but it is unclear whether they always did or only started at that point or what exactly the motivation behind that feeling is.

The progression of the story partially answers some of these questions, but only with a significant delay. For example, it is revealed towards the end of the story that the protagonist is in love with Tina, but many of these questions remain unanswered, forcing the reader to simultaneously make a number of projections into the story development and regarding character motivations, some of which are not fully addressed. At any rate, readers have to rapidly move back and forth across the text to link elements separated by significant ellipses and manage a large number of dangling narrative threads and hypotheses about characters and events.

Speaking of gaps and omissions, one can distinguish a number of categories here and they all showcase a high degree of undernarration. There are obviously gaps in the causal event progression. We never know the specifics of the love story, or how clones were invented and are manufactured. We

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[23] Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik, "O narracji w drugiej osobie – enaktywnie" [On Narrating in the Second Person – Enactively], *Teksty drugie*, no. 2 (2022): 62, DOI: https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2022.2.4.

know almost nothing about character interactions. The central plot sequence in the story is when the protagonist notices that their neighbour has a number of Swift clones and decides to vigorously train and physically exert their own as part of a plan that is not revealed at that point. Later, the protagonist organises a Taylor Swift party with her neighbour during which it is revealed that the plan was to use her clones to assault her friend's clones in what is apparently a fit of jealousy and an attempt to win her neighbour. Seemingly, the plan is cancelled as the protagonist realises their deep feelings for Tina which somehow end up being reciprocated and the two disappear behind the closed doors of Tina's room. Only some of the events are mentioned in that progression, and when they are mentioned, their nature and significance is only partly revealed.

The character psychology and motivation remain equally cryptic, pointing to another area of gaps and ellipses. On the one hand, the narration seems to be internally focalised with respect to the protagonist, yet the information we get about their mental state is highly selective and rudimentary. However, along the principles of undernarration, readers can recognise the actual complexity of motivation and psychology, as the narrator hints at conflicting desires, thoughts, plans and emotions of the protagonist navigating the realities of the consumerist late-capitalist cyberpunk dystopia.

Towards the end of the story, the focalisation and the scope of the narrator's perspective changes dramatically. After the protagonist and Tina go to the latter's room, we never hear about them anymore. Instead, the narrator switches towards a new focaliser along with obtaining what seems to be a more omniscient perspective: the winged Taylor Swift clone on a perch performing their nightingale routine and dreaming about love, recognition and fame. Such a switch is another move that generates surprise, curiosity and confusion, along with some degree of cognitive challenge necessitated by abrupt disposing of the main characters and storylines and establishing new focalisers towards a story's end.

Another important stylistic feature of the story is its slightly New Weird aesthetic, in which strange and surprising information is revealed but in a casual way, as if it was ordinary. This is perhaps the peculiarity of this story, but in more general terms it could be projected on to flash fiction in general: it is yet another technique of intensifying epistemic narrative emotions of anticipation, suspense, surprise and curiosity which manifests itself in this particular example in a style which bafflingly naturalises out-of-the-ordinary or strange events. Neither the narrator nor the characters are surprised by a winged Taylor Swift clone or that you can buy one online. The characters casually engage in sex, marijuana smoking and are essentially slavedrivers of the clones, but they still live with their mothers and have to

do household chores and ask for an allowance. All of that is surely a flabber-gasting mixture, especially when undernarrated. In this case, undernarration leads to a peculiar presentation of weirdness, as if it is natural and ordinary.

# Conclusion

Behm-Steinberg's *Taylor Swift* perfectly illustrates the defining features of flash fiction listed in the second section of this article. In spite of its fragmentation, it does maintain a sense of aesthetic and thematic unity. It enables readers to generate storyworlds on the basis of the scant input of narrative cues. Undernarration is its chief strategy of relaying information with respect to the scope, density and granularity of the storyworld. All this results in a type of reader engagement which emphasises intense and dynamic manipulation of the epistemic narrative emotions, such as curiosity, surprise, anticipation or suspense. In relation to this, undernarration forces readers to ceaselessly stretch their cognitive capacities, as their cognitive schemas, inference-making, gap-filling and expectations are constantly reshaped with almost every phrase in an endless labour of cognitive challenge.

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# Zaangażowanie poznawcze i afektywne czytelników w *flash fiction*

**Abstrakt**: Artykuł podejmuje próbę eksploracji *flash fiction* rozumianej jako mikronarracje, uznając ją za sposób pisania, który rozwinął się właściwie dopiero w ostatnich dziesięcioleciach, choć niepozbawiony jest znaczących poprzedników sięgających wielu wieków historii literatury. W artykule poruszono kwestie definiowania i cech formalnych *flash fiction*, zary-

sowując typowe struktury, a także spekulując, w jaki sposób *flash fiction* może angażować czytelnika w charakterystyczny sposób. Autor wychodzi z założenia, że zachowując podstawowe wymagania narracyjne (reprezentowanie wydarzeń i możliwość generowania mentalnych reprezentacji światów opowieści), *flash fiction* opiera się głównie na niedopowiedzeniu i fragmentacji, czyli narracji z niewystarczającą szczegółowością. Wymaga to od czytelników, pomimo zwięzłości tekstów *flash fiction*, przezwyciężania ciągłych wyzwań poznawczych, a także doświadczania wysoce skondensowanych i intensywnych epistemicznych emocji narracyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe**: *flash fiction*, mikronarracje, recepcja czytelnika, poznanie, emocje, narratologia kognitywna.

# Kognitive und affektive
# Einbeziehung von Lesern in *Flash Fiction*

**Abstract**: Der Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit der Erforschung von Flash-Fiction, verstanden als Mikroerzählung, und betrachtet sie als eine Schreibweise, die sich erst in den letzten Jahrzehnten richtig entwickelt hat, wenn auch nicht ohne prominente Vorläufer, die bis in die Jahrhunderte der Literaturgeschichte zurückreichen. Es wird weiterhin auf die Definition und die formalen Merkmale von Flash-Fiction, sowie ihre typischen Strukturen eingegangen, sowie darüber spekuliert, wie Flash-Fiction einen Leser auf seine eigene, charakteristische Weise fesseln kann. Es wird behauptet, dass Flash-Fiktionen zwar die Grundlagen erzählerischer Anforderungen beibehalten, wie etwa die Darstellung von Ereignissen und die Fähigkeit, mentale Darstellungen von Handlungswelten zu erzeugen, sich jedoch hauptsächlich auf Untererzählung und Fragmentierung stützen und nicht ausreichend detailliert erzählen. Dies erfordert, dass der Leser trotz der Kürze der Flash-Fiction ständig kognitiv herausgefordert wird und hochverdichtete und intensive epistemische Erzählgefühle erlebt.

**Schlüsselwörter**: Flash-Fiction, Mikroerzählung, Leserreaktion, Kognition, Emotion, kognitive Narratologie.