

Storytelling in Miniature: Microfiction and Reader Participation

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Abstract

This article proposes that Iser's work on gaps and blanks, as well as recent enactivist-inspired cognitive-narratological extensions of Iser's work, can enlighten an under-theorized genre of experimental narrative, microfiction, typically identified as stories under 300 words (though often considerably shorter). The extreme brevity of microfiction results in stories that are similar, to a degree, to short stories, though experientially quite different; in the most thorough narratological treatment, William Nelles (2012) makes the case for a generic distinction between microfiction and the traditional short story. As I have argued elsewhere (2016), borderline-narrative texts (such as microfiction) can make for oddly compelling reading experiences, largely due to the increased degree of reader participation necessary in narrativization. A main point of investigation here is as follows: while there is general agreement that Iser at least somewhat underestimates the extent to which narratives are perpetually fraught with gaps to be filled in by readers, there is still arguably a noticeably greater gaps-per-capita (in a manner of speaking) in microfiction set against higher-narrativity texts; readers need to do more, in other words, to narrativize the typical piece of microfiction. Further, the extreme brevity of microfiction potentially affords readers a uniquely full experience of perceptual presence over the course of the micro-story.

Keywords

Microfiction, experimental narrative, cognitive narratology, reader participation

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1. «Deeply Natural» Narrative

In a January 2008 interview with the literary magazine *The Believer*, American author Lydia Davis confesses, «I am simply not interested, at this point, in creating narrative scenes between characters», suggesting that she is «shying away from a certain artificiality that I perceive to be present in many such scenes as written». Rather than constructing rich, fleshed out scenes, replete with meaningful dialogue and deep engagement between characters, Davis instead expresses a desire for a «deeply natural» narrative, of the sort that is «ongoing ... inside our heads» and «is spoken aloud if a friend asks a question». Such a desire is evident throughout her books, perhaps most clearly in the exceptionally brief story-like pieces that make up increasing percentages of her recent manuscripts.

Take, for instance, “They Take Turns Using a Word They Like”, from her 2001 collection *Samuel Johnson is Indignant*:

«It's *extraordinary*», says one woman.
«It *is* extraordinary», says the other.

Davis's invocation of natural narrative reasonably (if unintentionally) recalls Monika Fludernik's focus on narratives that are «“naturally occurring” or “constitutive of prototypical human experience”» (12). Indeed, “They Take Turns Using a Word They Like” manages to strip out artifice almost entirely, focusing less on narrative intrigue and more on what we might consider to be prototypical human experience: readers of this extremely short text are encouraged, it seems, to observe two women commenting on something that is, apparently, *extraordinary*. The importance of the ostensible subject — the extraordinary thing — is nil; the title of the piece urges us to consider not the extraordinary thing itself as the subject of the piece, but rather the women themselves.

Such a reorientation meshes with Davis's stance, too, as “They Take Turns Using a Word They Like” is, at best, only a borderline-narrative scene; readers are not so much encouraged to be concerned with the passage of time (only a few seconds pass within the storyworld), the target of the women's commentary (again, the title leads us away from such inquiries), or any changes of state the characters might experience from the beginning to the end of the eleven-word piece (the women do not seem to experience any state-altering events). But despite this relative lack of movement within the storyworld — two women agree that some unknown entity is extraordinary, and nothing more — a reader of the piece undertakes a surprising amount of legwork. Readers are likely to have some idea, if only below immediately conscious acknowledgement, of what the women look like, where they might be standing, and how their bodies are expressing, via gesture or otherwise, the emphasis placed on the particular words (*extraordinary* and *is*). The exceptionally curious reader, too, might have some claim as to what the women are commenting on — the identity of the extraordinary thing — though the layout of the story, again, seems to encourage the fleshing-out (or *filling in the gaps*) of other aspects of the storyworld before, or in place of, the extraordinary thing.

Wolfgang Iser's theorization of the active role of the reader in filling in the gaps inherent in narrative texts is among the longest-lasting of his contributions to the fields of narratology and response theory. This article proposes that Iser's work on gaps and blanks, as well as recent enactivist-inspired cognitive-narratological research that effectively extends Iser's phenomenological focus, can enlighten an under-theorized genre of experimental narrative, *microfiction*, typically defined as stories under 300 words (though often considerably shorter).

The extreme brevity of microfiction results in stories that are similar, to a degree, to short stories, though experientially quite different; in the most thorough narratological treatment, William Nelles makes the case for a generic distinction between microfiction and the traditional short story, arguing that stories become «not just quantitatively but qualitatively different» once they fall below (approximately) 700 words (87). As Nelles points out, too, collections of microfiction (alternately known as short-shorts, really short stories, sudden fiction, hint fiction, and minute stories, undoubtedly among other labels) typically feature dozens of authors trying their hands at exceptionally short stories. In this article, I will focus specifically on instances of microfiction strewn throughout Davis's manuscripts.

I find Davis's microfiction particularly compelling for two reasons: first, the sheer output is noteworthy, as a great deal of her story-like pieces fall below the 300-word threshold identified by editors of microfiction collections (however arbitrary such a threshold is); second, Davis's microfiction is not (that I have seen) marketed as such, but is instead woven into collections encompassing both longer and shorter pieces. In the

rare instances microfiction is given attention as a form, it is within edited collections specifically highlighting typically individual instances of microstories from authors that traditionally work in longer-form. Davis's work, on the other hand, offers readers a chance to experience microfiction in the wild, presenting these brief experiments as they are, notably shorter but still standing alongside other, longer pieces. As such, Davis could usefully be considered among the foremost practitioners of microfiction, second (perhaps) only to Franz Kafka's well-known shorter works (which are, importantly, demarcated as "The Shorter Stories" in *The Complete Stories*).

2. From Iserian Gaps to Enactive Perception

For Iser, gaps in narrative are the «points at which the reader can enter into the text, forming his own connections and conceptions and so creating the configurative meaning of what he is reading» (1974: 40). Readers are actively engaged in the construction of narrative experience, but as Porter Abbott notes, Iser limits readers' active supplementation of narrative texts to particular «points», therefore neglecting «the way gaps actually riddle narrative at *all* points and the way readers begin filling them in from the first words» (Abbott 108; Abbott points to earlier critiques of Iser's theory of gaps in Sternberg; Eco; and Fish). So while Iser should rightly be credited with centering the active role of readers in his theory of narrative, it is (and has been) necessary to build on his work, to push it further in order to get a more thorough, phenomenologically accurate idea of how readers experience narrative.

Cognitive narratologists have adeptly noted parallels between Iser's notion of gaps and the enactivist theory of perception (see, for instance, Caracciolo 93 and 97; Popova 79-80). The enactivist framework contends that human cognition is the result of a dynamic interplay between one's body, brain, and environment; cognitive activity is thus "enacted" through an active exploration of the world. This view of «active perception» is set against, most explicitly, what is known as the 'snapshot' view of perception, which supposes «that we build up an internal model corresponding to [...] experienced detail» (Noë 62). As the enactivist philosopher Alva Noë argues, though, the snapshot view of perception, with its reliance on internal models, brings about some theoretical difficulties.

Noë points to the example of a cat sitting, motionless, on the other side of a picket fence. We «have a sense of the presence of a cat even though, strictly speaking, you only see those parts of the cat that show through the fence» (60). According to the snapshot theory, we can perceive the cat because we build up, in our brain, a model of the cat. If we cannot see the entire cat, as is the case here, we can rely on our existing knowledge of cats to flesh out an internal model. Yet a mental model based partially on perception and partially on existing knowledge of a cat cannot account for the feeling of «perceptual presence» (Noë 60; see also Kuzmicova; Popova; and Irving) or what narratologists have variously referred to as immersion (Ryan) and experientiality (Caracciolo). The cat, enactivists would argue, *seems* present, as a whole: «We do not merely *think* that these features are present. Indeed, this sense of perceptual presence does not depend on the availability of the corresponding beliefs that we know, based on past experience, what the rest of the cat looks like (Noë 60).

The snapshot (or internal model) argument, then, would proceed as follows: the cat appears as 'whole' to us, despite being behind the fence, based on our brain's ability to construct a faithful model of the cat by pulling together what we *can* perceive in the mo-

ment and what we know of cats based on past experience. But, as Noë points out, «It does not seem to me as if every part of the cat is visible to me now, even though it does seem to me, now, as if I perceive a whole cat and as if the unperceived parts of the cat's body are present» (62). Enactivists suggest that perceptual presence — not only knowledge or belief of what the partially-visible cat looks like, but the feeling that we can perceive the cat as a whole — is due to our *sensorimotor* skills:

My relation to the cat behind the fence is mediated by such facts as that, when I blink, I lose sight of it altogether, but when I move a few inches to the right, a part of its side that was previously hidden comes into view. My sense of the perceptual presence, now, of that which is now hidden behind a slat in the fence, consists in my expectation that by moving my body I can produce the right sort of 'new cat' stimulation. (63)

We have a sense of detailed access to the world — and to the partially-visible cat — not due to a detailed model or representation built up in our brain, but because of our mastery of sensorimotor knowledge; we know that we can move around and obtain whatever details we might need, rendering internal models obsolete.

In the following two sections, I will approach microfiction from an enactivist perspective from two directions: first, I will consider some theoretical implications of the relative degree of gappiness in microfiction as opposed to a typical short story or novel, especially as it relates to narrativization; second, I will discuss the temporally-contingent nature of perceptual presence in reading literary narrative, with a particular focus on how the general understanding of presence is impacted by the extreme brevity of microfiction.

3. Gaps-to-Text in Microfiction

Noë's work on perceptual presence as enacted rather than snapshot or internal model-based theories is, like Iser's theory of narrative, heavily predicated on gap-filling. While Iser contends that gap-filling occurs at particular, key points in a text where readers can 'enter' and play an active role, narratologists building on enactivism acknowledge that the experience of narrative is entirely predicated upon readers filling in gaps at all points in the text. Yanna Popova, for instance, notes that readers engage in what enactivists call «participatory sense-making» (Di Paolo, Rohde, and De Jaegher 59-72): the meaning of a text is enacted during the interaction between reader and text; meaning and interpretation is neither fully the product of the reader nor the text itself. Popova acknowledges, too, that such enactivist approaches may push against Iser's theory of narrative: Iser's «main point is that textual structures [...] in some sense control reader response so that there are always certain limits imposed on reception processes [...] [It] is clear that, for Iser, textual meanings are understood as potentially 'given' in the text and then jointly realized through reader's involvement» (80). While the general notion is similar — both Iser and the enactivists agree that readers play an active role in the experience of narrative — the recent models are clearly far more reader-involved.

Reader participation is required to make sense of any text; literary texts, Popova notes, «have more gaps than other forms of communication; hence, they require more active participation» (79) in order to enact meaning and a sense of perceptual presence. Literary texts, in other words, require a higher degree of reader participation — in the form of filling in gaps, to keep with Iser's terminology — than, for instance, a shopping list (unless, perhaps, the shopping list is presented as a sort of experimental literary text itself). This much is, we could say, easily accepted: readers expend more effort — they

fill in more gaps — when reading a *story* than when reading a shopping list or some other non-narrative, non-storied text. Here, I will consider some examples of microfiction in an effort to discern whether microfiction typically entails a different degree of gap-filling than more prototypical stories; in other words, I will consider the gap-to-text ratio of microfiction.

Microfiction, as I noted earlier, is a paradigmatic borderline-narrative form; Brian McHale might call these texts «weak narratives», as they «evoke narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it» (165). While we could look at microfiction as narrative — and read it narratively — these stories are not the high-narrativity texts that populate most short story collections. We could look, for instance, at Davis's story, "Master":

«You want to be a master», he said. «Well, you're not a master».
That took me down a peg.
Seems I still have a lot to learn.

One reason Davis's microfiction stands out, especially in relation to the sort of microfiction that populates collections of the form, is her treatment of plot. In William Nelles's study of the form, he argues that «the actions narrated in microfictions are more likely to be palpable and extreme» (91). Davis's plots, especially in her shortest microfictions, never approach what we could reasonably call 'extreme' in terms of action; at most, we might consider them extreme in terms of *inaction*. The plot here — a man telling the narrator that, despite their wishes, they are not a master; the narrator, then, admits to having a lot to learn — could be taken any number of ways; even in three lines, the gaps spin almost unmanageably out of control if we attempt to find a particular key point at which to enter the text. Who is «he»? Who is the narrator? What does the narrator have to learn? In what tone or sense is the man referring to being «a master»? Extreme plots, actions, and themes are commonplace in microfiction; we can see this in Joe Schreiber's "Progress": «After seventeen days she finally broke down and called him "Daddy"» (93).

While not much longer than Davis's story, "Progress" is, as Nelles argues, implicitly rather extreme. The «progress» in the story appears to be that of a potentially non-consensual relationship — a progression toward the «she» breaking down. Just based on the title, "Master," a reader familiar with microfiction might lean in a similar interpretive direction. But the story itself does not imply extremity of any sort; the narrator seems to calmly acknowledge being taken down a peg. Familiarity with the conventions of microfiction, then, are not necessarily the only gaps to fill here.

As Nelles notes, too, short stories almost always have fleshed-out characters, while microfiction almost never does (92). We are given very little information, in the text itself, as to the identity of the characters. One seems to know a bit about being a master, while the other admits they do not. Microstories, per Nelles, often introduce «an explicit or implicit intertextual reference» in order to «greatly increase the functional or interpretive reach of a story [...] with the briefest of allusions a writer can [...] add cues, contexts, and even entire narratives» (95-96). As is common in microfiction, Davis almost never directly identifies her narrators or other characters, but the narrators often bear a striking resemblance to Davis herself; if the stories are not autobiographical, they could be taken to be autofictional, in some sense a merging of fiction and autobiography.

Filling gaps in this way, via intertextual allusions, "Master" comes to make a bit more sense: reading through the entirety of the collection, *Can't and Won't*, we see the senti-

ment of failed or misjudged mastery repeated several times. In “Ph.D.,” the final story in the collection, Davis writes:

All these years I thought I had a Ph.D.
But I do not have a Ph.D.

Capping of a collection largely devoted to frustration and failure, our narrator’s sudden realization that, despite what she thought to be the case (if only figuratively), she does not have a Ph.D.; she is not, despite apparent signs to the contrary, an expert or a master. We see this, too, in the title story, “*Can’t and Won’t*”: «I was recently denied a writing prize because, they said, I was lazy. What they meant by lazy was that I used too many contractions: for instance, I would not write out in full the words *cannot* and *will not*, but instead contracted them to *can’t* and *won’t*» (46).

Here, readers are not only filling in the gaps from the collective frustration expressed throughout the work at hand but also personal experiences of failure, especially failure for seemingly inconsequential reasons. And, finally, in an excerpt from “Writing”, our narrator admits: «Writing is too often about people who can’t manage. Now I have become one of those people. I am one of those people. What I should do, instead of writing about people who can’t manage, is just quit writing and learn to manage» (252). Over and over throughout the volume, a character-narrator — perhaps Davis herself, perhaps an autofictional blend — seethes with frustration over writing, failure, fellowships, awards, recognition, and balancing this with life itself. Revisiting “Master”, then, we can fill in the gaps: the «he telling the narrator she is not a master appears to be a person of some power — based on the other stories, this could be the implicit commentary of a judge from some writing award or fellowship the narrator was denied. Far from the sort of «master» as implied in the traditionally more extreme sorts of microfiction discussed by Nelles — and as implied in “Progress” — the reader’s participation leads us to the clear conclusion that the sort of mastery implied here is that of a writer.

Readers, then, are able to make sense of the story through participatory sense-making, through the filling of gaps, and meaning is (perhaps retroactively) enacted as one works through the other, similar stories. The story looked at most closely here, “Master”, is 27 words (28 including the title), yet is experienced as a far more complex work. Through intextual allusions to other stories throughout the collection, the subdued plot (typical for Davis though atypical for microfiction more generally), and the extreme brevity, readers do a great deal of legwork in turning this brief text into a richer narrative. There is, again, no set key point at which readers are cued to enter the text and actively engage; the reader participates in the construction of the story — in its narrativization — from the title through the last word, and feasibly quite a bit after that. Participatory sense-making, especially when it comes to stories this short, continues on into the reading of other stories; “Master” really only comes together within the context of several other similar micro/autofictions within *Can’t and Won’t* (and, it should be noted, beyond; for instance, Davis’s microstory “The Fellowship”, from her 2007 collection *Varieties of Disturbance*, deals similarly with the frustration and disappointment of writing).

While microstories are a fraction of the typical short story in terms of length, and while there may not be clear key points at which a reader is cued to enter the text (as Iser implies), there is no shortage of gaps for readers to fill in order to narrativize the text. Given the exceptionally brief length of the typical piece of microfiction, these stories seem to have a greater gap-to-text ratio than more prototypical short stories: there is less information we can take as ‘given’ in the text, because there is simply less text; as such,

there is arguably more legwork to be done — a greater degree of reader participation required — whether it is through the identification of intertextual elements (here, I point specifically to intertextual references to Davis’s other works) or past experience or knowledge brought to bear on the text itself.

4. Presence-to-Text in Microfiction

While microfiction texts take up far less textual real estate than most other narrative forms, these miniature stories do not prohibit the sort of perceptual presence that cognitive narratologists have identified as a key trait of literary experience. Building on the work of enactivists such as Noë, Anezka Kuzmicova points to the notion of presence as key to the experience of literary aesthetics: «the capacity [of language] to make absent phenomena present to the senses ... becomes vital whenever language is used and processed aesthetically» (108). Kuzmicova points to particular instances in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*, and Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s *Camera* wherein «explicit references to transitive bodily movement» afford readers the feeling of direct presence in the storyworld of the text (119). And as Popova notes (forthcoming), this experience of presence is time-based, allowing for short bursts of *being there*, of feeling perceptually present in a storyworld, and is thus typically confined to a small percentage of a given narrative’s real estate. The feeling of perceptual presence in a storyworld is not, then, directly correlated with our experience of perceptual presence in the real world; while Noë’s framework of active perception is simply how we exist in the world at all times, the feeling of presence diminishes over time when reading a narrative text.

Given the time-based nature of presence in literary narrative, microfiction is particularly compelling due to its far greater presence-to-text ratio than prototypical stories; readers, at least theoretically, could feel as if they are present in the storyworld for perhaps the entirety of the microstory, thanks to its extreme brevity. This is set in contrast to the rather small percentage of story-time readers tend to feel perceptually present in a more prototypical storyworld (Popova, forthcoming). The notion of perceptual presence in Davis’s microstories is more intriguing still due to their typical content: Davis’s desire to shy away from artificiality in a drive toward a deeply natural narrative logically extends into everyday, ultimately accessible scenarios. We can see this in a string of microstories dealing with the awkwardness and stiltedness of the very sort of deeply natural experience Davis is interested in. I will look at two of those stories here, both dealing with a travelling narrator, starting with “Short Conversation (in Airport Departure Lounge)”:

«Is that a new sweater?» one woman asks another, a stranger, sitting next to her.
The other woman says it’s not.
There is no further conversation.

Here, Davis descends further into the radically still plot. While an initial reading of “Master” could have spun into several different directions, perhaps zeroing in on the notion of professional frustration due to its close association with other stories in *Can’t and Won’t*, “Short Conversation (in Airport Departure Lounge)” seems to put the breaks even further on the idea of narrative progression; the story is seemingly *about* stillness. This continues, too, in a logically related story, “The Woman Next to Me on the Airplane”:

The woman next to me has many fast and easy crossword puzzles to do during the flight, from a book called *Fast and Easy Crosswords*. I have only slow and difficult crosswords, or impossible crosswords. She finishes each puzzle and turns the page, as we fly at top speed through the air. I stare at one page and don't finish any.

Again, we have a plot that is radically still (there is no extreme action) and intertextual references appear nil; the sort of participatory sense-making readers are likely to engage with here — and the manner in which they fill in the gaps in the text — are largely through perceptual presence. Looking again at the opening line of “Short Conversation (in Airport Departure Lounge)”, we can see how Davis affords the reader an easy opportunity to place themselves in the position of the woman asking a complete stranger about her new sweater and being told (indirectly, as the line is not quoted) that it is not new; the lack of further conversation — one, possibly two lines total — encourages readers to question the extent to which this was a conversation at all, and why the narrator would frame it as such. In short, the story experience of the story is that of a creeping awkwardness, allowing the reader — either in the position of the narrator or, perhaps, a close on-looker — to feel perceptually present to the uncomfortable exchange. So while readers are filling in more traditional sorts of gaps — the color and style of the sweater, the surroundings of the airport lounge, what the women are drinking, the body language of both women, perhaps especially the stranger being asked, apropos of nothing, about her sweater — we are also seemingly invited to fill in the gaps through this (imagined) perceptual presence: we can not only see but *feel* the awkward interaction by filling in the gap with our own sense of perceptual presence of the scene.

The second, longer story of the travelling narrator seems to work a bit differently, more in conversation with the earlier stories of writerly frustrations. In “The Woman Next to Me on the Airplane”, our narrator's brief inner narrative tells of her neighbor doing clear, simple crossword puzzles, while the narrator herself has «only slow and difficult crosswords, or impossible crosswords». The very slowness of the story — there are no real, state-altering ‘events’ to speak of that break up the slow telling — seems to invite the reader, again, to become present, as the narrator: the mild jealousy of how easily her seatmate's puzzles are, the near-impossibility of her own puzzles, and the resignation that none of those puzzles will be finished by the time the flight is over. Not only does this give a second layer to the initial travelling narrator story, slightly less awkward but no less uncomfortable, but it also recalls the writer-narrator from the previous section, again utilizing intertextuality (recalling stories from around the present collection) to make better sense of this brief story, filling in the gaps that narrative in general, and perhaps microfictions especially, necessitate. Again, there is no specific point of entry or key spot in the story for the reader to become actively engaged here — microstories are, again, too brief for readers to be cued to specific points of possible engagement — but we are, instead, filling gaps and making sense of the story via participation from the first words of the text, or even from the title. It stands to reason that the «impossible crosswords» our narrator refers to are her arduous writing tasks, fellowship applications, residency inquiries — the sort of professional failures our writer-narrator laments more specifically elsewhere. The key here, in these microstories of frustration, awkwardness, and stillness is the sense of perceptual presence — of bodily and affective identification being used to fill in the gaps of a narrative form that prides itself on extreme brevity.

5. Micro-stories, High Participation

Microfiction remains an intriguing yet thus-far under-theorized form of experimental storytelling. This article has argued that Wolfgang Iser's theory of gaps in narrative, and the active role readers take in filling those gaps, is a suitable entry-point for investigating the unique experience of reading microfiction. Recent cognitive-narratological frameworks, especially those building upon research into enactive perceptual presence, are effectively continuing the legacy of Iser's gap-based narrative theory, extending existing arguments that narratives are riddled with gaps at all points, not just key spots as Iser suggests. I have argued here that microfiction, while exceptionally short, is no less rich with gappiness and thus calls for a high degree of reader participation despite its relative lack of textual girth. I have further suggested that the particular appeal of some microstories is their ability to play with readers' experience of perceptual presence. While most narratives afforded experiences of presence in small quantities and in particular scenes, certain microstories — due both to their propositional content and their extreme brevity — allow readers to feel present for the entirety of the (brief) story. A final argument rests in the suggestion of a typology of microfiction, as there are clear experiential and structural differences in the microfiction of Lydia Davis, as examined here, and the sort of extreme-action microfiction that populates most edited volumes. While microfiction is undoubtedly a diminutive form in terms of textual real estate, it is nonetheless a rich trove of theoretical opportunity.

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