"FOR SALE: ELECTRONIC GENRE, BRIEFLY ANALYZED":

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF MICROFICTION ON LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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It's not so much the idea that is bothersome; it is the attitude behind the idea that seems so ominous. The emergence of genres like microfiction and flash fiction is unsettling only because no one seems to have taken a moment to be concerned about what it means. Making a piece of literature from 500 words or less in writing other than poetry is certainly a novel idea (no irony intended), but the forces driving that kind of development ought to leave every lover of great Literature more than a little uneasy. Too often the masses assume that a new development, because it is new, is *good*. In terms of genre, *good* means that it is assumed that the genre will benefit, or be a credit to, the art form. In the development of literature, *genre*, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is "a type of literary work characterized by a particular *form, style, or purpose*" ("genre", my italics). The changes in form, style, and purpose of new genres of literature, like microfiction, reflect changes in the way that readers think; such changes in tradition need to be evaluated in terms of the nature of their genesis as well as of their effects on Literature.

A significant change in the attitude of contemporary readers is being made. It's gradual, deserving of the passive voice of the previous sentence, but certainly less gradual than most changes that have occurred throughout written history that would compare in magnitude. It's the kind of change that doesn't catch the eye until it has reached the point where it makes the unwary victim suddenly stammer out, "what happened here?" It is a change that sets into the brain of every person in society, reader or not. The change is in the mind and it af-

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fects our fiction. Relieved, you may think to yourself, "it's okay, fiction is always changing," but that indulgent attitude towards literature is exactly what makes drastic changes like this one so subtle.

People are reading fewer "actual" books.

It's easy to see that people are reading fewer "actual" books. The world has entered the gates of a new world of technological wonder, and it's no wonder it has everyone more captivated in reading than books ever did. Technological advances like the Internet and the various "e-readers" have made reading, in some form or another, more popular than ever. People can gain access to written works that interest them more easily than ever before. As a result, more people have things they want to read than ever in the history of the world. Some suggest, though, that this wide standard of accessibility limits the depth of understanding that people are willing to seek out. Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* describes this effect: "My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski." (6-7) Carr argues that the way in which we think, as tied to the way in which we read, is physically changing as a result of this new pace and accessibility of information.

Many do not see this "speedier" approach as a problem. Carr quotes Joe O'Shea, former student body president at Florida State University: "'Sitting down and going through a book from cover to cover doesn't make sense,' he says. 'It's not a good use of my time, as I can get all the information I need faster through the Web.' As soon as you learn to be a 'skilled hunter' online, he argues, books become superfluous." (8-9) Proponents of the Internet will indicate that, indeed, research is much easier today than it has ever been, and for informational purposes, technology has made reading a book from cover to cover unnecessary. In reality, most people do not need books when they have

their other sources of info. As author David L. Ulin bleakly puts it: "This is why reading is over… Nobody wants to do it anymore" (8).

The opposing sides, those who hold to the value of books and those who prefer to take advantage of technology, seem to be speaking past one another. While literary traditionalists seek opportunities to dive deeply into the literature they read, the tech-savvy up-and-comers are happy to skim the surface of the information pool, grateful for the technology that makes life easier for them. Each side has its definition of the concept of reading and each is different from the other in its *purpose*. "Literary" reading is not for gathering information, but is primarily concerned with negotiating meaning from a text; most other types of reading however, aren't quite so concerned with meaning as much as with information. For one side, the pursuit is wisdom; for the other, knowledge.

This impasse in purpose seems immovable on the surface, but remember that form, style and purpose are all affected by the way the author thinks, and therefore are going to be affected by technology, and therefore are going to affect genre, whose definition centers on the "form, style, and purpose" ("genre") of the art. Despite the differences in purpose, there are other contributing factors in the formation of genre to consider.

Society determines the effect that technology has on art. Researching the development of microfiction, most of the sources that provide definitions of microfiction were on the Internet. Very few books have been published about the subject of short, short fiction, and to my knowledge, there are fewer than ten printed works with the term "Micro-fiction" or something like it in the title. Online, however, there are numerous pages with information about microfiction, with forums dedicated to the genre, how-to guides for the aspiring microfiction writer, and online collections or "magazines" of works belonging to this relatively new genre. It is almost a paradox: a genre of fiction with

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virtually no printed material, yet it is a new art form with a large volume of online material, and an even larger online following.

To help understand this online phenomenon, Craig Snyder, author of "The Microfiction Mini Site", describes microfiction as a work of fiction 500 words or less. Here is an example of a work of microfiction by Suzanne Baran from a site called *Six Sentences*:

> B. the Irishman actor had me over for dinner. He cooks really great fajitas. I write on his typewriter while listening to Lou Rawls on a vinyl. I told him I am expecting my period. He asked if women get it around the time of a full moon. "Interesting theory," I said, "but no." ("The Crimson Wave")

The only guideline for this piece was that there needed to be six sentences, no more, no less. Plot, character, and theme are up to the author.

Considering that the length is the only significant guideline to the form of the genre, there deserves to be a good reason for setting the word limit to the work. This is where the point comes back to the genre's online following. On his website, Snyder explains how Internet reading has developed with the Internet. He says, "a number of writers have grown with the web, choosing HTML [(the language of Internet code)] over paper, and creating personal sites to showcase their writing and web design talents" ("Microfiction Mini Site"). The Internet has become a medium of choice for many people, and new forms of writing have begun to exist solely on the Web (eg. blogs, tweets, RSS feeds, chats, etc.).

The problem with internet reading, Snyder goes on to explain, is that reading from a computer screen is unpleasant. The light from the LCD screen is hard on the eyes, so it is unreasonable for someone to sit down and expect to read a novel from a computer screen without getting a headache. People have developed scanning techniques with

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which they have no need to read anything longer than a heading to find what they want on the Internet. The solution Snyder and microfiction enthusiasts like him have presented is to create fiction that fits on a computer screen without having to be scrolled. "Micro Fiction," says Snyder, describing the difference between Microfiction and Flash Fiction, another genre of "short short" fiction, "is more strictly a web phenomena, is more suited by it's very nature to the screen environment." Thus, not only is microfiction shorter to read, but it is also suited perfectly for being read from computers and other electronic devices.

This form facilitates the access to the genre, allowing it to be as easily read from the screen of a PC as from the screen of a phone. This gives rise to many of the nicknames that have been given to microfiction, such as, "pocket-size story, minute-long story, palm-sized story, and my personal favorite, the smoke-long story (just long enough to read while smoking a cigarette)" (Casto, "Flashes on the Meridian"). These "bite-sized" works of literature make it possible to read something during the course of a busy day, but does that necessarily mean that it is a good substitute for spending time with longer works of the greats? Is one form as good as another? It is likely that, in matters of form, the debate will continue much in the same way as has the discussion of superiority of existing forms like poetry or short story: those for whom the form of microfiction fills a purpose or a need will value it, and those who do not value it will have their reasons as well. The issue, however, must extend beyond matters of form.

In the definition of genre, after the characteristic of form comes style. Just as the form of microfiction is not so prescriptive as it is minimalist, the environment created by the form determines its style. Several of the online informational sites about microfiction indicate that setting a word limit requires certain things of the authors of microfiction. One website simply entitled "Micro Fiction" says of the genre, "the challenge here is to write a piece containing all the elements of a

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traditional short story - a setting, one or more characters, conflict, reso-lution - **all in 100 words or less**" (Gardner). Snyder also weighs in on what he feels should happen in a work of microfiction. "The story," he says, "must be stripped to the absolute bone. No room for flourishes of any kind. The Micro must be leaner and meaner—it has no choice" ("Microfiction Mini Site"). Not to get too far ahead of the thought process at this point, but what is the implication of the feeling of needing to be rid of all flourishes in writing? What effect would a substantial movement of this persuasion have on the English language? Consider these questions as we continue our tour through the makings of the genre.

Quite a few web sites have cropped up carrying advice for would-be Microfiction writers. The how-to help ranges throughout ad-vice headings such as, "Length and form obviously matter", "Soul-stirring Language", and "Play against expectations" (Renshaw) on one web site to another site that provides a daily microfiction assignment such as, "Given the character of *an inanimate object*, write a story in the *romance* genre, using the subject *improvisational conversation* and the theme *coming of age*. If you feel extra creative, *add another genre of your choice*. Your word limit is *475* words" ("Microfiction"). Still others sites like *fifty word fiction* and *Six Sentences* publish the tightly constrained work of submitting writers, showcasing what they perceive as the artistic liberty of this compact genre. The growing popularity of this style of writing has people interested.

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Wondering why people are drawn to this genre of fiction brings into consideration its function, the final characteristic of genre. What does this fiction do? Why does it exist? Snyder's web site seems di-rected towards the answer to this question, and his response provides insight into the attitude behind the creation of the genre. Explaining the appeal of microfiction, Snyder says, "the short story, the scorned older brother of the novel, has seen a resurgence in popularity in recent

years, especially among those who surf the web on a regular basis. And if short is good, then **ULTRA-SHORT** is even better!" ("The Micro Fiction Mini-Site"). Saying that the shorter the work is, the better it is seems to be the prevailing sentiment of many of those who promote the genre. This mode of thinking is clearly based on fallacy, and can lead to dangerous suppositions about other important forms of literature. Phil Gardner, after describing that the "challenge [of microfiction] is to write a piece containing all the elements of a traditional short story" using very few words, gives away his not-quite-unbiased feelings about those who bother writing longer works. He says, "And to think some people write novels. *The fools*" ("Micro Fiction," my italics). In the opinion of those who use few words to create their images, if it can be done in fewer words, why shouldn't it be? It is as if they are attempting to say "any fool can spew forth a novel, but it takes real genius to get the point across in a super economical manner."

This alarming attitude is only alarming in that it comes from those who call themselves writers, whose craft relies on the flexibility, complexity, and beauty of language as its medium. Calling someone a fool for holding an opinion of art that is different than one's own begs the question: *if everyone thought the same way as me, what would the world be like?* With the opinion of literature held by these microfiction writers, given time, the English language would be reduced to an Orwellian "thoughtspeak", condensing ideas and images into tightly-wound connotation-doused words and phrases that carry all significance and no meaning.

To better understand this attitude, we must look at how it has developed. As mentioned earlier, the generation of people who are developing this genre are the kind of people who see a computer screen more than they see paper, so their medium of choice is clearly going to be the computer when doing their writing. Even beyond this, however, is the fact that most of the writing this generation does is specifically

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for the Internet. In what way has the widespread use of the internet shaped the "shorter is better" attitude?

Taking a step backward in history in order to move forward with this thought, a brief look at the history of reading and of books. Historically, the wealthy enjoyed all of the benefits of education and literacy. The rest of the population was rendered impotent in their quest to claw their way out of poverty as a result of their inability to obtain books and the practical knowledge that comes with a good education. One of the hallmarks of a wealthy estate was its library. The grander the estate, the more complete and well-rounded the estate's library (an interesting thought in light of the "shorter is better" argument). It was a mark of the owners' prosperity as well as his education. No desirable estate would be without an equally desirable library where one could pass the time enthralled by the classics or buried in mystery or searching through the science.

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Not to long ago, the typical American home had at least a shelf's-worth of books. It was not housed in the mansion library of the past, but it would adorn a study or other multi-purpose room separate from the rest of the house. Great titles and the names of great authors were displayed with pride and just the appearance of literacy enhanced the elegance of the home, regardless of how ordinary or mundane.

Although today's personal libraries are usually not comparable in their quantity (or quality) of books to the libraries of old, the acquisition of good books is still appreciated by many. The advancements in printing and improved public education, as well as the availability of inexpensive books has encouraged more people to establish some sort of limited library of their favorite works. If nothing else, one can always turn to public libraries as a great source of knowledge, inspiration and literature, as well as a fabulous addition to supplement the limited family library of past generations.

As time and technology have marched forth, we are spending less time at home and more time on the go, without a stable "base of operations." Pamelyn Casto, speaking of the hurried nature of current society, indicates that one of the possible reasons for the current rise in popularity of the short story is "because of the 'asthmatic' conditions under which we live—our fiction is reflecting the *out-of-breathness of modern life*" ("Flashes"). We have become a people constantly in motion, so there is never enough time to sit down and enjoy a long novel anymore. Instead, we seek out small pieces of information. As technology improves, the pace of life speeds up and instant information becomes more of a necessity than a luxury. With the construction of an information superhighway, more Americans have all of their books within a digital device; whether it be the Kindle, the Nook, the I-Pad, or a smart phone. These devices are made specifically for reading stories, and articles in an electronic format. Virtually any book, magazine or published white paper can be found in electronic format and is accessible from one of the many devices readily available to the public.

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Wendy Sutherland-Smith, in her article "Weaving the literacy Web: Changes in reading from page to screen," states that "the world of text is one of information, citizens must have access to information to internalise(sic) and refine it, through personal experience, to knowledge" (662). The amount of data that is considered important and basic for survival in today's world grows exponentially from year to year. As the need for information grows, the need to expedite access to this information also grows. If we need more information to survive, and the amount of information becomes greater with each passing year, there is also great pressure to allow us to input, or "internalize" all of the information into our base of knowledge quicker and more efficiently. As is expected, new technologies are developed, old technologies are adapted, and current technologies are made more

efficient, all in an effort to achieve the transfer of information as fast as possible.

This scramble spills over into the realm of literature and creates "smoke-long fiction" (Casto, "Flashes") at the expense of length, plot and character developments, and "frills" (Snyder, "Micro Fiction"). Again, referring to the purpose of the genre, it seems that the function of a microfiction is to give the rushed reader a quick fix of fiction as he/she goes about his/her busy business. Granted, for a busy person, every once in a while, it must be nice to feel literary for a moment of the day without having to open a book or spend much time reading and trying to remember prior plot. The problem is not in the immediate function of the genre, but what effect it has upon its readers and upon language.

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Although books can be read for pleasure and entertainment, historically, the initial purpose of books was to archive information and to benefit the reader. The nature of reading was to provide a way of communication and to preserve language, information, and knowledge. Considering the preservative function of literature, what is to be preserved when our literature does away with "flourishes" and removes the plot from all context? Years into the future, little will be understood about our culture from literature like microfiction because there is not enough room in the work to establish a context. Language traditions will be literally lost if our literature does away with the flourishes that make English such a versatile language. Microfiction has not shown itself to be interested in preserving historical or cultural understanding, nor has it demonstrated much concern for the preservation of language, but can only be bothered to generate brief images of abstract experiences.

With a book, the reader can vicariously live through the character in the stories. Marshall Gregory's "Ethical Criticism: What is it and why does it matter" states that "none of us rejects the opportunity to

enlarge ourselves by 'trying on' the lives and feelings of fictional characters" (38). Gregory's claim about vicariously living through the characters we read about was corroborated and expanded upon by Wayne C. Booth. Booth extends the notion of living vicariously through the characters to the conclusion that "stories are our major moral teachers" (27). Stories will continue to stand the test of time, but the development of how people read will continue to change. With technology making changes in the way we communicate, when reading stories through the screen, our understanding has had to change as well.

Consider this piece of microfiction, supposedly created by Ernest Hemingway, or at least by the Ernest Hemingway character in John De Groot's play called *Papa.* He says to the audience, "Would you like to hear a short story in six words? For sale: Baby shoes, never worn" (25). The *pathos* of the six-word story is undeniable, and possibilities it suggests are many and varied. The reader can imagine whether it is an ad in the paper or a sign somewhere, where such an ad/sign would appear, why the pair of shoes necessitates its own ad, why there is no other "baby stuff" mentioned other than the shoes, why the shoes are being sold, what happened to the baby who was supposed to wear them, for how much the shoes are being sold, et cetera. Given the leeway provided for interpretation, the possible moral lessons that can be gleaned from such a story are also many and varied. This story can teach anything from the grief of young would-be parents who have lost their newborn to the satisfaction of a nervous boyfriend whose girlfriend has just had a successful abortion. Anything on that spectrum is arguable because there is no contextual support, thereby leaving it up to the reader and his/her morals to decide what values are held within the story. In this manner, any story this insubstantial can serve not as a moral teacher, but a moral parrot, repeating to the reader the values he/she already carries.

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Without context, a story, like most Hallmark cards, can serve for a variety of value systems. The reader can usually read such a short story without having to stretch his/her imagination much at all. There are, however, some microfictions that can force a measure of that expansion that a lover of literature looks for. Take for example a story written by Craig Snyder of the *Micro Fiction Mini-Site* taken from his site called *Microdot.* The story is called "All Electric Trees Are Dark":

> In the spooky silence and dim nothingness that followed the power failure in the Dome, Rogers ushered his party, all reluctant to move as if zombies trapped in molasses, onto the path that led to City Park. Around them in the dark they sensed little knots of stranded pleasure seekers paralyzed by lack of will. They heard voices falling in on themselves, the dead air suffocating all sound. After some few minutes of panic and real fear they arrived at the entrance to the park. Rogers' wife Gail found the pavilion. "Here!" she cried, and they all sat, trembling, on white benches under the black trees, which were really just memories of trees, built of plastic forms and cunning wire (Snyder, "All Electric Trees Are Dark").

This story, unlike Hemingway's (which I will admit was an extreme example), carries a discernable theme, and by the end, the reader has a pretty good idea of some elements of the setting (electric trees indicate a futuristic city, and we know there is a power outage) and the general character of the guests of "Rogers' party" are pretty easy to figure out (their inability to cope with a power failure, that Rodgers needs to herd them, their unobscured fear), but of the character of the two named characters—Rogers and his wife Gail—the reader is given very little. This lack of development is not necessarily

weakness on the part of the story, but it indicates that the guests may be more important to understand than the other characters in order to understand the theme of the story, which seems to revolve around the effect of the power outage has on the people comprising Rogers' party.

That there are supportable analyses of this story indicates that some microfiction may succeed in sustaining some literary merit. Authors who succeed in creating meaningful themes in their writing are a credit to their art. Such stories are a credit to their genre. The problem, however, is that with the ease of publication afforded by the Internet, the good stories are few and far between. Because there are few books on the subject, there are no authorities to indicate which are the best stories. Because of the lack of authorities on the subject, it is up to the Web user to sift through the swarm of poorly written stories to find the good ones. Because of this sifting process, it becomes just as time-consuming to read good literature as it is to pick out a book and read good literature from it (with fewer pop-ups, I might add!).

The effect of such literature on the reader in this process of sifting can be varied, but with the ongoing trend of the rising generation being unable to read books it is difficult to say that encouraging less extensive reading is going to preserve literature traditions. The outlook of microfiction's affect on literature, at first glance, does not seem positive. Also, as I mentioned earlier, there are several reasons that would indicate that shortening literature can have a dwindling effect on language, reducing its capabilities, as opposed to enhancing it like most other literature seeks to do.

As a whole, however, it is most likely that instead of being a problem to literature, microfiction is a symptom of a larger problem on a larger scale than genre. The development of these genres of short short fiction more likely indicates that there is a problem developing with the way we are thinking than that our taste in fiction is becoming

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corrupt. Instead of thinking deeply about experience and existence, the information superhighway has the world glutting itself on information without stopping to ask why. Humanity is becoming less human as we compare ourselves more and more to computers and machines and cease to seek for meaning and wisdom. Information gives the illusion of having knowledge, which society mistakes for understanding, which seems an adequate substitute for wisdom.

Microfiction of itself is not a bad thing, but a reader ought to be aware that it is not a satisfactory substitute for the reading and language of other forms of fiction. It should be seen as celery stick of literature: it can be a great garnish for a colorless dish of a day, but man cannot survive by celery alone. There is not enough there to truly fill the true appetite for literature. For the literary soul of man to survive, the novel, the poem, and the short story are all essential parts of the diet of that soul.

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