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The Reader as Co-Author: Reading and Writing “Bedtime Story” by
Jeffrey Whitmore

El lector como co-author: Leer y escribir “Bedtime Story” by Jeffrey
Whitmore

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ABSTRACT

Flash fiction arguably requires more involvement on the part of the reader than other literary genres. In fact, because of its brevity, a flash story can only be developed (not necessarily completed) by the reader who thus becomes co-author of the text. In flash fiction there is very little room for the elaboration of plot and characters and yet a successful narrative, through a careful selection of words, can offer all the elements that readers need to write a larger story. This is what Jeffrey Whitmore achieves in his memorable flash “Bedtime Story”.

KEYWORDS: microrrelato, leer el microrrelato, Jeffrey Whitmore.

RESUMEN

El microrrelato, respecto a otros géneros, requiere presumiblemente un lector más activo y comprometido. De hecho, debido a su brevedad, estos textos solo pueden ser desarrollados (no necesariamente completados) por sus lectores. En el microrrelato hay muy poco espacio para la elaboración de la trama y los personajes y, sin embargo, un texto bien escrito puede brindar, a través de una selección atenta de las palabras, todos los elementos que los lectores necesitan para “escribir” una historia más larga. Es lo que logra Jeffrey Whitmore en su memorable “Bedtime Story”.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: microrrelato, leer el microrrelato, Jeffrey Whitmore.

1. The Reader as Co-Author: Reading and Writing “Bedtime Story” by Jeffrey Whitmore*

Flash fiction is not new and was not invented for the Internet generation to suit their increasingly hectic lifestyles and decreasing attention spans; in fact, it can be argued that it requires more attention and more involvement on the part of the reader than other literary genres.

All texts have traces, gaps, areas without information that readers have to fill in by themselves, but a short narrative, by its very nature, takes this notion to the extreme and readers must infer whole worlds from a few words only. Settings, plots and characters are merely suggested, evoked, rather than described at length: in successful flash stories, density and intensity of meaning replace density and effusion of words on the page.

In fact, flash fiction is the epitome of what Roland Barthes calls the writerly text, *texte scriptible*, as opposed to the readerly text, *texte lisible* (Barthes 15). Readerly texts are traditional works of literature that we know how to read and which have a certain transparency, unlike the writerly that are self-conscious and resistant to reading, thus compelling the reader to produce meanings. As Barthes points out “the writerly text is *ourselves writing*” (Barthes 16) and, indeed, a flash story can only be developed (not necessarily completed) by the reader who, to paraphrase Barthes, experiences the “bliss” of the text not only in the words that are there, but also in those that are not.¹

A flash is a fragment of a longer story that begins and ends off-page. In fact, most flashes hardly give any information about setting and characters or the cause for the conflict or incident described, which is not revealed until the very end. They often end with cliffhangers, leaving readers to imagine not only what happened before, but also what will happen next.

Flash stories are usually ambiguous and are often built around a final surprise or twist. Expectations are created in various ways, for instance, by titles inviting (mis)interpretations, or by unreliable narrators whose words cannot be trusted, or by the use of intertextuality.

Twists have always been popular in literature and film, but, if in longer texts and feature films, readers and viewers are given time to anticipate and appreciate the twist, in a flash story or in a short film they have no opportunity to do so. Only very accomplished writers and filmmakers are able to create works that are enigmatic without being baffling, containing the clues that the reader/viewer needs to visualize the bigger picture and make sense of the final surprise. In fact, a contrived trick played at the expense of readers’ intelligence will not encourage them to think any farther than the punchline. But a twist that has been carefully prepared for, will compel them to re-

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¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in any detail Barthes’ distinctions between readerly text/writerly text, text of pleasure/text of bliss, reading as pleasure/reading as bliss, or the most appropriate English translation for Barthes’ concepts of *plaisir* and *jouissance*.

read the story, perhaps repeatedly, in order to fill in the gaps from the clues in the text. It is by accepting this intellectual challenge that they become co-authors of the narrative.

Despite the popularity of flash fiction and the great number of flash stories available online and in anthologies, few offer those elements that the reader needs to “write” a larger story. Even fewer have the human interest that invites multiple readings or the rhythm that makes them perfect for reading aloud. “Bedtime Story” by Jeffrey Whitmore, however, is a gem that does succeed in achieving this.

It belongs to the subgenre of “55 Fiction” which dates back to 1987, when Steve Moss, the editor of *New Times*, a Californian newspaper, launched the “55 Fiction” competition. He asked readers to submit short stories of fifty-five words or less (not counting the title). The competition became an annual event and the best stories were collected in subsequent anthologies. The first, *The World’s Shortest Stories*, published in 1995 by *New Times* and reprinted by Running Press in 1998, opens with “Bedtime Story”. This flash has been reprinted in a number of different anthologies since then and has also inspired several short film versions.² It reads:

1. BEDTIME STORY

“Careful, honey, it’s loaded,” he said, re-entering the bedroom.
Her back rested against the headboard.
“This for your wife?”
“No. Too chancy. I’m hiring a professional.”
“How about me?”
He smirked. “Cute. But who’d be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?”
She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel.
“Your wife.”

Like a joke, this narrative ends with a punchline, but unlike a joke, which is a complete story in itself, it has an emotional impact that denies closure. In fact, jokes, just like so many flash stories which only deliver a punchline, belong to the category of what might be called “temporal humour” (Carroll 352). In a joke, the punchline explains the puzzle, but the answer is an absurdity or an incongruity meant to amuse the audience rather than prompt them to think. Conversely, when we are engaged in authentic puzzle solving, as in the case of “Bedtime Story”, we commit ourselves to making sense of how that particular piece of the jigsaw fits into the overall picture. Because of its emotional impact, this flash has the power to kindle the readers’ imagination, urging them to fill in the gaps: it is part of a more extensive narrative that “needs” to be told, and only the reader, as co-author, can do so by carefully examining the traces in the

² The success of the story is evidenced by its repeated appearance in anthologies (most recently in 2016 in David Galef’s *Brevity: A Flash Fiction Handbook*) and by the number of short films it has inspired: *Revolver Tango* (2004) directed by Pascale Marcotte, screenplay by Pascale Marcotte, with Chantal Dauphinais, Bobby Thompson; *Rendezvous* (2005) directed by Andres Nicolini screenplay by Andres Nicolini, with Laine D’Souza, Hannah Lavan; *Bedtime Story* (2006) directed by Paul Baker, with Kimberly Estrada, Gus Fraiha; *The Murder Plans* (2011) directed by Amaravadi S. Raman (as Raman Amaravadi) screenplay by Amaravadi S. Raman (as Raman Amaravadi), with Lanna Joffrey, Mark Levy, Tara Magalski; *One More Thing Before Vegas* (2015) directed by Wayne Yip, screenplay by Wayne Yip with Michael Greco, Zara Martin. All of them, with the exception of Paul Baker’s, are only loosely based on Whitmore’s story which is why they were given new titles.

text.

The title, “Bedtime Story”, creates expectations in the reader that are instantly dispelled. A “bedtime story” is a story told to children at bedtime to prepare them for sleep; it is usually innocent and has a happy ending. But, in this flash, it is immediately apparent that we are dealing with themes of violence and sex, and that the title is ironic.

Titles are extremely important in literature in general and in flash fiction in particular because, in flash stories, each and every word – literally - “counts”. Titles can guide readers, but may also challenge them by concealing and disguising. “Once the title is there”, writes Gerard Genette, “the only thing left to produce is a text that justifies it ... or doesn’t” (Genette 67).

“Bedtime story” relies on the literalization of metaphor, a type of ambivalence achieved by contrasting the metaphorical and the literal significance of a term, in order to reveal an ironic disparity between the two meanings. Literalization of metaphor is often used in flash fiction as a major ironic device and this is the case with “Bedroom Story”, in which a commonplace metaphor is introduced and then developed in such a way as to emphasize, instead, its literal meaning.

Readers become aware of the unsuitability of the ordinary metaphorical interpretation of “bedtime” as soon as they read the words “honey” and “it’s loaded”, and the reference to “the bedroom”: this is no “bedtime story”, but a story that takes place in a bedroom.

There are only eight lines in this flash story, but the author manages to increase the suspense, playing with his readers’ expectations and increasing the tension from one line to the next until the final resolution.

There are no descriptions of setting or characters and yet we clearly see the drama unfold as if on a stage before our eyes. The setting is suggested by only two words: “bedroom” and “headboard”. The man “re-enters” the bedroom, prompting the reader to imagine where he had been and what had been going on before he left. The woman is now “resting her back against the headboard”. Are they in a hotel room? Where did she find the gun? The man’s calm, laconic reaction to the sight of the gun suggests that it must have been kept somewhere easily accessible (perhaps the drawer of a bedside table) or else he would surely have protested if she had searched his belongings and found it. In turn, this suggests the setting is his bedroom, but as the reader discovers in the second line, the woman in the bed is not his wife.

The man’s first words (“Careful, honey, it’s loaded”) give a clue to his character and his relationship with the woman. This is reinforced by the omniscient narrator’s remark (“he smirked” and the man’s third line of dialogue (“Cute. But who’d be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?”)). From just a few words, the reader forms a mental picture of a conceited male chauvinist able to calmly discuss and smirk about murdering his wife.

The full irony in the text is brought to light in subsequent readings. Once we re-read the story, we appreciate the situational irony and the clues in the carefully chosen words that make up the text. The man is patronising the woman, he is self-confident and does not see her as a threat. When he tells her to be careful with the loaded gun, his concern is that she may fire it accidentally. This is all the more ironic once we know how well she can use a weapon. Even though she does not put the gun down, he keeps talking to her as if he is unconcerned. He seems to have no doubt that she approves of his plans to dispose of his wife. The gun itself is never mentioned directly, whether by

the man, the woman or the narrator. The man and the woman uses deixis (respectively “it” and “this”) and the narrator uses a synecdoche, “barrel”.

After the punchline and the realisation that the woman is a professional assassin, the relative terseness of her speech makes sense. Even though she is about to commit murder, she is calm (she has “her back rested against the headboard”) and in control. The words “she wet her lips” suggest that she relishes the moment and the reader is driven to think about the weeks or months (it cannot have been a very brief relationship or the man would never have confided his murderous intentions) that must have led up to this moment, and how distasteful she must have found an intimate relationship with her victim.

The third character in the narrative, the wife, is not physically present and yet she is the catalyst for events. The reader is told nothing about her, but can infer that she effected the introduction of the man and the woman, and told the woman where he kept a gun. Inevitably, the reader speculates about her: did she hire an assassin because she understood he wanted to kill her? He is unfaithful, but did she have other reasons? Was money a factor? These and other questions are left unanswered.

As discussed earlier, the narrator’s words are extremely important for suggesting setting (“re-entering the bedroom”, “her back rested against the headboard”) and characterisation (“he smirked”, “she wet her lips”). But it is the dialogue that is most revealing of character.

The speech of the two protagonists is quite different. His register is informal and intimate (“honey”), hers is brief and to the point. The markers of his style are “honey”, “cute”, “chancy”, “dumb”, “lady hit man” and he speaks in complete sentences. In contrast, the woman’s speech is terse and characterised by ellipsis and, in particular, the omission of verbs³ (this [gun is] for your wife?”, “how about [hiring] me?” “your wife [is]”) which is all the more ironic once we discover what a woman “of action” she really is.

The protagonists talk three times each and the story can be divided into three sections. The last remark in the third section contains the twist and the punchline. The so called “triple” is quite common in flash stories, in jokes, and in humour in general. A situation is introduced, then developed and the final line is the surprise twist, logically related to the first two, but unexpected.

The man’s final line of dialogue is a rhetorical question (“But who’d be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?”). Although they resemble questions, rhetorical questions neither seek nor elicit an answer: they function as emphatic statements that are evaluated against shared assumptions.

To be felicitous they require that discourse participants hold views in common. But in this narrative, there is a tragicomic misalignment in the speaker’s and addressee’s views and understanding. The man’s question fails rhetorically because the woman ignores the rhetorical intent and, unexpectedly, gives instead an informative answer. His plan, just like his rhetorical question, misfires (pun intended) and readers are left to speculate whether he has time to realize that he misjudged not only the woman, but also his wife.

³ In David Galef’s *Brevity A Flash Fiction Handbook*, a verb is added to the woman’s question (“What about me?”) to become “What about using me?” (62), affecting the rhythm and the style of her speech.

In “Bedtime Story” the pauses expressed by punctuation confer a cinematic rhythm on the dialogue so that the text resembles a fragment of a screenplay, and it is not surprising that it was made into a short film by Paul Baker in 2006 with only minor changes in the dialogue. It is interesting to see in practice how one reader, a filmmaker in this case, filled in the gaps in the story. The short film “Bedtime Story” (2 minutes in duration) is available on the director’s YouTube channel at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EAq44sDWAU>

In the new medium, the reader becomes the filmmaker, the camera takes the place of the omniscient narrator and the microphone records the dialogue. The plot remains unchanged, but the filmmaker removed “honey” from the sentence “Careful, honey, it’s loaded” and added “Now, that’s cute” to the original “Cute”.⁴ He also added music, a score which he composed himself and which recalls a specific film genre, the noir. The film opens with the music and a black screen, shortly followed by the title; even before the action begins, the mismatch between title and action is foregrounded.

The new medium has different requirements and the film must necessarily show all the visual elements which are not described in the narrative. Decisions had to be made as to the age and physical appearance of the protagonists, their clothes, their voices, their body language, as well as the setting (the appearance of the bedroom, where the gun was kept) and the location from which the man re-enters the bedroom.

It is interesting to see how the actors’ gestures and movements fill in the pauses in the dialogue marked by full-stops in the text. The secret of comedy (including dark comedy) is timing. Rhythm and timing are essential in preparation for the final twist and that is why punctuation is of great importance in this story. The filmmaker creates a pause before the man’s last remark, by having him light a cigarette and inhale the smoke, thus delaying the delivery of his last line and the final revelation that quickly follows. This is an example of how one reader, a filmmaker in this case, filled in the gaps on the basis of traces in the text. But so many other readings are possible.

“Bedtime Story” invites readers to write for themselves what preceded and will follow the events described as well as the personal histories of the characters and their interactions. What did the wife say to the woman about her husband? What will happen after the murder? Will they get away with it? Successful flash stories require readers to produce their own interconnecting and intersecting narratives: their writing begins when the author’s ends and it is in this co-authoring that the “bliss” of flash fiction lies.

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⁴ Whilst the additional words do not affect rhythm or characterization, the removal of “honey” is puzzling in that the word is consistent with his register and his attitude to the woman.

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