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**Flash fiction, prose poetry and ambiguity: The distinction between flash fiction and prose poetry on ambiguous terms**

Abstract:

Flash fiction invites the reader to co-create the story themselves. We propose that a level of ambiguity in the flash fiction text is germane. In flash fiction, ambiguity is created through the brevity of the piece with the purposeful exclusion of exposition, for instance, in a similar manner to prose poetry. We wonder, therefore, about the overlap, if any, between notions of ambiguity in flash fiction and prose poetry? Are the mechanisms of ambiguity employed in prose poetry any different from that of flash fiction? What elements are left ambiguous, and what is purposely left out? What are the differences between the two forms, if not on ambiguous terms? We propose imagination as the counterpoint to ambiguity.

Biographical notes:

**Cathryn Perazzo** is a PhD candidate at Deakin University, working on a novel and exegesis. Her research interests include creative writing theory and practice-led research. Cathryn's other writing interests span poetry, short story and life writing. She has published short works of both fiction and non-fiction. Cathryn is a member of Poets of Odd: a group of poets with publishing credits who have also jointly edited and produced an anthology of their poetry, *The cat and the philosopher went for a walk*.

**Sif Dal** is an independent researcher with interests in flash fiction and identity. While her creative work is predominantly flash fiction, Sif's Young Adult novel 'Hidden', which is being launched in 2017, focuses on issues of identity. Sif has several pieces of both fiction and poetry published in anthologies within Australia and internationally. Sif previously authored and presented the peer-reviewed paper, 'Identity in a Flash: "Smásaga", flash fiction and Icelandic Australian Identity' which was well received at the 19th annual Australasian Association of Writing Programs Conference in November 2015.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Ambiguity – Prose poetry – Flash fiction

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## Introduction

It is our aim to further the discussion about the boundary between flash fiction (sometimes abbreviated here to 'flash') and prose poetry. Anecdotally at least, this has become a contested space. As writers of short forms, we also ask ourselves: when we sit down to write, is it a story we wish to write, or a moment? We will explain how the answer to that question might mean that what emerges becomes either a piece of flash fiction or a prose poem. Somewhere along the continuum, if you like, that stretches between the two, rests brevity and ambiguity. We assert that there is a paucity of scholarship on the differences between flash fiction and prose poetry. We will outline, therefore, some of the differences and similarities related to the two forms. The primary prism will be through our own various creative explorations into the forms. We begin by addressing each form separately, along with our own creative attempts. The first of these will be Sif Dal's on flash, followed by Cathryn Perazzo's on prose poetry. We will express our attitudes to, and interpretations of, our own work, along with the implications for the reader of such concerns as the level of ambiguity the work corralls. We will examine what any overlap or distinction between the two forms might mean for our own writing, and, by extension, for other enthusiasts of flash fiction and/or prose poetry.

## Sif Dal on flash: Fragments suspended in and creators of ambiguity

Flash fiction, also known as, Short-shorts, Sudden Fiction, Smoke Long Fiction, Micro-fiction, Minute Fiction and many other forms (Chantler 2009, Howittt-Dring 2011, Nelles 2012, Tansley 2013), is fiction generally considered in scholarly circles to be under 1,000 words. Even though the upper limit is 1,000 words, many publishers of flash on the internet (where flash enjoys great popularity) prefer lower limits, pushing the envelope on writing very short fiction for greatest impact. The annual 'National Flash Fiction Day' competition, for example, calls for submissions of up to 100 words (National Flash Fiction Day 2014). On the Australian writing website 'Seizure', there is a page for flash fiction writers titled 'Flashers'; the submission guideline for digital publishing asks for pieces between 50 and 500 words (Seizure Online 2014).

While the definition of flash appears to be fluid and open to interpretation, it is not completely without rules. If anything can be considered imperative to the identification of a flash, aside from its brevity, it is that it arguably requires narrative. The same essential elements are expected of flash fiction as are applied to narrative of any length. As stories, they cannot simply be observations or lists of facts. While it has been argued that flashes can arise in the form of shopping lists, crossword puzzles, or even answering machine messages (Al-Sharqi and Abbasi 2015: 53), they must still adhere to the rules of narratives – that they have at least one protagonist (character), and that, in some way, that protagonist is involved in some form of action (plot). According to David Galef, author of *Brevity: A flash fiction handbook* (2016), within well-written lists there remain implied characters, an implied action.

In discussing the structure of narratives, Seymour Benjamin Chatman argues that Jean Piaget showed how various disciplines utilised the conception of structure: wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation (1978: 20–21). Chatman goes on to say that

narrative contains all three, and that in being whole, narrative is a sequential composite of discrete events and existents. The events, he argues are usually related and mutually entailing. Chatman gives an example, 'If we were to extract randomly from cocktail chatter a set of events that happened at different times and different places to different people, we would clearly not have a narrative (unless we insisted on inferring one…)' (1978: 21).

It is within this exception flash fiction finds itself. Chantler writes, 'The best short-short writers know that what is unsaid is as important as what is said' (2009: 47). Nelles and Aldama show flash fiction can be distinguished from stories and short stories in several ways besides length; there are discernible differences in how characters, timeline, and conclusions are managed. There is a stripping back of exposition to intensify emotional and psychological reactions in the reader, for example, through an emphasis on an epiphanic ending which dominates the narrative in word count and emotional impact, or through the careful selection of language to evoke recognisable tropes of a particular culture (Aldama 2013, Nelles 2012).

Germane to flash fiction, however, is its ambiguity. As Ashley Chantler offered up, perhaps as a challenge to writers of flash fiction, 'I will suggest ... as I have implied earlier that the best short-shorts are those where the reader is prompted to question and to write the unwritten' (2009: 45). What is unwritten provides ambiguity and encourages the reader not only to question, but to answer their own questions and become co-writers of the story.

## Flash fiction and pivoting

Applying Gustav Freytag's pyramid to flash fiction it is possible to identify what is eliminated from flash fiction stories, compared to other forms of narrative, to ensure economy of prose. Whereas Freytag identified several elements of narrative structure: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution (Martin 1986: 81), flash fiction discards most of these elements. It is safe to say flash fiction does not utilise exposition. It rarely finds itself situated at a point of rising action, either. Falling action provides no tension to hold the interest of the reader, and resolution offers little in the way of narrative. This only leaves climax as the greatest point of action; as a scarf tied to the middle of a rope, the climax is central to the tug-o-war between rising action and conclusion. From this it is possible to argue that climax is the narrative element in which flash fiction is likely to find itself most regularly situated.

In the introduction to Christine DeVine and Marie Hendry's *Turning Points and Transformations: Essays on Language, Literature and Culture*, DeVine writes, 'The climax or crisis of many narrative plots could be described as a turning point, a moment or event that leads to a discovery or a reversal, and finally to a resolution or denouement' (2011: xi). In fulfilling Chantler's challenge to writers of flash, it might be argued that the pivotal point in narrative, the climax, offers the greatest advantage of inference – of not stating – for writers to exploit. It is at this point in a larger, unseen, narrative that the reader is most readily prompted to 'write the unwritten' (2011: xi).

## Ambiguity in flash

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In describing ambiguity in flash fiction, Al-Sharqi and Abbasi write:

> Flash fiction writers deliberately sketch scenes with strokes of ambiguity to keep readers fully attuned to each word. They also withhold details regarding the story's characters, events, scenes and atmosphere that watchful readers try to compensate with an active imagination. (2015: 52)

While ambiguity may be considered a flaw indicating substandard writing, it is considered a strength when it comes to writing flash. Flash fiction employs a variety of ambiguities to invite curiosity and imagination in the reader. These include *lexical* – 'The boy struck the bat with a bat' (the word 'bat' has two meanings); and *syntactical* – 'Mary filled the hole with her sister' (did Mary and her sister fill in a hole together, or had Mary just finished murdering her sister and then dropped her into a hole?) (Sennet 2016). However, the fragmented nature of flash fiction plays the main role of ambiguity through the very nature of the form itself.

## Fragmentation in flash

It is perhaps prudent to begin this segment by defining the common usage of the words 'ambiguity' and 'fragment'. For this practicality I turn to *The Oxford Dictionary* which allows the definition of ambiguity – 'The quality of being open to more than one interpretation' – to piggy-back off the definition of a fragment – 'A small part broken off or separated from something', insomuch as the interpretation of a fragment will necessarily be open to more than one perspective as it floats free of context (Oxford Dictionary 2017). Santilli argues that 'the fragment rejects closure', and in as much as it does so, it remains in a state of becoming because it is never quite completed or whole (2002: 44).

There are several varieties of fragmentation which may act individually or simultaneously in a short narrative – a flash – to create ambiguity. These include historical, spatial, contextual, and sequential (referring to collections of short narratives) forms of fragmentation (Bradshaw 2008, Bruns 2014, O'Donoghue 2005, Santilli 2002). The most practical course for illustrating the fragmented and ambiguous nature of flash fiction, is to analyse one of my own flashes.

### Hypnagogic

She lay. Eyes shut. The mattress cradled her like a mother. Her world was full of the future – content.

He flung open the door, marched across the room, snapped open the wood blinds.

Her eyes blinked in the surge of light, unfolded though she willed them not to be. The world of possibilities retreated from the smoky rays of light. Summer stretched her callous fingers across the room to touch the – suddenly empty bassinet. (Dal 2014)

This piece contains syntactical ambiguity; this technical mode of ambiguity was not considered useful and would have resisted the economy of the piece. However, a lexical ambiguity is employed to stimulate curiosity in the interplay of words, and I will discuss this later in the analysis.

Addressing the fragmented nature of this piece will be my first port of call. Immediately, it will strike the reader that this piece is short, consisting only of three paragraphs and a total of 77 words, including the title. This spatial fragmentation serves the purpose of informing the reader that their commitment need only take a few moments, but that within that time, there is great likelihood they will not get the 'whole story'. Already, spatially, the piece is identifying itself as a fragment broken away from a larger narrative.

The title of the flash is crucial to setting the scene in this piece. The word 'Hypnogogic' is not an 'everyday' kind of word, and therefore suggests this story may not be about an everyday event. The use of this word is designed to immediately engage the reader's curiosity, but also, for those readers who are aware of the denotation of the word, it primes them that there is a dreamlike quality or context to the narrative.

The story begins in medias res, which tends to be the modus operandi of flash. 'She lay' offers no history, and no context. We cannot say why, or where she lay, or even who 'she' is. We are simply dropped into the middle of a scene and expected to glean clues from the words – as few as they may be. The first clue comes in the phrase, 'The mattress cradled her like a mother'. She is on a mattress, perhaps in a bedroom, or a hotel room, or a hospital. The use of the imagery here suggests a maternal quality to the narrative.

Then the focus suddenly shifts: 'He flung open the door'. There are now two characters in the story and, juxtaposed with her lying down, and her contented state, his actions are swift, aggressive. Is there something to be gleaned from this sudden change of atmosphere? Is 'he' in some way abusive, or frustrated, or overly excitable?

'The world of possibilities retreated': here is a sense of sadness, perhaps disappointment; 'Summer stretched her callous fingers': again a juxtaposition of 'summer' – which is often associated with light and warmth – and 'callous fingers' suggesting something more sinister, perhaps cruel; something that is not what it seems. There is also a lexical ambiguity to find in this phrase, a playing with words that counter expectation. 'Callous' meaning *cruel* replaces the stronger association of 'calloused' meaning *hardened*, which is more commonly associated with hands and fingers, creating ambiguity of intention. Is this a mistake on the part of the author, or a meaningful interchange of concepts?

The final phrase, 'suddenly empty bassinet', offers the slimmest of clues, which, set in the context of contentment, aggression, sadness and cruelty suggests something greater than what is actually written. It is now up to the reader to puzzle the pieces together and come to a conclusion, in terms of both reflective understanding and narrative completion of the scenario offered. As with other genres, such as movies – *The Sixth Sense* (Marshall et al 2000), where the viewer discovers at the end that the protagonist is in fact, dead springs to mind – the piece may require a second read to make sense of it. With not much continuity within in the piece, and with the sudden shifts of mood, this fragment, with its economy of words – most particularly exposition – is an exercise in ambiguity.

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**Cathryn Perazzo on prose poetry**

What, then, can be said of prose poetry, itself a brief form? Curiously, of the two prose poems of my own that I will analyse, one is longer than the flash fiction piece already presented by Sif Dal. Kevin Brophy reflects on his impression of the prose poem as fragment, just as Dal has suggested of flash in this essay, but with a narrative that, when present, recedes into the background:

> When I find myself inside a prose poem, I find that there is, as in prose, narratives, even possible novels – but the narrative is never the point. It is a force more or less present. I find there is an exchange or conversation between imagery and narrative; and for me there is a fragmentary construction. (Brophy 2002: 6)

Dal and I will come back to comparing and contrasting flash and prose poetry, including the common overlap of brevity and absence of exposition, both of which contribute to ambiguity in the reading. First I will continue with a brief examination of the prose poem in generic terms, including examples of others work and my own.

Hetherington and Atherton have spoken of the absence of profile and certainty surrounding the prose poem: 'This is a form that is widely written, yet as a significant part of contemporary literature in English it exists in a kind of critical half-light' (2015: 265). Comments from prose poets themselves suggest they 'are often uncertain about how their works relate to established literary forms and genres' (2015: 265). They go on to argue that 'Poetry and prose, as general terms, tend to defy precise definition if only because some prose works are indisputably 'poetic' and some poems tend to be prosaic' (2015: 267).

I note in passing that there is, of course, a distinction between prose poetry and lineated poetry too, which I won't dwell on here since it is not the subject of this essay. Briefly, however, to help us distinguish between lineated poetry and prose poetry, and to enhance our understanding of the prose poem, here is a clever demonstration from Jen Webb:

> **Against anxiety**
>
> Lineated poetry costs too much. I shuffle the line breaks here and there, fret about the length of stanzas, move metaphors in and out; I select and reject descriptors, panic, hit delete. How to know for sure which line hits its note, and which slides off key. Where to place the line break. How to find the breath. The page stretches out, blank, and I am blank too. (in Atherton et al 2016)

She ingeniously employs the prose poem to expound on creating the lineated poem.

Given the apparent difficulty of pinning down prose poetry, I would like to contribute my take on it by considering what I think of when I sit down to write a prose poem, with the hope that it might be useful to our purpose. I must point out that while I have enjoyed writing lineated poetry for some years, having long ago faced my fear of reading or writing any poetry, I consider my dalliance with prose poetry a relatively recent affair of months, as I began to encounter the resurgent buzz about prose poetry and want to experiment with it myself. In delving into my thinking on the prose poem for this essay, I realised, however, a connection of mine over years that I hadn't really

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understood until now.

When I first encountered Ania Walwicz's well-known 'Little Red Riding Hood' almost two decades ago, I didn't know I was reading a prose poem. It was so different from poetry I had encountered before, it had such a drive, such a beat, such mischievousness, that it had quite an influence on me. Sometimes I would practice imitating her style, in scraps still buried in the dark of my own computer hard drive. In recent times, though, when I examined the prose poem as a form, from the perspective of writing one, I remembered Ania's poem and its effect on me:

### Little Red Riding Hood

I always had such a good time, good time, good time girl. Each and every day from morning to night. Each and every twenty-four hours I wanted to wake up, wake up. I was so lively, so livewire tense, such a highly pitched little. I was red, so red so red. I was a tomato. I was on the lookout for the wolf. Want some sweeties, mister? I bought a red dress myself. I bought the wolf. Want some sweeties, mister? I bought a red dress for myself. I bought a hood for myself. Get me a hood. I bought a knife. (Walwicz 1982: 7)

What follows are a couple of attempts of my own, with some analysis, primarily from the experience of writing them. Neither are intended to read like the aforementioned example from Walwicz – a long-time and playful proponent of the form (McCredden 1996) – but there is a pleasure of recognition for me that some of the characteristics of her poem are what I aim to make present in mine. Some of these are commonly understood to go towards the make-up of a prose poem, such as the look of the paragraph, and sentences (though her sentences are arguably a matter for play, since they skip the usual grammatical rules). I see in hers, too, other aspects I find I am trying to introduce as I write a prose poem myself, like repetition, like the sharpening of sensory communication, the thump of words like 'red'.

### Geriatric Mother

I think you would call it a mercy fuck. I couldn't resist his eyes, reminding me of when we were young, of when we weren't strangers, well were less strange, not *e*stranged. Now, a month later, even though it would be a medical miracle, I am at the chemist buying a pregnancy test. I am 51. It is inconceivable, pardon the pun. All I know is the nausea feels like the first time. My breasts are tender, too, or is it just that I have been squeezing them so often and so hard checking since the sick feeling started? The test will be easy enough, fast. Wait for a good stream, preferably the first of the morning, after the kidneys have done their night's work. I would rather know now than past the point of no return, as they say. At the counter I lie the oldest of lies: *It's for a friend*. (Perazzo 2016)

As a writer of a number of different creative forms, flash fiction, and now prose poetry among them, I make a decision about how I would like to express a creative idea. Why, I find myself wondering, did I think to express the poems here in prose poetry rather than flash? Partly, I wanted to try writing prose poetry, as I have already mentioned, but first I needed an idea I thought would work as poetry, for these ideas that I expressed a number of months ago as prose poems and selected from to include in this essay.

For me, an idea I might have could translate into a poem, or be morphed into a prose poem, but it is unlikely I would attempt to write that same idea as flash. What choices, then, am I making when I'm writing prose poetry, as opposed to flash? What are the main aspects I notice about 'Geriatric Mother'? It is compressed. It is a moment, in this case with a brief flashback. I've aimed to heighten that moment; it draws on the senses – as does descriptive writing in general but here there is a compression of detail, the alliteration of the s's in the 'My breasts' sentence, to enhance sound and rhythm. It suggests a larger backstory, just like flash fiction. We might wonder about context, about how this fits into a bigger story, but I choose to leave this ambiguous. It might tell the tale of what happens after 'she' applies the pregnancy test, for instance, but instead focusses on the moment of purchase, and the narrator's feelings in that moment, including her embarrassment that leads to the lie. It's a distillation of that moment. The last line aims for a rounding out, a kind of signing off, or pay off, to use advertising parlance.

What else do I notice when I write prose poetry? What about in the following poem, 'Turnaround'?

### Turnaround

It's kind of discombobulating finding yourself in a different vehicle, learning the bits and bobs, like how the gear shift moves, like how to run the air con, like concentrating so hard on doing a u-turn in a strange vehicle that you nearly clean up a cyclist, as you're parking by the Swan River. After he did the 'fongool', lifting the finger – and I sat for a moment because I had not even seen him at all – I wanted to drive after him, wind down the passenger-side window and call out, 'but I love bike riders, I'm a rider myself!' (Perazzo 2016)

I observe even further compression, and that I am straight into the moment, with an emphasis on tone, second person, conveying a feeling, voice. I am very quickly wanting to establish a character and a take on things, which I think is true of both pieces, as well as still wanting an 'ending'. There is a concentration on character, but I am not thinking of plot per se, which is a key factor that influences my choice of form. It is also closer to nonfiction than fiction, as my poetry generally is. It comes down to what I envisage for that piece, and what I prioritise in the writing.

I also note the repetition, particularly when I read it aloud: the 'discom*bob*ulating' and 'bob', the 'like/s'. I also noticed the following adjustment I made to the poem, which is illuminating, I think, on how I work with language in a prose poem. After I put this poem into the essay draft, I added in the following edit: 'lifting the finger', to follow 'After he did the "fongool"'. I did it to clarify the 'fongool', but I also worked on alliteration and consonance. I thought of saying 'raising the finger', but went with 'lifting', because of the visual and aural pleasure it gives me, with the repetition of the 'f's: 'A*f*ter he did the '*f*ongool', li*f*ting the *f*inger'. This approach and attention to details is more like writing poetry than flash for me, as the form is more 'refined'.

To an extent, this is the way I might approach a lineated poem, but the emphasis is different without the line breaks. I now find myself, when I think of an idea for a poem, actively tending towards the prose poem. I think in part I am enjoying bringing the tools of poetry to bear, with an intensity of repetition, imagery and metaphor, but in a form

that looks like prose; I will be intrigued to see if this trend continues.

…

We would now like to draw together some similarities and differences we have identified between the forms of flash and prose poetry, taking into account our own experiences of writing them, as demonstrated so far in this essay. Our task is complicated because, in addition to previous remarks made on the difficulties, further evidence comes from observing that publishers themselves cannot agree. A piece that in one publication might be considered flash might be published as prose poetry in another. The publishing context can play a part (Brophy 2002: 5).

**How are they the same?**

For one, they generally have the look of prose, the shape of a paragraph; both are fragments, with the open-endedness this implies. The fragment, as Sif Dal has outlined, floats free of context (it is a fragment resisting closure, in a constant state of becoming); ambiguity just happens, because of the brevity – requiring the reader to fill in some of the gaps; and, both may have an 'epiphanic' ending.

**How are they different?**

At a basic level, one is prose and the other is prose poetry; prose poetry is more likely to be a moment; there is the expectation of the reader that a flash piece might be part of a larger story, which wouldn't necessarily be true of the reader who is expecting to read a prose poem. Dal contends that in flash there is always a bigger story – the fragment is never the whole story; though both might contain character, flash requires character+plot; prose poetry doesn't necessarily contain that pivotal moment of story where the change occurs; and we suggest that while prose poetry can engender contemplation in reference to the emotional and psychological impact of the piece, flash requires reviewing the piece for clarity and sense making – as with Dal's earlier example of re-viewing *The Sixth Sense* (Marshall et al 2000) to see the clues you missed during the first encounter.

Inevitably, there is overlap of the forms, and our research suggests the similarities between the two are more pronounced than the differences. If you imagine a continuum with flash at one end and prose poetry at the other, in the middle there is bound to be crossover (see Figure 1). For instance, in the middle, the prose poem might hint at a story, and/or involve at least one character. Flash might be written poetically, and drop us straight into the heart of the moment, in the manner of the prose poem.

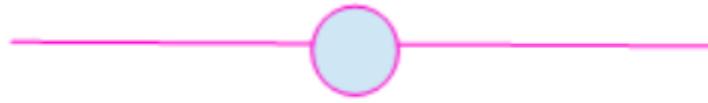***Flash fiction***                                                    ***Prose poetry***



Figure 1: Flash to Prose Poetry continuum.

It is only at the far ends that we come close to pinning down differences on the continuum. Even still, prose poetry has difficulty remaining at an end of a spectrum, as it draws together both prose and poetry in such a way that neither is it rest. According to Hetherington and Atherton, 'In its creation of a new genre that is at least two genres at once, it emphasises the instability of what may otherwise look fixed and known, also emphasising what is fluid and coming-into-being' (2015: 276).

Perhaps the perspective of the writer is the thing, the writer's decision on form, and the rest is up to the reader. Shane Strange suggests:

> One could argue that poetry doesn't rely on narrative, or that prose doesn't have the capacity for description of feeling or moment that poetry has. It seems to me both of these arguments can be undermined by a look at the current dynamics of both poetry and prose. I'm thinking particularly here of the fuzzy boundary between those very short forms of prose fiction like 'micro-fiction' or 'flash fiction', and prose poetry. What really distinguishes these forms seems to me to be the writer's self-identification of the genre they are operating in. (in Atherton et al 2016)

Whatever the two forms' differences, subtle or otherwise, in their fragmented brevity we proffer that they are often aligned on ambiguity.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, this essay is exploratory not prescriptive. There is arguably a freedom that comes with the undefined, perhaps even the indefinable. We have the liberty to write according to *feel*. Does this feel like flash, or does it feel more like prose poetry? When an idea pops into our minds, asking to be expressed, this is sometimes the question we ask ourselves if we write in different forms. It might be a matter of personal preference for one form over another; the novelist might never consider prose poetry, for example. But when genre or form is fluid, those who lean towards a more concentrated form of writing, whether that be poetry through to short fiction, may well welcome the fluidity that comes with a lack of classification. We allow for ambiguity within and *between* the forms.

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