

Flash: Time and Space

This analysis of the work of Robert Walser and Franz Kafka has attempted to establish why flash fiction is so popular today by responding to criticism that disparages short fiction and our attention spans. Firstly, there is nothing lacking about flash fiction, be it the content, the style, or the language. We find that “there is so much going on inside a [flash fiction] that it feels bigger than its small space on the page allows” (Howitt-Dring 57), and it is this paradoxical presence of absence that creates a false impression of lack, thereby emphasizing the implicit elements of fiction. Length as a factor has been identified as unimportant; however, it is an attractive theory because flash fiction does not take long to read. Yet flash fiction is “not as recent a form as some may imagine, as it has historical precedents [all over the world], where it has been used for many centuries,” and, therefore, despite “their ties to our contemporary culture,” they are not a product “created to satisfy the small attention spans” associated with contemporary society (Howitt-Dring 49). Although not a product of our modern lifestyles, the form fits seamlessly into it. This does not mean that the contention that our attention spans have become shorter because of our digital culture, or that “purposeful doing is now shadowed at every step with the possibilities of distraction” (Birkerts 170), should be outright rejected. To a certain extent, there is truth in these types of claims; however, it is not necessarily the idea that our attention spans are shorter, but that, like our lifestyles, our attention spans have become fragmented. Perhaps our attention spans are the same, except they have been compartmentalized so we can divide ourselves between the various aspects of modern life that demand our time. Birkerts argues this has happened because there is “too much information,” and so we “graze it lightly, applying focus only where it is most needed”; therefore, we “orient ourselves with a necessarily fractured attention” (Birkerts 147). More accurately, Lyons observes the shift in our lifestyles and acknowledges that “the regulated working day allows only short fragments of reading time, which must be seized in the interstices between home and work and sleep, in lunchbreaks, on commuter trains” (Lyons 185). We must take advantage in today’s world of any moment that does not remove

us from our pursuing what Kafka would have called our happy distractions, whatever they may be.

At the same time, we do experience instant gratification when reading flash fiction because it takes so little time to consume. It is for this reason it could be claimed that flash fiction has become more popular because it seems to pander to a shortened attention span. This is because the digital world, fully integrated with our physical existence, means “more and more people are being persuaded to access their culture through screen portals, ordering up what they need for their Kindle, their iPod, their nightly watching streams” (Birkerts 72). This sense of immediacy is something readers may expect from their fiction, too, but readers and writers of flash know this is not always true. It is true that an entire flash can be read in moments; however, instant gratification is not always attainable—nor should it be. Flash fiction demands the reader’s attention and does not accommodate distraction. Without concentration, one might assume flash fictions have nothing to say, which is not the case. The internet has provided an appropriate space, a seemingly unlimited one, for the publication of flash fiction; the text is of a length we can quickly consume in between the moments of our fragmented lives and is accessible wherever we are able to attain a connection. When Walser and Kafka first began publishing stories, they “appeared in magazines and newspapers,” which was “typical of the literary scene at the time” (Ryan 62), and nothing has changed; there are a vast array of online magazines and journals publishing flash fiction, among other forms of literature. Even though flash fiction and other variants have been around for centuries, flash fiction has found its right time and space within our modern, digital, fragmented lives. It will only continue to increase in popularity.

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