

**UNDERSTANDING FLASH FICTION BY THE SIX-WORD STORY:
“FOR SALE: BABY SHOES, NEVER WORN”**

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ABSTRACT

Literary work never limits itself to any type or idea. Discussing fiction, sometimes we do not mention flash fiction: a type of very short story, even only a few words, but can contain so many interpretations according to each reader. This study shows the history, elements, and characteristics of flash fiction as a type of prose. *For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn* is one of the well-known flash fiction stories. Although generally attributed to Ernest Hemingway, the link to him is unsubstantiated. We can analyze this six-word story into every two words of each sentence: the meaning of “*For Sale*”, “*Baby Shoes*”, and “*Never Worn*”. In this way, we can have many interpretations for each word and also the meaning as a whole.

Keywords: Prose, flash fiction, six-word story

ABSTRAK

Karya sastra tidak pernah membatasi dirinya pada jenis atau ide apa pun. Berbicara tentang fiksi, kita jarang menyinggung tentang fiksi kilat: jenis cerita yang sangat pendek, walaupun hanya beberapa kata, tetapi bisa mengandung banyak sekali interpretasi bagi masing-masing pembaca. Studi ini menunjukkan sejarah, elemen, dan karakteristik fiksi kilat sebagai jenis prosa. *For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn* adalah salah satu cerita fiksi flash terkenal. Meskipun umumnya dihubungkan dengan Ernest Hemingway, kaitan ini tidak memiliki dasar. Kita dapat menganalisis cerita enam kata ini menjadi dua kata dari setiap kalimat: “*For Sale*”, “*Baby Shoes*”, dan “*Never Worn*”. Dengan demikian, kita dapat memiliki interpretasi untuk setiap kata dan juga artinya secara keseluruhan.

Kata kunci: Prosa, fiksi kilat, cerita enam

1. INTRODUCTION

The title says it all:

For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn.

In total, there are six words. Only six words.

In the usual way of learning fiction or prose as one of literature genres, we always discuss four types of fictions: (1) short story, (2) novelette, (3) novella, and (4) novel. They depend on the word counts. For example, The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America specifies word lengths for each category of its Nebula Award categories:¹

- Short Story: less than 7,500 words;
- Novelette: at least 7,500 words but less than 17,500 words;
- Novella: at least 17,500 words but less than 40,000 words
- Novel: 40,000 words or more.

Short story is defined as less than 7,500 words. However, there are types of “very short” in this kind of short story. This is called as **flash fiction**. Its average word count ranges anywhere from five to 1,500 words, but the consensus is that the maximum tops out at 2,000.² Because of this simplicity, flash fictions leave so many holes to be interpreted by each readers according to their perspectives.

For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn is one of the well-known flash fiction stories. Although generally attributed to Ernest Hemingway, the link to him is unsubstantiated.³ Hemingway scholars generally agree,

¹ Nebula Awards, “Nebula Rules” , <http://nebulas.sfwaworld.org/about-the-nebulas/nebula-rules/>, accessed on 10 May 2020.

² Gilead, A. (2008). How Few Words Can the Shortest Story Have? *Philosophy and Literature* 32(1), 119-129. doi:10.1353/phl.0.0009.

³ Slate. “Did Hemingway Really Write His Famous Six-Word Story?” <https://slate.com/culture/2013/01/for-sale-baby-shoes-never-worn-hemingway-probably-did-not-write-the-famous-six-word-story.html>, accessed 10 May 2020.

though, that it isn't outside the realm of possibility, given Hemingway's history and style. Regardless, this shortest of short stories will live on in Hemingway lore. Like other flash fiction, also give us an opportunity to be interpreted.

2. THEORY

Flash fictions can also be called with many other names: micro-fiction, micro-stories, short-shorts, short-short stories, very short stories, sudden fiction, postcard fiction, nano-fiction, nanotales, postcard fiction, or napkin fiction. Its focus isn't necessarily on plot or characters, though it should still have both. Instead, the emphasis is placed on movement: each sentence must peel back a new layer that wasn't visible at first. If a line (or even a word) doesn't progress the story or reveal more about a character, it probably won't belong in this medium.

Categories of Flash Fictions

Based on the word counts, there are up to six different categories of short stories:⁴

- **Flash fiction**, maximum 1500 words.
- **Sudden fiction**, maximum 750 words.
- **Drabble**, or microfiction, maximum 100 words.
- **Dribble**, or minisaga, maximum 50 words.
- **Twitterature**, maximum 280 characters.
- **Six-word story**, any story with a single-digit word count is a category unto itself.

⁴ Reedsy. What is Flash Fiction? <https://blog.reedsy.com/what-is-flash-fiction/>, accessed on 11 May 2020.

Elements of Fictions

However, as a part of fictions, flash fiction also have elements as other fictions do, namely:⁵

1. **Characters and Characterization**, the people in the story and their respective traits.
2. **Setting**, represents the time, place, and condition of the story.
3. **Plot**, the events that happened in the story. Commonly divided into five parts: (1) exposition, or the beginning, (2) rising action, (3) climax, (4) falling action, and (5) Denouement
4. **Point of view**, how the story be told by the perspective of characters. It can be first-person view, or the third-person view.
5. **Theme**, the main idea of the story.
6. **Tone**, the emotional meaning of the story. It can be sad, fun, frightening, or et cetera.

Characteristics of Flash Fictions

The one that can differ flash fictions from other fictions are the characteristics itself. The special characteristics that flash fictions have are:⁶

- **Brevity**: Regardless of the exact word count, flash fiction attempts to condense a story into the fewest words possible. To look at it another way, flash fiction tries to tell big, rich, complex stories quickly and concisely.
- **A beginning, middle, and end**: In contrast to a vignette or reflection, most flash fiction emphasizes plot. While there are

⁵ Stefanie Lethbridge and Jarmila Mildorf. Basics of English Studies: An introductory course for students of literary studies in English, Version 03/04, Prose.

⁶ Catherine S. "Flash Fiction Definition and History" <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-flash-fiction-2990523>, accessed on 11 May 2020.

certainly exceptions to this rule, telling a complete story is part of the excitement of working in this condensed form.

- **A twist or surprise at the end:** Setting up expectations and then turning them upside down in a short space is one hallmark of successful flash fiction.

History of Flash Fictions

With roots in folklore and collections like Grimms' Fairy Tales and Aesop's Fables, (very) short stories have been around for centuries. In India, there were Panchatantra and Jataka. In Turkey, there was Nasreddin. In China, there were Zen koans who wrote *The Gateless Gate*. In the United States, early forms of flash fiction can be found in the 19th century, notably in the figures of Walt Whitman, Ambrose Bierce, and Kate Chopin.

Hemingway also wrote 18 pieces of flash fiction that were included in his first short-story collection, *In Our Time*. It is disputed whether (to win a bet), as alleged, he also wrote *For Sale, Baby Shoes, Never Worn*. The claim of Hemingway's authorship originates in an unsubstantiated anecdote about a wager between him and other writers. In a 1991 letter to Canadian humourist John Robert Colombo, science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke recounts:⁷

"He's [Hemingway] supposed to have won a \$10 bet (no small sum in the '20s) from his fellow writers. They paid up without a word. ... Here it is. I still can't think of it without crying— FOR SALE. BABY SHOES. NEVER WORN."

In fact, it seems that versions of the six-word story appeared long before Hemingway even began to write, at least as early as 1906, when he was only seven, in a newspaper classified section called "Terse Tales

⁷ Garson O'Toole, "For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn"
<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/01/28/baby-shoes/>, accessed on 11 May 2020.

of the Town,” which published an item that read, “For sale, baby carriage, never been used. Apply at this office.” Another, very similar, version appeared in 1910, in an article edition titled “Tragedy of Baby's Death is Revealed in Sale of Clothes” by The Spokane Press. By then, Hemingway was only ten years old. Those two claims seem impossible for Hemingway to write it.

Another, suggested as the title for a story about “a wife who has lost her baby,” in a 1917 essay by William R. Kane, who thought up “Little Shoes, Never Worn.” Then again in 1920, writes David Haglund in Slate, the supposed Hemingway line appears in a “1921 newspaper column by Roy K. Moulton, who ‘printed a brief note that he attributed to someone named Jerry,’”:

“There was an ad in the Brooklyn “Home Talk” which read, “Baby carriage for sale, never used.” Would that make a wonderful plot for the movies?”

Many more examples of the narrative device abound, including a 1927 comic strip describing a seven-word version—“For Sale, A Baby Carriage; Never Used!”—as “the greatest short story in the world.” The more that Haglund and Quote Investigator’s Garson O’Toole looked into the matter, the harder they found it to “believe that Hemingway had anything to do with the tale.”⁸

3. ANALYSIS

For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn can be analyzed by the characteristics of flash fiction: the brevity, the structure, and a twist at the end. Only contains six words, it must be fulfilled the criteria of brevity.

⁸ Josh Jones. “The (Urban) Legend of Ernest Hemingway’s Six-Word Story: “For sale, Baby shoes, Never worn.” <https://www.openculture.com/2015/03/the-urban-legend-of-ernest-hemingways-six-word-story.html>, accessed on 14 May 2020.

However, also as a part of fiction as whole, we can also analyze this story by the elements of fiction.

Structure of Flash Fiction

Beginning: “*For Sale*.”

“*For Sale*” is a common word for us selling. It has meaning: (1) Offered for purchase; or (2) to be bought.⁹ We can easily recognize it because it is so common when we see any advertisement. If we see the words “*For Sale*.” it can trigger us for see what things are being sold by the seller. The phrase is the invitation for us to consider the sale. Humans have been trading and going to markets for millennia. Deep within our culture, we know it is part of the human condition to seek out things to buy with our money. When we read “*For Sale*.”, our interest is piqued.

Middle: “*Baby Shoes*.”

Now, we know that the sold one is the “*Baby Shoes*”. Most people love babies, especially the babies’ feet and make their babies wearing shoes. The very fact that babies cannot walk, and so the shoes are for show and for our pleasure adds to the joy. By the word of “*For Sale*.”, we, as the potential buyer, wants to know the condition of the products that we want to buy: maybe it is in the good condition or not. We also consider to see the price.

End: “*Never Worn*.”, The Twist

The ending is the twist. The “*Baby Shoes*” was never worn. “*Never Worn*” can imply that these shoes were in fact in a good condition, as opposed to preloved items, so the seller could sell in a higher price. However, the fact that the baby, who was prepared to have these shoes, was never got to wear them. It leaves us a single question: *Why did that*

⁹ https://www.lexico.com/definition/for_sale, accessed 14 May 2020.

happen? There are many answers to this question. “*Never Worn*” is a perfect example of a climax ending, that twists the plot, defying your expectations and yet perfectly in line with the story.

Interpretations of the Meaning

There are different ways of reading the story: its meaning can be quite tragic and very sad, or it can be a happy ending. This is opportunity given by six-word story flash fiction to be open to any interpretation.

...Maybe the Mother was Miscarriage

Most of us can infer that a woman was expecting a child. The woman was so excited and confident of seeing her baby that she had started buying the baby clothing. But the baby never came. She never gave birth. At some stage, she miscarried. Now, with time passed, she realized she was ready to sell the prized possession, either to rid herself of the tragic memory, or because she was in desperate need of money.

...Maybe There Were Other Shoes

Some of us can say that the baby was born. Maybe the mother was showered with gifts by many friends. So many gifts that she is now selling off the surplus to raise money for charity. If it happens, we can create the story has become hopeful and joyous.

...Maybe the Shoes Were for the Wrong Sex

We live in a society that distinguish colors and models of fashion between male and female. Usually, pink is for female and blue is for male. Perhaps, the colors and models of the shoes were not match with the sex of the baby. So, it was better to sell them than give it away freely.

...Maybe the Mother was also Dead

This one can be the darkest and worst interpretation. Perhaps, the mother herself is dead, died in childbirth with the baby inside her. Now, we realize it is her husband or family member who is methodically selling

her possessions. In this interpretation, the story might almost be methodical. They have listed for sale, two chair, in need of repair, and one bed, with broken springs.

Elements of Fictions

The story can also be analyzed by the elements of fictions, such as:¹⁰

- **Characters:** Obviously, the readers of the advertisement. The seller, it could be the woman, whether she was alive or not. Some other characters that might include are the baby (if it was alive), or the woman's other family members.
- **Setting:** The location is on the advertisement. We can infer from the era that this fiction was made (1900s), it could be on a newspaper.
- **Plot:** (1) *Exposition*, obviously, the woman became pregnant. (2) *Rising action*, she began preparing for the baby's arrival, which is evident from the fact that she bought or was given some new baby shoes. (3) *Climax*, it can leave us our own interpretation. (4) *Falling action*, the seller decided to clear up and put an advertisement to sell the shoes. (5) *Denouement*, the baby (either alive or not) never used the shoes.
- **Point of view**, is the third-person view, view of the advertisement readers.
- **Tone**, it leaves us three emotions: sad, neutral, or happy.
- **Theme**, it can be sad one – about the loss, whether the loss of a child, or even the other – or it can be happy one-about the joy,

¹⁰ Cliffnotes. "In which Hemingway short story is the saying, "Children's shoes for sale"?" <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/cliffsnotes/subjects/literature/in-which-hemingway-short-story-is-the-saying-quotchildrens-shoes-for-sale>, accessed on 15 May 2020.

when in fact the shoes were sold because there were already other shoes or the parents wanted to buy a new one.

4. CONCLUSION

Literary works never limit themselves only to a certain part. Flash fiction, although that simple, also gives us some ways to interpret. That means the way I read the story may not be the way you read it. "*For Sale: Baby Shoes. Never Worn.*" is a beautiful six-word story. You can also have your own interpretation that is different from me. This is the beauty of flash fiction.

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