
The Short-Short Story in 20th Century Publishing

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Abstract

Originally known as the very short or short-short story, different labels are now used to describe any story between 100 and 1500 words in length. The form is known for allowing authors to create an engaging story in very few words, painting as much by absence of detail as presence. Although widely considered to have emerged in the 1980s, the form had already established itself from the 20th century onwards. This article outlines the form's incarnations and developments throughout the 20th century, its reception by readers and publishers, and the opportunities the form has afforded writers. It will demonstrate that Short-Shorts developed from the demands of the publishing and popular culture markets, and have varied in cultural value and status. They have contributed to the education and exposure of new writers, and become a reaffirmed art-form in their own right in the digital age.

Key Words

Short-Shorts; Darnton; Entertainment; Education; Bourdieu; Magazines

Introduction

Short-Shorts developed organically alongside other literary forms at the turn of the 20th century. Short-Shorts, despite their shorter length, but are similar in the freedoms of genre and content considered acceptable to short stories or longer works (Drag 2018). They are

grouped together by Marc Botha in *The Cambridge Companion to the English Short Story* as being ‘small literary forms, either historical or contemporary, which are suited to representing a wide range of subjects while remaining responsive to the shifting contexts of literary production and reception’ (Botha 2016 201). Irving Howe and Ilana Wiener Howe’s *Short-Shorts* published in 1942 set a limit of 2500 words, which would now be considered closer to a short story length. This definition of length has varied, decreasing over time as the form evolved. The precise rules for Short-Shorts emerged as authors developed the form in practice. For instance *Half a Sheet of Foolscap*, discussed below, established the need for compressed time-space, deeper characterisation and implied development outside the space of the story (Masih 2009 286). So, although the form has become more controlled and concise over time, its rules are fluid, allowing for creative experimentation.

The establishment of the Short-Short

Although very short stories date as far back as Aesop’s fables, the first published pieces emerged in line with print press journalism and literature, prompted by the widespread establishment of industrial printing in the mid-19th and early 20th century. The need for quick and easy to produce content saw Short-Shorts develop as mass entertainment - influencing their length and style. Leading writers at the time helped shape the form through their work, positioning early Short-Shorts within the low-brow and literary forms.

One of the first examples of the form was *Half a Sheet of Foolscap* (Masih 2009 286), a story of fewer than three pages, published in 1903 by Swedish playwright August Strindberg as part of his collection of short stories, *Sagor*, translated to English in 1912. This story of a man reminiscing on the love, happiness and death in the past two years of his life, was notable for covering a large span of time in relatively few words. As an author, Strindberg was notable for focusing on particular parts of the narrative within short stories, comparable to his interest in pinhole photography (Masih 2009 286). This style contrasted with narrative developments by writers such as Louisa May Alcott, Kate Chopin and Guy de

Maupassant, popular prior to the 20th century, steering the direction of future Short-Shorts (Masih 2009 286). Simultaneously, the early 20th century saw the publication of Short-Shorts in periodicals. In 1903-06, O. Henry published Short-Shorts for *The New York World*. The stories '*The Gift of the Magi*' (1,800 words) and '*The Last Leaf*' (2,400 words) are similar in length, structure, plot, character and narration to modern day Short-Shorts. As an example, *Particularly Complicated When The Snakes Show Up* by Simon Cowdroy, commended for the Bath Flash Fiction Award of 2018, follows a similar style of narration to *The Last Leaf* (Winners | Bath Flash Fiction Award 2019). They are both short and vivid in their descriptions, and sudden in their endings. Correlations between the styles of older and contemporary pieces help trace the tradition of writing and reading Short-Shorts. The popularity of O. Henry's works, in particular, with their focus on everyday, yet dramatic scenarios and twist endings, influenced aspiring writers, providing a blueprint for the forms development.

Short-Shorts as entertainment

Notably, most Short-Shorts of the time were written in simplistic journalistic language as quick entertainment. Sherwood Anderson, an American novelist and short story writer, published *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919. This collection contained realistic and well crafted 'small-town' stories, written in everyday, relatable language. Anderson disliked the works of O. Henry and others, finding them too focused on plots that romanticise the everyday (Masih 2009 319). His work may have introduced Short-Shorts to a wider readership, beyond stories published in magazines at the time (Stevick 1984). The stories were short and simple, with complexity in the form being yet to evolve (Shapard 1986).

Some examples of literary merit emerged over the following decades. In the 1920s, many writers published in or created experimental journals and periodicals in which very short stories were published, distributed and widely discovered. As a key example, in 1924 Hemingway wrote *In Our Time*, a thirty-two-page collection of eighteen Short-Shorts covering war, love, bullfighting and other subjects. He completed it in France within a few months, a self-proclaimed short burst of effort, and was published in Paris with a print run

of 170. The 1925 Boni & Liveright U.S edition and 1930 Scribner's edition were supplemented with longer stories from 1923-24 (Masih 2009 406). Despite selling only 500 copies, it received praise from modernist writers Ford Maddox Ford and F. Scott Fitzgerald and would heavily impact American fiction following its publication. In fact, Fitzgerald, possibly having been inspired by *In Our Time*, would later write *The Lost Decade*, an 1100-word piece for *The Esquire* in 1939 (Hooks 2017). Critical attempts to deconstruct Hemingway's work found that it had moved away from the extravagant Victorian era writing style via simple, unemotional yet powerful sentences (Masih 2009 406). As such, the works were said to feel real, and alive in their depiction of life - a quality which Short-Shorts, as a form, came to acquire.

The developments in early Short-Shorts revealed that, at the time, no one concrete style or norm characterised the form. As Nathan Leslie states, 'flash fiction is *about* ambiguity' (Masih 2009 406). Furthermore, its development both as mass print entertainment and as a literary form made its cultural value uncertain. As such, Short-Shorts could be interpreted as catering to Pierre Bourdieu's argument regarding the hierarchy of cultural products, determined by their symbolic use and social value more than the site of their production (Mahbub & Shoily 2016). Throughout the 20th century, Short-Shorts functioned as content for popular culture and lifestyle publications and as education for new writers seeking exposure.

Short-Shorts as content for magazines and periodicals appeared in lifestyle publications, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Liberty Magazine*, which would publish stories with estimated reading times in minutes (typically under 5 minutes). They included many single-page stories in virtually every edition (Liberty Magazine Contents | Magawiki 2019). *Cosmopolitan*, in particular, considered both the entertainment of their readers and the necessity of advertisements in supporting the publication. Longer pieces required that the story be split up by advertisements, and *Cosmopolitan's* editor at the time, Ray Long, assumed that readers would enjoy stories which they were not forced to piece together between pages. Short-Shorts could fit on opposite pages of a magazine, and so many of these were

commissioned, being seen as the ideal length (Maugham 1938). This shows that Short-Shorts at the time were linked to developments in print design and the demands of early print advertisement. *Cosmopolitan* had a circulation of 1.7 million in the 1930s whilst *Liberty Magazine* reached a peak readership of 2.7 million in 1927 (A Short History Of Liberty Magazine With An Examination Of Issues From 1935 2019; Höglund 2007). This assured a wide readership for the stories in the American market, establishing their role as advertisement vehicles. However, it is difficult to say whether sales increased as a direct result of the Short-Shorts in publication.

The Short-Short story became recognised as a stand-alone form in publications. They were referred to as the 'Short-Short story' in 1926 in *Collier's Weekly*, a popular American literature and journalism magazine, wherein it was considered 'the greatest innovation in short story publication since the work of O. Henry' (Masih 2009). In 1936, William Somerset Maugham published *Cosmopolitans: Very Short Stories* a collection of twenty-nine Short-Shorts (between 1200 and 1500 words) which were originally published in *Cosmopolitan* between 1923 and 1929. It is known that Maugham was originally paid \$2,500 each for the first eight stories (Rogal 1997). This signifies that the form had become well established, and short-short story writing was a potentially lucrative opportunity for authors.

The form then spread widely via competitions in multiple genres. In November 1929, Hugo Gernsback, editor of *Science and Wonder Stories*, ran a short-short science fiction competition awarding \$300 for a winning story between 1400 and 1500 words. Other magazines (including *Liberty*) followed suit, requesting stories between 500 and 2000 words in length, with a pay-out from \$5 to \$1000. Gernsback noted that, whilst there were no science fiction Short-Shorts at the time, there was an increasing trend towards Short-Shorts in general in magazines (Masih 2009), opening up, in the words of Hugo Gernsback, the editor of *Science and Wonder stories* 'a new field for embryo authors'. This indicated that Short-Shorts were a good platform for debut authors to gain attention due to the number of

open markets available (Wallace 2019). The magazine, later called *Wonder Stories*, was known only as a pulp magazine, which published large volumes of fiction and paid writers as little as half a cent a word. They were largely ignored by literary critics acting as cultural gatekeepers. So whilst Short-Shorts were becoming more popular, they were rarely as seriously regarded as longer formats (American Heritage 1989).

While not critically recognised, Short-Shorts had some important implications in terms of writers' access to the publishing market and general exposure. Given the number of magazines accepting submissions and the number of pieces writers could submit, they could make a living on the production of Short-Shorts. It can be argued that this, in part, circumvents Robert Darnton's publishing communications circuit, whereby authors supply to publishers who must then work with printers, shipper and booksellers, who then supply a finished book to the readers (Mahbub & Shoily 2016). Since the writers of Short-Shorts were submitting to a medium which would be published regardless of the individual author's contribution to it, the rest of the circuit did not need to be considered for each author individually as it would with longer pieces. With the reduced length of each individual submission, editing and assessment considerations were arguably more straightforward as well (Weel 2001 13). The process also warped the role of publishers as cultural gatekeepers. Gatekeeping requires that only a certain number of those who apply for publication can be selected, due to the limited resources available to any one publisher. It ensures quality as the resources would only be invested in something of value to critics and readers (Wright and Verboord 2015). However, Short-Shorts took up so few resources (and, indeed, a larger number of them were required to take up worthwhile space in a magazine feature or anthology), that gatekeepers, in this case, magazine editors were perhaps more lenient to this form. As a result a wider range of Short-Shorts and their respective authors would have received publicity, albeit only in publications where the form would be considered worth publishing in the first place. The works were more likely to be published in low-brow publications, and, as such, would not have received the cultural and literary praise of longer pieces, which needed higher levels of approval. However, they still received exposure,

circulation and monetary compensation for their literary efforts.

The edited anthology, often comprising several years of stories published in magazines, brought more respectability and literary value to the Short-Short. In an example of Short-Shorts pushing the boundaries of topics and authors, Mary Austin edited *One-Smoke Stories* in 1934, called so because each could be read in the time it took to smoke a corn-husk ceremonial cigarette. The entries were written and published as stories from southwest America, featuring members of Indian tribes, Spanish Colonials, Mexicans and European Americans (Austin 1934). Although sales figures for the specific title are difficult to obtain, Austins' general sales figures were considered disappointingly low (Women In World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia - Austin, Mary Hunter (1868–1934) 2002), however the volume drew attention to underrepresented writers and stories. In a similar vein, Marie de Nervaud Dun published *Harvest of Short-Shorts*, a selection from 500 of her stories previously published in *The Chicago Tribune* and others from 1933 to 1968, making her the only woman at the time to have published such a collection. Spanning decades, the anthology showed that women were publishing on a story by story basis, each one being influenced by the issues of the time in some way (Masih 2009 545). So, Short-Shorts allowed space for growth and recognition of writers of different backgrounds and cultures.

In the case of anthology publications, cultural gatekeeping was more selective as stories were curated over several years, rather than being regular releases. Since many of them were tied to highly esteemed authors, social and cultural capital were often linked to the success of the form. For example, scholar and writer Robert Oberfirst published *Short-Shorts* in 1948, a collection of twenty-eight of his stories, published between 1937 and 1947 under the pseudonym Michael Tiff. In the same year, the literary agent Barthold Fles published *Collier's The Best Short-Shorts* (Masih 2009 524). Oberfirst's *Anthology Of Best Short-Short Stories*, published regularly between 1952 and 1960 (ending that year), contained guest essays and stories from figures such as TV personality Steve Allen, fantasy and horror author Ray Bradbury and actor and cartoonist Pinto Colvig, as well as an increasing variety of newly

commissioned pieces (Masih 2009 542). In terms of symbolic capital, the Short-Shorts which were usually praised as highly as long-form literary works in the early 20th century were usually the ones authored by already established writers. Those published in *Liberty Magazine* and other pulp publications usually accrued little symbolic capital, and there are no records of authors gaining such capital solely through the production of Short-Shorts - a point which displays the ultimate limitations of the form.

Respect and symbolic capital for many Short-Shorts from earlier decades only accumulated decades later, when the unique value of the Short-Shorts as a literary work and educational tool became apparent. Even then, the most highly regarded pieces were typically those of already respected authors (Masih 2009 533). This leads us to observe that the form differs in its perceived value over time as it comes to be measured by different criteria, and that authorship strongly influenced the perception of individual works within the form (Richardson 1986).

Short-Shorts as education

Alongside entertainment, Short-Shorts slowly accrued recognition as a valuable tool for education in reading and creative writing. In 1932, Walter Alderman wrote *Writing The Short, Short Story*, a manual commissioned by A. Demott Freese of the publisher A. D. Freese & Son. Alderman believed that although the form was at first tolerated as a fad by the writing community, the fast pace of life had allowed it to rise in popularity as a form of writing and it deserved recognition. He appreciated the formula of O. Henry's writing, and of reworking stories into their best possible versions (Masih 2009; Alderman 1932). The literary agents Robert and Thomas Oberfirst ran a Short-Shorts business between the 1930s and 50s, producing a book on the form titled *Writing The Short-Short Story* in 1942. Amongst this collection of guides and articles published by *The Writer Inc*, a Boston publisher, are *Cutting Sells a Short-Short* - highlighting the cuts in editing made by a magazine before accepting a Short-Short, and George Freitag's *Writing a Vignette* - a discussion of his story *The Lost Land* in *The American Magazine* and the critical response it achieved. It indicated the popularity

of such stories amongst writers at the time (Masih 2009 479) and the community they tried to create around Short-Shorts.

Following this publication, Oberfirst produced *Technique SELLS the Short-Short* in 1944, a compilation of guides originally published in *The Writer* from 1939 to 1944, supplemented with stories from *Liberty*, *Collier's*, *Esquire* and *The New Yorker* magazines, as well as *The Ladies' Home Journal*. Various editions spread throughout universities and schools in the US, Canada, Australia and the UK for educational purposes (Masih 2009 486). Oberfirst emphasised the differences between Short-Shorts reliant upon character development, and those reliant upon plot developments and twist endings, stating that whilst magazines were beginning to prefer character-driven pieces, plot-driven ones were easier for novice writers (Masih 2009 487). Nonetheless, he argued that Short-Shorts took a great deal of skill, likely more so than their longer counterparts (Masih 2009 487). Similarly, *Writers: Try Short-Shorts!*, a writer's guide and collection of Short-Shorts, was edited by Mildred Reid and Delmar Bordeaux and published by Bellevue Books in 1947. Along with Oberfirst's work, it acknowledges the strong development and wide readership of the Short-Shorts since 1926, and its ability to uniquely showcase human nature, in that the stories were succinct and therefore somewhat blunt and direct in their depictions. It included its own marketing list of magazine titles, locations, requirements and payments (Masih 2009 517; Reid and Bordeaux 1947).

Following the publication of the above manuals and due to the ease of accessibility Short-Shorts provided to new authors, the form saw greater use in creative writing classes. Short-Shorts were considered an excellent means for writers to hone their craft before embarking on longer pieces (Wallace 2019). From 1951 onwards, Short-Shorts and collections thereof saw greater educational use. William Ransom Woods' *Short-Shorts* was published in 1951, and included works from Rudyard Kipling, W. Somerset Maugham and August Strindberg, and focused on the stories, their impact on the reader, and the approachability of the medium for high school writers. As such, Short-Shorts became a link

between established authors and novice ones, leading to a trend in the appearance of writing courses teaching the very short story (Masih 2009 533). This reveals the increased cultural significance of Short-Shorts, achieved through an emphasis on its educational functions.

Much of the economic value and significance of the form was, however, dependent on its appeal and accessibility, which proved vulnerable to changes in popular culture technologies. By 1956, television took over 12.2 percent of the advertising market. The market share of magazines dropped from 12.6 percent in 1946 to 8 percent in 1956 and the popularity of the Short-Short followed suit (Zuilen 1977). Oberfirst was reduced to self-publishing for a while and never achieved a ninth issue of his anthologies. *Liberty Magazine*, one of the first to recognise and utilise the appeal of Short-Shorts, ceased activity in 1950. By the 1960s and 1970s, Short-Shorts were rarely present in public media, beyond stream-of-consciousness and fable writing styles. Where the form did appear, it was often compared to prose poetry, particularly by readers of the works of W.S Merwin (Masih 2009 569).

Nonetheless, Short-Shorts preserved their educational niche and, as a result, their cultural function. Novelist and journalist Mark Helprin published many Short-Shorts in magazines throughout the 1970s. He wrote the story 'Ruin' (published in *The New Yorker* in 1975) whilst he was a Harvard sophomore under the tutelage of American novelist Roger Rosenblatt, who asked students to write a story in Hemingway's style (Masih 2009 569). As a result, the form continued to facilitate the transition between early literary attempts and professional writing. Emphasizing this link, Kathleen Collins published the article *A Fragment Approach to Short Story Writing* in *Teachers & Writers* in 1979. The 1980s saw similar repeat searches for stories that could be read and discussed quickly for classroom use (in particular, publisher Holt, Rinehart and Winston's *Short-Shorts* (1981)) as well as for 'condensed yet overpowering' narratives (for instance, Irving and Ilana Howe's *Short-Shorts: An Anthology of the Shortest Stories* [1982]) (Masih 2009 614; Howe 1982). While the form

lost its economic value, it survived thanks to its cultural and educational relevance.

In conclusion, Short-Shorts emerged in the 20th century as a form of low-brow entertainment and an advertising vehicle, eventually reaching greater cultural and educational value. Short-Shorts developed across those two parallel lines, challenging gatekeeping arrangements and traditional publishing circuit practices. They illustrated Bourdieu's argument on privileging use over site of creation when evaluating cultural products. As technology advanced and the reader's average attention span receded, the Short-Shorts story (now flash fiction) has found a home in online magazines (*Flash Fiction Magazine* and *Flash: The International Short-Shorts Story Magazine*) and social media platforms, facilitating even shorter forms. Therefore, the form has proved to be resilient, adaptable and continuously relevant to contemporary life.

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