

The Six Word Short Story: a tool for teaching level 1 creative writing undergraduates

Liam Murray Bell
University of Surrey

Abstract:

Ernest Hemingway is said to have asserted that his best work was a short story of only six words: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." In teaching creative writing, we are presented with the challenge of engaging with undergraduate students of disparate academic backgrounds from whom we can often not assume the knowledge of the literary canon that would be required to elucidate and explain aspects of writing prose; such as narrative structure, characterisation or point of view. The presentation of six word stories, then, from well-known literary figures supports the students in experimenting with these elements. The aim of this article is to highlight the multiple opportunities inherent within the six word short story for demonstrating to students the tools and structures required to sustain a longer piece of prose writing.

According to a study published by the University of Pittsburgh's Learning and Development Centre, students retain only 20% of what they hear and only 10% of what they read (Glaser, 1983). In teaching creative writing to undergraduates, therefore, is it efficient to base discussion of the narrative devices or constructs utilised by authors on analysis of full-length novels or extended further reading? It is possible, I would argue, that a student attending a lecture that explores third-person, limited narration based on Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, for instance, will come away with an impression of the plot of the story but not an understanding of how limited, third-person narration and point-of-view has been used by Hemingway. This essay, therefore, will discuss my adoption of the six-word short story, as made famous by Hemingway's "**For sale: baby shoes, never worn**" (*The Guardian*, 2007), as a tool for teaching Level 1 Undergraduates several basic constructs and techniques for prose writing in a way that doesn't require lengthy further reading or plot summary that may detract from the structures I am trying to elucidate.

At the University of Surrey, the English with Creative Writing BA Programme is in its infancy. This academic year, which has just finished, was only the second year that it has run. Previously Creative Writing and Professional Practice was offered to Translation MA students and Undergraduate Students on the General Humanities BA. As such, the course has been constructed from a linguistics background, with an acknowledgement that it is required to speak to a number of different disciplines. This has been maintained into the new BA programme, with Film Studies students as well as English Literature students having the opportunity to study Creative Writing. In constructing a lecture entitled 'Introduction to Writing Prose Fiction', therefore, I was faced with the task of engaging with students from disparate academic backgrounds from whom I could not necessarily assume knowledge of the literary

canon. Further, whilst we have explored several theoretical perspectives - including articles from Gunther Kress and Roman Jakobson - elsewhere in the course, the drafting of this lecture was intended to give students practical and technical advice as an aid to beginning to write prose fiction: a kind of writer's toolkit.

In the absence of referencing Sterne, Nabokov, Austen, Amis etc. to explain concepts such as narrative structure, characterisation, or point-of-view, it would have been necessary for me to teach with abstractions or to provide time-consuming plot-summaries or extracts in order to elucidate certain points. The benefit of Hemingway's six word short story, then, to the university lecturer is that it allows for the drawing out of strands of fiction writing with self-contained and easily accessible examples that don't require close-reading or explanations of context. They can be placed on a PowerPoint slide and presented for the students to read there and then in the lecture. Furthermore, authors as diverse as Margaret Atwood and Elmore Leonard, following on from Hemingway, have taken on the challenge of writing such a short-short-story. Indeed *The Guardian* newspaper, in an article entitled 'To cut a long story short' published on 24th March 2007, invited thirty-five contemporary authors to write a six-word short story. You can find this article on the online archive of *The Guardian*. The presentation of these six-word short-stories from well-known literary figures supports the students in experimenting with common structures and narrative devices.

The Hemingway text, "**For sale: baby shoes, never worn**", is used as an introduction to the lecture, to ask the students to think about what is happening beyond the words on the page. So, I note that the words "never worn" bring to mind a series of questions that concern the possible histories and indeed the possible futures of the various characters that operate outside the confines of the short text. For instance, who is selling the shoes: is it a single person? A couple? Do they still have a relationship? Or has their world been pulled apart? And the baby: are the shoes merely a gift never worn? Or was there a miscarriage or a cot death perhaps? Then what of the couple who will respond to the advert: another couple, maybe? An expectant mother? Do they question why the shoes have never been worn? And what becomes of their child, then, how does he or she enter the world? Are they impacted upon by the first couple and their child?

By giving the students these questions, it is intended that they are made aware of the potential for a prose narrative, however short, to convey meaning and to provide subtext and narrative strands that both begin before and continue after the text itself. It would be possible, perhaps, to engage in a full lecture purely based on the Hemingway text, but

instead I extrapolated from this in order to look further at four key aspects of writing prose: structuring a story, developing plot, characterisation and point-of-view.

Narrative structure is often discussed in terms of Aristotle's 'Poetics', which gives us the basic linear construct of beginning-middle-end. I don't shy away from giving the undergraduates an extract from Aristotle, but this linear structure that follows the same passage of time as our own lives, following from beginning to end as a life passes from birth to death, is portrayed through a more contemporary six-word short-story from Blake Morrison: "**Womb. Bloom. Groom. Gloom. Rheum. Tomb.**" As I say, it would be possible to take the students through texts from the literary canon that have followed this linear narrative structure— *Moll Flanders*, say or, more recently, William Boyd's *Any Human Heart*— but it would have taken a great deal longer and my primary concern is not to provide them with a literary history, but instead to show them this structure in practice. The Defoe or Boyd novels would have required further explanations for those students unfamiliar with the texts, whereas I can present a PowerPoint with Morrison's story and talk them through the linear stages— 'Womb', birth, 'Bloom', childhood, 'Groom', passage into adulthood. I'll stop there before it gets depressing.

Having outlined this basic narrative construct, I then go on to discuss the ways that we, as writers, can change this linear storyline, how we can fracture it and change the chronological order in order to engage the reader. I argue that the prose narrative doesn't need to follow what E.M Forster described as the 'tapeworm' of the story, but instead how events can be relayed in order of their importance to the narrative. Again, I can immediately give them a concrete example of this through a six-word short-story, this time by Helen Fielding: "**Dad called: DNA back: he isn't**". As with the Hemingway story that we began with, this story doesn't conform to the beginning-middle-end structure of Aristotle, but instead presumes to draw us in with a central event: the DNA results. This can be seen as occurring approximately in the middle of the natural story, thereby inviting speculation as to the reasons for the test and the potential fallout from it. If she were to expand the story, Fielding could structure it from present to past, past to present, or it could even jump backwards and forwards between the two. By examining this, with the students, I am able to present them with an example of how a non-linear narrative can work and the authorial intentions behind utilising this structure. Further, I can then invite the students to furnish me with contemporary examples of how authors play with the 'story-time' and tease out discussion of texts which utilise this narrative structure, giving them contemporary examples such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* or Donna Tartt's *A Secret History* which they can go away and explore with these

ideas on narrative structure already present in their mind. In other words, they have been provided with the concept and they can then utilise this in dissecting texts from whichever author they choose rather than me prescriptively telling them what to read or how to write.

Similarly, in looking at plotting in prose, I am able to explain the ideas of temporal and causal plotting. My primary focus is to demonstrate how the students can use temporality and causality to ensnare the reader in their story. Temporality (being the engagement with the question “What will happen next?”) is highlighted for the undergraduates through use of a Simon Armitage six-word story: “**Megan’s baby: John’s surname: Jim’s Eyes**”. This plot raises all kinds of questions for us as readers: will Megan tell John? Will John find out on his own? Will there be an altercation between John and Jim? Note that all these questions are concerned with what comes next. I ask the students to consider how this pulls the reader into the plot, as opposed to causality whereby the question asked is “What has happened to bring us to this point?” The plot does not have to follow a series of ‘what will happen next’ clauses like so many cliffhangers at the end of a soap-opera. Instead, I use this example from Patrick Neate to show how the writer can engage with causality: “**The pillow smelled like my brother.**” It is still true to say that this story can beg a temporal question or two, but the primary question is surely: ‘what has happened?’ What has happened in the past to bring us to this point? What has happened to the brother? Why is the fact that it is concerned with the pillow important, is it to do with a death? What role has the narrator had in the implied plot? We read on in the expectation of finding out what has happened to bring us to this point.

This may seem a slightly simplistic way of looking at plotting: a two-strand approach based on whether the author is engaging the reader’s temporal or causal instincts, but it is one that can be easily understood. And again, it can be drawn out into contemporary examples with texts other than novels also up for discussion, for instance film or stage scripts. What the temporal and causal argument does provide the students with is a template that they can then apply to contemporary texts, many of which will use both temporal and causal plotting. More than this, however, they can engage with it in a self-reflexive manner, examining the ways in which they draw the reader into their writing, their ability to produce suspense or intrigue. They begin to realise how important plotting can be, how it operates, as Ashley Stokes has observed as “the underside of the stone that no one sees. It is the head labour that makes a novel realize itself on its own terms.” (Stokes, 2001:207) After becoming aware of how the plot operates in their prose, then, it is easier for the student to consider how they utilise and manipulate these aspects: to begin plotting so that they are able to consciously

engage the reader. This template is illustrated simply and concisely through these six-word short-stories from Armitage and Neate.

The third aspect of writing prose that I examine through the six word story then is characterisation which, according to Malcolm Bradbury, is intimately linked to plot. Bradbury notes that "plot is itself often the product of a character or characters in their processes of development, growing self-knowledge or interaction with others. So plot itself is the product of human actions or adventures." (Bradbury, 2001:116) Again, it would be possible to investigate the ways in which an author might build character through examples from the literary canon, but the way that Austen builds Emma, say, is very different from the way that Nabokov builds Humbert Humbert. To provide detailed discussion of the ways and means of depicting character would require many extracts and a fair amount of close reading, which would begin to resemble an English Lit lecture rather than a lecture that explores the devices that the students themselves might use. It is necessary to provide the students with a brief rationale for the importance of character to the prose narrative. From there, however, I again seek to provide a broad framework which they can then apply as they see fit.

There are, I contend, four broad types of characterisation: autobiographical, whereby the author includes aspects of themselves in the character, as with Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; biographical, whereby the author includes aspects of others, such as J.M. Barrie admitting that Captain Hook is largely based on one of his classmates at Eton; from scratch characterisation, whereby a character is entirely fictional and is created from the ground up; and, finally, a combination method that involves autobiography, biography and from-scratch characters. I present the students with the argument that the latter is by far the most common, using A.L. Kennedy's six-word story as an example: "**He didn't. She did. Big mistake**". Kennedy could be drawing on autobiography in order to construct this, in that she could be transposing a scenario from her own life and could be placing herself in the position of the character given by 'She did'. Indeed she could have switched the gender and she could be relating to the 'He did' perspective. Then the other character could be based on a previous lover— utilising biography— or even on an imagined lover— utilising the from scratch method. Again, I am able to explore these aspects of characterisation quickly and effectively by using this short text, in a way that would require significantly longer if I were to provide exhaustive examples from novels etc. I can then finally refer back to Malcolm Bradbury's contention that we "observe, invent and create" characters "from our own lives, from our observations, our sense of the motives of others, our fascination with culture and mannerisms." (Bradbury, 2001:124)

The final aspect of prose writing that I explore through the six-word short story is point-of-view. I think characterisation, structure and plotting (which we have discussed) can be seen as fairly obvious topics for inclusion in a summary lecture for writing prose, but point-of-view may seem a slightly more specific topic and it could even be argued that I am being more prescriptive in suggesting how the students should approach point-of-view. The reason I decided to include this aspect, however, is due to the argument, as made by David Lodge, that “One of the commonest signs of a lazy or inexperienced writer of fiction is inconsistency in handling point of view” (Lodge, 1992:28) Having been involved in practice-led workshops since the age of Eighteen, it is one of the things that often strikes me as the most glaring error or inconsistency in a young writer’s work. It, for me, is one of those things that all students should be encouraged to get clear in their minds— along with the use of semi-colons and the economical usage of adjectives— before putting pen to paper. If point-of-view is inconsistent, I would argue, then the believability of the narrative is often lost.

It is fairly easy to illustrate the idea of point-of-view for the students in a first-person narrative. To do so, I use another six-word story by Hani Kunzru: “**Stop me before I kill again**”. By taking this as a jumping-off point I can explain that to continue this with an observation from, say, a detective chasing this killer without any indication of a change in the narrative position would be incongruous. It is possible, in first person, only to give the thoughts of that character or to give them speculating on the thoughts or opinions of another character. If you then want to give direct access to the thoughts of that other character then you need to have a break in the structure of the narrative— a clear indication that the point-of-view is changing. Most undergraduates recognise this and it is reflected in their writing. A more common inconsistency in point-of-view, however, is in third-person narration and, crucially, in the extent to which this is limited or subject to an omniscient narrator. To elucidate this I give them another six-word story, this time by Andrew O’Hagan: “**Purse found. “No notes,” she said.**” This introduces the idea of authorial intent, with regards to point-of-view. If we say that the main character is the someone who is being handed the purse by the ‘she’, then we can say that O’Hagan is prefacing this character’s point-of-view in a limited, third-person narration. By writing ‘she said’, O’Hagan is not giving us access to the ‘she’ but only speculation from the limited perspective of that narrator. As a result, we, as readers, are aligned with this main character in being unsure as to how ‘she’ came across the purse and, if truth be told, in being suspicious as to her statement that there are ‘no notes’. If O’Hagan had written it from the point-of-view of the ‘she’, then he could have written: “I found the purse and gave it back, but I took thirty pounds in cash from it first”.

Then we would know about the 'she' character and would be able to assert, without doubt, that she had stolen the money. Similarly, if O'Hagan were to write: "Purse found. "No notes," she said, as she stuffed the thirty pounds into her pocket" then we could state that this would be an omniscient narrator who is able to give us both perspectives. Generally, the new writer's first instinct is to go for this omniscience so that they can relate everything from every angle. By teasing out the O'Hagan six-word story, however, I try to show the students what they can perhaps gain by employing a limited point-of-view and again invite them to explore contemporary examples and to engage with their own work to investigate the extent to which they afford the reader access to the character's thoughts, the extent to which they withhold information from the reader, and the interesting things that can occur in the gap between. That is, I try to show them that limiting the point-of-view is an interesting way to create a unique narrative that allows intimate knowledge of the character and that therefore invites greater engagement with the plot.

What I have done in this essay, then, is given you a brief account of how the lecture was given, of what the rationale behind using these six-word short stories was, and of the practical applications that I hope the students take away from the lecture. As it is a lecture given to Level 1 students, it is not intended as an exhaustive introduction to writing prose fiction, but merely as a series of frameworks and templates that they can apply, or indeed subvert, as they go into Level 2 & 3 and begin the more commonplace creative writing provision of seminar and workshop-based learning. As it is an introductory and a summary lecture, the six-word short-story is ideal as each of the individual concepts of prose writing that I explore, if illustrated by some of the novels I have mentioned, could easily have taken up a lecture on their own. My decision to provide an introductory lecture based on aspects such as structure, plotting, characterisation and point-of-view was based on my own experiences as a Creative Writing undergraduate at Queen's University, Belfast. During that course, we were invited to begin submitting short stories to a workshop from our third year. Any discussion of structuring a narrative, developing character etc was then based on peer-discussion of the creative writing, seminar examples and what could be extracted and utilised from English Literature texts. That is, in introducing this lecture at Surrey, I have tried to bridge a gap between close-reading of the texts of other authors and the actual practice of writing. Rather than analysing novels or short-stories, which becomes a module in itself, or sitting down and writing in isolation, with no sense of literary antecedent or understanding of how previous authors have utilised narrative devices and constructs, I have provided them with in-class examples, in the form of the six-word short story, that can be easily digested. The analysis and potential applications that are elucidated, therefore, can then be used by

the undergraduate students both in examining examples from the literary canon, in constructing their own prose narratives and in self-reflexively engaging with how their own writing draws upon that which has gone before.

References:

Glaser, R. (1983, June). Education and Thinking: The Role of Knowledge. Technical Report No.

PDS-6. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, Learning and Development Center.

'To Cut a Long Story Short', *The Guardian*, Saturday 24 March 2007: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/24/fiction.originalwriting> (accessed 23/06/10)

E.M Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2005)

David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, (London: Penguin, 1992)

Malcolm Bradbury, 'Character and Characterisation', in *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (eds), (London: MacMillan, 2001)

Ashley Stokes 'Plotting a novel' in *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (eds), (London: MacMillan, 2001)

Liam Murray Bell is a PhD Candidate in Creative Writing and a Graduate Teaching Assistant at University of Surrey, Guildford. He combines teaching on the English with Creative Writing BA with writing and research pertaining to his work-in-progress novel, rubber bullet, broken glass, based during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. His creative work has been published in *New Writing Scotland* 21 & 26.