

The Short-Short Story: The Problem of Literary Genre

José Flávio Nogueira Guimarães (Mestrando Fale - UFMG, joseflaviong@ufmg.br)

ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the short-short story in the field of genre theory. A polemical genre, the short-short story (also known as Flash Fiction, Sudden Fiction, Micro-Fiction, Micro-Story, Postcard, Blaster, Snapper, Mini Fiction, Fast Fiction, Skinny Fiction, and Quick Fiction) has not received much academic consideration so far. Since the short-short story is a hybrid genre, which mixes poetic condensation with the fictional narrative language of the novel, it seems to be deeply enmeshed in the fading away of generic boundaries. The assumption of "essence" or generic identity, upon which taxonomy relies, is now read as an open invitation to deconstruction. On the one hand, to present the generic essence of a text in terms of the text's assumed self-identity is to work in complicity with the unquestioned truth-claims of that text. On the other hand, to work against these truth-claims by ignoring them and constructing alternative generic identities is to call down upon oneself charges of hermeneutic repression and taxonomic or typological narrow-mindedness. Thus, an open framework for analyzing short-short stories related to poetical function and narrative brevity is suggested. Moreover, a case study of four very different short-shorts illustrates the implications of applying the genre lens to this type of fiction. Based on observations from the case, a theoretical concept of autopoiesis (a continuous structuring of the purpose[s] and parts of the form of the genre in question itself) is suggested and its potential significance for genre theory and short-short story initiatives is addressed.

Key-Words: genre, short-shorts, autopoiesis.

The short-short story, or sudden fiction, blaster, snapper, sketch, prose poem, prose fiction, vignette, experimental fiction, anecdote, enigma, flash fiction, mini fiction, fast fiction, skinny fiction, quick fiction, micro fiction, draft, picture, text, among other names that this new literary genre has received, has been classified as a separate category very recently. Robert Shapard and James Thomas were the ones who in their latest publications such as “New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond” from 2007 and “Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories” from 2006 considered it a separate genre. In the last years of the 20th century, it was considered a sub-category or a sub-sub-category of the short story as Robert Shapard himself states in the Introduction of “Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories” from 1986, edited also by him and his colleague James Thomas. Around that time, the 1990s, short fiction had a genuine revival under the influence of especially Jorge Luis Borges and Raymond Carver (Mose 2004, p. 84). At first, those texts were published in magazines and newspapers and began to appear as “generic markers”. They combined characteristics of the short story and journalistic writing; and “may be regarded as literary manifestations of the changes in the history of mentality” (Mose 2004, p. 81). Gitte Mose explains himself:

A “new” and “nervous” subject entered the stage and insisted on the privileged position of the individual in the pursuit of an adequate ontology for the new century. This subject’s perceptions, emotions, and subconscious were to serve as the main instruments of intellectual and artistic exploration and analysis. Thus the center of gravity, the central point of orientation, now belonged to the observer, not to the world – in keeping with Nietzsche’s dictum that “life no longer lives in totality” (p. 81-82).

I understand that as a cause and being part of the rise of this new genre there is a search for a new and “adequate ontology for the new century”. In addition to that, I also agree that not only the subconscious but also the unconscious plays an important role as a tool used in the process of exploration and creation of short-shorts. Charles E. May emphatically declares about the short story, one of the genres that brought forth the short-short: “... the field of research for the short story is the primitive, antisocial world of the unconscious, and the material of its analysis are not manners, but dreams” (p. 133). As the referred latter locus of the mind, the unconscious, is a space of “psychic makeup”ⁱ, composition, creation, assembling; the realm of this new genre similarly is a space of self-production, self-creation or autopoiesis. The “unity”, the genre short-short, is autonomous and uses the same components in its network production which were used to create itⁱⁱ. I mean journalistic writing style, poetry, the novel and the short story. The hybridism, the bricolage and pastiche

from postmodernism, characterize the emerging genre as a patchwork or human unconscious, a space without a single identity but with features and traits from distinct sources.

Concerning the origins of this new genre, and further on the origins of storytelling, May argues they are different from the novel's. The novel describes the world of the everyday reality, notwithstanding "storytelling does not spring from one's confrontation with the everyday world, but rather from one's encounter with the sacred (in which true reality is revealed in all its plenitude) or with the absurd (in which true reality is revealed in all its vacuity)" (p. 133). Here we are faced with the concept of true reality. Is true reality what we can see or unconventional sub-universes of the supernatural? Many religious people believe the true world is the one to come. This kind of

mythic thinking (...) is that mode of thought which becomes predominant during the nineteenth century when the short story is developed, and it is that mode of thought which the Russian Formalists suggest characterize the essential artistic function and device. The nature of mythic thought within the framework of the sacred, the attempt by the Romantics to recapture this mode of thinking in a secularized way, and the development of a critical approach which unites this mode of thinking with the essential nature of art itself – all help us to understand why the short story has been called both the most primitive mode of communication as well as the most artistic. (...) Short fiction is so bound up with the experience of the sacred and mythic perception, it is no accident that the short story as we know it today got its most important impetus as an art form from the Romantic effort in the early years of the nineteenth century to regain through art what had been lost in religion. (...) This secularization of inherited theological ways of thinking is an attempt on the part of the Romantics to regain what many anthropologists have called 'the sacred origin of storytelling' (May 1994, p. 138-140)

May is discussing the origin of storytelling and thereof the origin of the short story and short fiction. Naturally, the reasons that engendered the short-short are different as I portrayed in "a few strokes" in the beginning; nevertheless we cannot deny the short story is one of the sources from where this new genre drinks from.

Thereafter I propose critical analysis on short-short stories related to poetical function and narrative brevity which will guide me to concepts, functions and practices not steadfast since the short-short story is a hybrid genre which mixes poetic condensation with the fictional narrative language of the novel, short story and the journalistic writing style. This acknowledgement leads me to have to face an issue that has been avoided rather than discussed due to the fact it denies the validity of the short-short story: have the principles of taxonomy indeed classified the genres sharply limiting the boundaries among them? How useful are those principles? My argument is that those taxonomic boundaries are not sufficient to limit the literary genres, especially the hybrid ones such as the short-short story that works in autopoiesis. What I mean by "taxonomic boundaries" are conventions, classifications,

created by scholars to draw and portray the literary genres defining and “limiting”, posing differences among them. Moreover, a case study of four very different short-shorts will be presented. Equally important, a survey on the intentions that brought forth the short-short story, might help me to support my argument through a resolution of the polemical relations between the traditional classification of literary genres and the creation of hybrid ones in contemporaneity. Last, the survey would also help me to define a concept of autopoiesis in literature due to the fact I will be addressing short-short story initiatives.

Besides, concerning the lack of a singular, definite and precise form for the contemporary short-shorts, which would provide a traditional classification for the genre, the format of generic identity, upon which taxonomy is based on, is then interpreted as an open invitation to critique: ways might be created for new classifications, as some have attempted to do, or perhaps there would be just a restatement that the genre is naturally hybrid and autopoietic, not allopoietic as other older genres.

2.

Thence, the short story was born in the bosom of the novel. Brander Matthews is said to be the first one to identify the short story as a separate genre from the novel in 1901. He was the first one to name it, in spite of the fact that it was regularly produced and developed throughout the whole nineteenth century in America, becoming a great success and a national form (Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. xii). Thus, it is B. M. Éjxenbaum who reinforces our perception that the short story and the short-short had similar rises or at least, resemblances in their first means of propagation as we have already seen about the short-short. Éjxenbaum in his study “O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story” states “the story, precisely as *small form* (short story), has nowhere been so consistently cultivated as in America. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, American literature, in the minds both of its writers and readers, was merged with English literature and largely incorporated into it as a ‘provincial’ literature” (p.82-83). In the thirties and forties American novelists published their novels in English magazines while most of the publications in American magazines were held by short stories. “The consolidation of the short-story genre was associated with, not engendered by, the propagation of magazines” (p. 83). In conclusion, magazines were the springs that launched the short story as well as the short-short to the world.

Resuming, Brander Matthews spends most part of his essay, "The Philosophy of the Short-Story", drawing differences between the novel and the short-story, a hyphenated one, as he insists on. "A true Short-Story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short" (p. 73). Among the many differences the author stresses I could cite the unity the short story has and the novel cannot have.

A Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation. (...) The Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of episodes. Thus the Short-story has, what the Novel cannot have, the effect of "totality", as Poe called it, the unity of impression (p.73).

Poe developed his concept of "totality of interest" in his article "Poe on Short Fiction" when he asserts

the ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length. (...) As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality* (of interest) (...); (while) in the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may (p.61).

I understand that what Matthews means by "a single emotion, a single situation" is the result of what Poe calls what can "be read at one sitting". As the moment will be a single moment, thenceforth the effect will be singular as well - a "unity of impression". Comparing the short story and the novel makes me recall a comment by Éjxenbaum who claims an influence of the short story over the novel and cites as an example Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. "The novel has only three characters, bound to one another by a single secret which is disclosed in the last chapter ('Revelation'). There are no parallel intrigues, no digressions or episodes; there is complete unity of time, place and action" (p. 87). Whatsoever I see that not only the novel influenced the short story but the short story as well influenced the novel.

Concerning the boundaries of literary genres, Matthews is very clear and avers that strict and rigid classifications are futile. He believes most literary genres melt and merge into one another.

The fact is, that the Short-story and the Sketch, the Novel and the Romance, melt and merge one into the other, and no man may mete the boundaries of each, though their extremes lie far apart. With the more complete understanding of the principle of development and evolution in literary art, as in physical nature, we see the futility of a strict and rigid classification into precisely defined genera and species (p. 77).

Matthews is not alone. The generic identity used by the taxonomic principles must not be static and immutable. It cannot be frozen forever. On the contrary, it should be flexible. Strict rules are not applicable to any field of art, including literature and genre theory. It is

very difficult to set limits in this field. For instance, authors have tried to limit and differentiate the novel and short story by the number of words. E. M. Forsterⁱⁱⁱ suggests the sum of fifty thousand words. Yet, Allan H. Pasco cites works considered novels shorter than that such as *L'Immoraliste* and *L'Etranger* (p.123). W. S. Penn in his article "The Tale as Genre in Short Fiction" explains: "It (does not) mean that a combination of elements from different genres could not be used by the story writer. What it means is that generic theory must evolve – grow or completely change – along with the development of new genres" (p. 54).

3.

But of course I can go back into past in order to seek the intentions and purposes that brought forth this new genre. The name short-short story may be new but the form is as old as parables and fables. Éjxenbaum as well depicts many differences between the novel and the short story. He asserts

the novel derives from history, from travels; the story – from folklore, anecdote. The difference is one of essence, a difference in principle conditioned by the fundamental distinction between *big* and *small* form. (...) Short story is a term referring exclusively to plot, one assuming a combination of two conditions: *small* size and *plot impact* on the ending. Conditions of this sort produce something totally distinct in aim and devices from the novel" (p. 81).

Nevertheless we know that the origin of the short story is intertwined with the novel. Some claim that the short-story, including its shorter form is an adaptation of realism and the novel. The formal realism, the basis for the rising of the novel, allows an immediate imitation of the individual experience of the subject situated in a context of time and space. (Watt 1984, p. 27) That happens in the novel, but that does not always happen with other literary forms. In a great amount it was brought to the short story. Not only that but the authenticity of the characters (including their names – ordinary and real names for the time the story was written) and their development in the course of time, and daily descriptions of the worries of life (Watt 1984, p. 27). The character must be seen as a particular person, not as a type. I could even say more. The prose style of the story has to cause an impression of absolute authenticity. Man has to be in his physical setting which is described in details. The story seems to be a transcription of real life. On the contrary, in the ancient fables and tales, the story did not need to seem authentic and real. The names were not ordinary and common for the time. All of that

was brought to the prose style through realism and the novel. As an illustration I cite the fable of “The Ant and the Grasshopper”, by Aesop. In the moral of the story, we see the animal-characters standing for people who are lazy, the latter, and will never succeed in life, and people who are industrious, the former, and will consequently prosper. Nowadays short story writers as well as novel writers, when writing their stories, have thoughts which emerge from immediate facts from their conscious mind. Characters are not animals or types anymore; except in children’s literature or in the horror genre. Nonetheless, deep differences can be drawn between the novel and the short story. Notwithstanding they are genres that merge into one another. After all, the fictional narrative language of the novel melted into the short story and into the journalistic writing engendering the hybrid genre short-short story.

In fact, the short-shorts stem partially from the short stories; yet, not only from this genre but also partially from modern poetry. Likewise, Joyce Carol Oates asserts in the Afterwords of “Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories” that “the rhythmic form of the short-short story is often more temperamentally akin to poetry than to conventional prose which generally opens out to dramatize experience and to evoke emotion; in the smallest, tightest spaces, experience can only be suggested”(Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 247)

In order to support her argument, Oates quotes Kafka’s “The Sirens”:

These are the seductive voices of the night; the Sirens, too, sang that way. It would be doing them an injustice to think that they wanted to seduce; they knew they had claws and sterile wombs, and they lamented this aloud.

They could not help it if their laments sounded so beautiful. (Kafka, qtd. in Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 246)

and a couple of Emily Dickinson’s verses: “The competitions of the sky / Corrodeless ply”

(Emily Dickinson, qtd. in Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 246). Moreover, Oates says very short fictions are “reminiscent of Robert Frost’s definition of a poem – a structure of words that consumes itself as it unfolds, like ice melting on a stove” (Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 246).

I understand that in Oates’s point-of-view a very short fiction resembles more a piece of poetry than conventional prose. Not only brevity, but tightness and condensation are points that weigh much, thereof the usefulness of each word, the essentialness and preciseness of every little piece of information might be the framework of the short-short. As the same Oates states quoting Frost, in this new genre, the words consume themselves as they unfold, like ice melting on a stove. Further, the short-short combines power and brevity, not only brevity, in a structure of words. Furthermore, Oates is not alone. In the same “Sudden Fiction”, Grace Paley asserts “a short story is closer to the poem than to the novel (...) and when it’s very very short – 1, 2, 2 ½ pages – should be read like a poem. That is slowly. People who like to skip can’t skip in a 3-page story” (1986, p. 253) In fact, short-shorts demand a really distinct

sort of reading from that of the short story and the novel – genres with which short-shorts are promptly compared (Mose 2004, p. 82). Indeed those genres engendered the short-short as I first said in the beginning. A third writer who supports the argument short fiction comes from poetry is Charles Johnson who cites two qualities a short-short demands and makes it resemble poetry: compression and economy (Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 233). In contrast, Gordon Weaver says fiction, either short or long, exhibit a narrative and poetry does not (Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 228). Thereof he purports the idea that the short-short might be more akin to the short story and novel than to poetry. Thus, he states the prose-poem is a bastard genre, a contradiction in terms (1986, p. 229). Edgar Allan Poe, early as 1842, sixty years before Brander Matthews established the art of the short story, also presented differences between poetry and short fiction, arguing “the tale has a point of superiority over the poem” (p. 61). He defended the thesis that while the latter seeks the development of the idea of the Beautiful, the former has its basis in *Truth*. He avers “truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale” (p. 62). All in all, Robert Kelly asserts that the new genre “has become the great fertile plain where, for once, poets and novelists can meet together as equals, and each produce effective work, funded by their separate dispositions and preparations” (Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 239 – emphasis added).

Moreover, in my contention, what matters in the contemporary short-shorts is the tone and rhythm as much as in the prose poem (A bastard genre?) or modern poem. By rhythm I mean what Robert Kelly calls “rhythmic scope”, a “focus on the *time of the experience of the text*”. He says this is exactly what characterizes the new form (Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 240). I understand rhythm is also what Gitte Mose calls “impressionistic form” (p. 81). The writers try to capture the prints left by the moment of occurrence of an event, and therefrom that time of experience is frozen and narrated in the form of a text. By tone I mean a style or manner of writing totally opposed to the traditional form (I define ‘traditional form’ below). Robert Fox avers “short-shorts can be tone pieces, much like poems. (...) (I see) the structure of the work in its entirety. (...) I know the difference (between a poem and a short-short) because I’ve chosen the form deliberately, instinctively” (Shapard and Thomas, 1986, p. 252). Short-short writers are not very much concerned with the traditional form. That is why the limits that distinguish a prose poem and a short-short are so obscure, hazy or “blurring” as Robert Fox declares (Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 252). Many short-short story writers do not follow any kind of pre-established form (traditional form); well built characters and a well definite plot (conflict, climax, and resolution) are no longer needed; they are considered “antiquated goods”, borrowing the words from Jason Sanford (2004) in his essay “Who Wears Short

Shorts? Micro Stories and MFA Disgust”; “tools” not used nowadays any longer. This is what I call traditional form, the old framework used by writers to support a short-short story.

4.

In addition, the limits and boundaries that settle the borders of this new genre seem blurring indeed – a characteristic of postmodernism, “interest in blurring the boundaries between poetry and prose: less obviously distinct than they once were”, as Sarah Brouillette (2007) says in her paper on contemporary literature. Undoubtedly, it is a genre engendered within the core of postmodernism. It is a hybrid genre which presents characteristics from the short story and journalistic writing. A hybrid text is one that combines features of more than one genre. In other words, the short-short mixes features from several genres. It is bricolage, “a literary piece created from diverse resources”, and pastiche, “a literary piece consisting wholly or chiefly of motifs or techniques borrowed from one or more sources”^{iv}. Again, those are characteristics from postmodernism likewise according to the same Sarah Brouillette (2007) and paper. She says postmodernism “celebrates *bricolage* and pastiche as play”. After all, in the realm of the short-shorts, form is not important but the message conveyed must be memorable.

Nevertheless, in the realm of the short-shorts the framework or structure of the texts is very different. The contemporary ones, the new “form” which has been rising, is one without a definite and precise identity, and still seeks an asserted name to be called after. The only constraint it has are the number of pages and words. It must be brief. And perhaps, a second and a third “constraint” might be its own lack of form and its autopoiesis – a concept very contemporary but an idea that is old as Goethe and Shakespeare. Shakespeare said: “This is an art which does not mend nature, change it rather, but the art itself is nature”... Goethe asserted: “A work of art is just as much a work of nature as a mountain”^v. If a work of art is just as a work of nature, nature is not created by anyone, it produces itself, it is self-maintained and self-organized - an autopoietic entity just like our new literary genre.

Hortense Calisher, an American short-short story writer, states about the form of short-shorts: “I’m not much for limiting statements on the technique or category of anything. All these do is limit – and sooner or later somebody will come along and defy that, or bypass what supposedly couldn’t be” (Shapard and Thomas 1986, p. 250). Thus her assertion is

questionable because many other forms of literary works have constraints, such as metrical poetry: sonnets or bardic poems – poetry still written nowadays.

What about so many labels to name this new literary genre? There are several as I have already mentioned. Perhaps there will never be only one but always several. There have also been some very recent attempts to sub-classify it. As I am working with principles of taxonomy, it is worthwhile citing Shapard and Thomas's recent attempt to sub-classify the short-shorts. They report a distinction they decided to make within the genre.

Stories of only a page or two seemed to us different not only in length but in nature; they evoked a single moment, or an idea, whereas a five-page story, however experimental, was more akin to the traditional short story. Calling on the Wisdom of Solomon, we split the child (*sudden fiction*) into two new children. The longer story became "*new*" *sudden fiction*, while the shorter became *flash*, named by James Thomas (2007, p. 15).

Granted that, writers have decided that a "*new*" *sudden fiction* must be between one to five pages or 1,000 – 2,000 words and the minimum for a *flash fiction* is a third of a page while the maximum length is 750 words – the same as Hemingway's classic "A Very Short Story".

Moreover, it is worthwhile mentioning a Danish attempt to classify the new genre found in the afterword to an anthology of short prose fiction, wherein the short-shorts are presented as generic field because, as the editors aver (Mose 2004, p. 83), "one of the most important characteristics of short prose is that it integrates and/or contrasts stylistic features and linguistic modes from many different literary genres without ever adhering 100 per cent to one single convention" (Brixvold and JØrgensen, qtd. in Mose 2004, p. 83).

Second, the generic field shows an increase in the fictional elements if we read it from the bottom up according to some familiar categories:

tale	
fairy tale / fable	Danish <i>novelle</i> / short story
allegory	prose poem
causerie	lyrical poem
essay	sketch
report	private note
document	

(Mose 2004, p. 83)

5.

There was a time that I call "primordial times" of the genre short-short story or "primordium of the short-shorts", when writers wrote short-stories which were shorter than the usual but were not named short-shorts, yet. Equally important, they obeyed the only limit that has been

set to this contemporary genre – the number of pages and words. I also refer to “primordium of the short-shorts” because of the form and characterization. They obeyed the traditional form: characters were well built and there was a well developed plot (conflict, climax, and resolution). Many short-short story writers from the primordial times of the genre obeyed the constraints of the form. Among them I cite Tennessee Williams in “Tent Worms”, Bernard Malamud in “A Lost Grave” and Ernest Hemingway in “A Very Short Story”, for instance. Thereafter, I cannot say this type of short-short is a hybrid text, a pastiche or a bricolage. Their boundaries are distinct. Or better, they have boundaries. Therefore, they are more akin to the short story than to the short-short. They are also longer; about the size of a new sudden fiction, except Hemingway’s. He developed form and characterization in 750 words! Less than two pages! I cannot call it a flash fiction – a story that evokes a single moment or an idea. They are not contemporary short-shorts.

Nevertheless, now I intend to conduct a brief analysis or case study of four contemporary short prose fictions: “The Red Fox Fur Coat”, by Teolinda Gersão, “The Wine Doctor”, by Frederick Adolf Paola, “My Date with Neanderthal Woman”, by David Galef, and “Popular Mechanics” by Raymond Carver.

“The Red Fox Fur Coat” – Plot summary - A humble bank clerk is strolling around town after work when suddenly she finds herself before a shop window and a red fox fur coat. The shop was closed but she comes back next day at lunch time and tries on the coat. It fits her perfectly; suits her beautifully. Our main character becomes obstinate concerning the purchase of the item. However, it cost “five times more than she could afford” (p.35). Then she decides to spread out the payment and sacrifice her holidays and part of the money she had saved for a car loan, eat less and use less heating. Notwithstanding she would be able to have the coat only after the third installment would be paid. Meanwhile she dreamed and thought all the time about it. She stopped by the shop everyday to see it. After a while, as deeper and deeper her wishes and drives become, she starts to feel and act like an animal, with a much more accurate sense of smell and hearing and craving desperate for raw meat. As soon

as she gets the coat at the shop, she can hardly get in the car and drive to the nearest forest where she leaps from the car with her four feet on the ground, waves her tail and shakes her animal body sniffing the air joyfully and then delving into the depths of the forest.

Analysis - This piece of short prose fiction is regarded as new sudden fiction due to its size, five pages, and its form development. There are not many details about the setting and the focus is all on the main character whose construction is elaborate. Therefore it resembles more the traditional short story with its conservative form. Furthermore, I do not see expansion throughout the story but “an impulse toward concentration” - concentration on the main character and not digression apart from that. According to Charles E. May, “this focusing of all forces on a single point is the prerequisite for all mythical thinking and mythical formulation” (p. 139), the basis for the primal narrative, the germ of the short story.

“My Date with Neanderthal Woman” – Plot Summary – Glena is a Neanderthal who lives in a cave in the woods. Robert is a Homo Sapiens who lives in the city and the story takes place at modern times. Robert hires the service of TransWorld Dating Agency to set a rendezvous with Glena. He is tired of modern women. And a series of critiques on our society follows. The Neanderthal woman has “a more natural sense of time than those of us dominated by Rolexes and cell phones” (p.109); “I’d grown tired of modern women and their endless language games” (p.110); “God, I hate all the introductory explanations of a first date – which is why I was so happy none of that mattered to Glena” (p. 110). The date works out wonderfully in spite of the unavoidable differences. Robert, character and narrator, intends to

solve them despite the fact they are separated by millennia. Analysis – This short-short is considered a flash fiction partly because of its size, approximately two pages, and partly because it evokes a single moment and a single idea besides the fact it lacks the traditional form. The tone, the writer's attitude towards the text, a style or manner of writing totally opposed to the conventional one, from beginning to end is humorous, indeed; a characteristic of most of the flash fictions. The text resembles an anecdote that is, actually, one of the sub-classifications of the short-shorts proposed by Stephen Minot in the Afterwords of Shapard and Thomas's "Sudden Fiction" (1986, p.236). The theme of the story brings to my mind what Charles E. May says, and has already been mentioned, about the "the field of research for the short story". (It) "is the primitive, antisocial world of the unconscious, and the material of its analysis are not manners, but dreams" (p. 133). After all, this is a great story to illustrate this idea: an affair between a modern man and a Neanderthal woman – a dreamlike short fiction.

"The Wine Doctor" – Plot Summary – It is august, 1930, and Dottore Controlaò, a conventional doctor is in his office in Italy, and suddenly is surprised by an unexpected visit from Ezio Delli Castelli, "the wine doctor of Nocera Terinese" (p. 137), an oenopath, "a practitioner of the unique healing art of oenopathy" (p. 137). Ezio Delli Castelli had had an appointment with Dottore Controlaò a month before and the doctor had requested him a chest x-ray due to his complaints of a nagging cough and coughing up small amounts of blood. We understand while reading that Dottore Controlaò was not very friendly to his patient at first. He called him *Voi*, a pronoun Ezio Delli Castelli disdained and the doctor knew it. Controlaò

diagnoses cancer in Castelli's throat and lungs and prescribes him morphine. Before the final greetings, Controloà pats Castelli's shoulder and holds his hands out before his patient. Now it is Castelli's turn to diagnose Controloà's disease: "Arthritis deformans". That impresses the conventional doctor. Subsequently, Castelli prescribes white wine from the Verbicaro region to his new patient. They finally shake hands and thank each other when Controloà calls Castelli *Lei* - a polite form of "you" better appreciated by the wine doctor. Analysis – Again we are before a story classified as a new sudden fiction due to its size, five pages, and the language used – the fictional narrative language of the novel. It even makes me recall Hemmingway's writing style. In fact, the likeness is closer to the novel than to the traditional short story. The environment is presented in details and there is a careful individual characterization - characteristics that distinguish the fictional narrative language of the novel from other genres according to Watt (1984, p. 9-34). In addition to that, May asserts "the novel (...) takes the everyday life-world as its province (while) in the short story we are presented with characters (...) not in their taken-for-granted social world" (p. 137). For instance, the flash fictions are the ones that are usually unreal and present us a fantastic world.

"Popular Mechanics" – Plot Summary – It is probably spring because the snow is melting and the weather might be getting a little warmer. Nevertheless, it is darker on the inside of a house. A husband and a wife are in the midst of an argument while the husband is packing to leave her behind. Meanwhile, the husband remembers their baby who was being held by the mother. The husband wants to take the baby and the wife wants to keep him. Each one of them firmly takes hold of an arm of the baby and pulls hard. That is how "the issue was

decided” (p. 69). Analysis – This is a short-short published in 1986. In the collection where I found it, “Sudden Fiction – American Short-Short Stories”, the editors, Robert Shapard and James Thomas, set up a forum with forty American writers on the rise of the sub-genre. At the time, concepts, definitions and classifications were very incipient. Among other proposals, they were trying to find a singular name for the emerging sub-genre. Therefore, the hybridism of the genre is very visible in this story. I would not say this is a typical flash fiction. It fulfills the prerequisite of size. It has around 750 words. Notwithstanding there are descriptions of the environment, characteristic of the fictional narrative language of the novel and the traditional short story. I also see a pinch of humor which suits the flash fiction perfectly. Raymond Carver, the author, was a pioneer short-short writer.

6.

I have attested through my readings on the topic that this new literary genre has not been studied in depth by the academia. The reason why, probably resides in the little sympathy it has engendered among writers, literary critics and also professors. Gitte Mose says that the emerging genre demands a different kind of concentration from that of the short story and thereafter is considered difficult to read (p. 82). In addition he also avers some authors “have regarded these texts as hack work, exercise or preliminary studies for work on a larger scale, using generic designations like ‘drafts’, ‘reflections’, and ‘experiments’, all underlining their provisional nature”(p. 82). Accordingly, “it is the exploration of what is still unknown that deserves priority” as Aldo Nemesio, says in his article "The Comparative Method and the Study of Literature". Certainly, that is one of reasons why I chose to deepen into the study of the short-short story.

It is true, as Jason Sanford says in his essay “Who Wears Short Shorts? Micro Stories and MFA Disgust” that

no matter how excellent and mind-blowing a regular-size short-story might be, it still takes an author

several days to write it. In this same time an author can write any number of mediocre short-shorts. (...) In fact, this is the (new) genre (a few) writers are embracing. (...) Poetic vision rarely shows up. After all, how can you express vision in 100 words (a good sample of a *flash fiction*)? (...) There is no denying that the short-short can be a powerful form of writing. (...) A good *flash* is so condensed that it borderlines poetry. A good *flash* engages your mind not only for the short duration of its read, but for a long time after.

Perhaps the poverty in the narrative, the lack of poetic condensation and an absence of traditional form among so many short-shorts make scholars withdraw from the study on the new genre. They miss the academic in those texts. In short, it is difficult to pinpoint the purpose or intention of those postmodernist texts. It might be only for the fun of creating a new kind of art that will expectantly order itself naturally in autopoiesis.

At last, Robert Shapard and James Thomas, literature teachers, the former at the University of Hawaii, the latter in Yellow Springs, Ohio, conducted a very recent research. They recruited writers, editors, and others who loved to read, asking them to rate the best short-shorts they had found so far. They made notes: *new sudden fictions* were everywhere then, even more than *flash fictions*. *Suddens*, not the *flashes*, got the most 10s from their readers.

Based on the results of this research I might conclude that the traditional form pleases readers better than the contemporary short-shorts. I say that because the *new sudden fiction* is more akin to the traditional short-story than the *flash fiction*. I am not considering the length but the form. Perhaps the length counts as well because when you have more space it is easier to develop form. Besides that, I must also conclude that autopoiesis in literature, and more specifically in genre theory, is a structuring of the form in self-organization, self-maintenance, in an autonomous way that “uses the same components in its network production which were used to create it” (See end-note # ii.). Thence, those contemporary genre forms such as the short-short story, which are not steadfast but are in constant mutation, will never fulfill the prerequisites necessary to fit the strict boundaries of the concept of generic identity. And we were able to attest that through the analysis of the short-shorts I have just carried out. Nevertheless, the contemporary short-short with its whole *mélange* of stylistic features, open beginnings and ends, away from the tradition, still finds a form of its own. Again, it is a form that being autopoietic will never suit the traditional taxonomic principles and their concept of generic identity. It will be always a hybrid form.

REFERENCES

Briggs, Robert. Don't Fence Me In: Reading Beyond Genre. **Senses of Cinema**. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne Press, 2003. Available at: http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/27/beyond_genre.html
Accessed on 20 November 2008.

Brouillette, Sarah. Course materials for 21L.488 **Contemporary Literature: British Novels Now**, Spring 2007. MIT OpenCourseWare (<http://ocw.mit.edu/>), Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Downloaded on 21 November 2008.

CARVER, Raymond. Popular Mechanics. In: SHAPARD, Robert; THOMAS, James. **Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories**. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986, p. 68-69.

ÉJXENBAUM, B.M. O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story. Trad. TITUNIK, I. R. In: MAY, Charles. **The New Short Story Theories**. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. p. 81-88.

GALEF, David. My Date with Neanderthal Woman. In: SHAPARD, Robert; THOMAS, James. **Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories**. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. p. 109-111.

GERSAO, Teolinda. The Red Fox Fur Coat. Trad. COSTA, Margaret Jull. In: SHAPARD, Robert; THOMAS, James. **New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond**. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 34-39.

JARRELL, Randall. Stories. In: MAY, Charles. **The New Short Story Theories**. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. p. 3-14.

MATTHEWS, Brander. The Philosophy of the Short-Story. In: MAY, Charles. **The New Short Story Theories**. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. p. 73-80.

MAY, Charles E. The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction. In: MAY, Charles. **The New Short Story Theories**. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. p. 131-143.

MOSE, Gitte. Danish Short Shorts in the 1990s and the Jena-Romantic Fragments. In: WINTHER, Per; LOTHE, Jakob; SKEI, Hans H. **The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis**. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. p. 81-95.

Nagai, Tosiya. **What is Autopoiesis?** 30 July 2000. Available at

<<http://www.nagaitosiya.com/e/autopoiesis.html>>. Accessed on 18 February 2009.

Nemesio, Aldo. *The Comparative Method and the Study of Literature*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999. CLCWeb: **Comparative Literature and Culture 1.1**. Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss1/1>
Accessed on 25 November 2008.

PAOLA, Frederick A. The Wine Doctor. In: SHAPARD, Robert; THOMAS, James. **New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond**. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 137-141.

PASCO, Allan H. On Defining Short Stories. In: MAY, Charles. **The New Short Story Theories**. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. p. 114-130.

PENN, W.S. The Tale as Genre in Short Fiction. In: MAY, Charles. **The New Short Story Theories**. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. p. 44-55.

POE, Edgar Allan. Poe on Short Fiction. In: MAY, Charles. **The New Short Story Theories**. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. p. 59-72.

Sanford, Jason. Who Wears Short Shorts? Micro Stories and MFA Disgust. **storySouth: a journal of literature from the New South**. Minneapolis, 2004.
Available at: <<http://www.storysouth.com/fall2004/shortshorts.html>>
Accessed on 20 September 2007.

SHAPARD, R.; THOMAS, J. **Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories**. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986.

---. **New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond**. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

---. **Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories**. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.

WATT, Ian. **The Rise of the Novel**. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

WOLFREYS, Julian. **Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

NOTES

ⁱ "unconscious." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 17 Feb. 2009. Available at <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/unconscious>>.

ⁱⁱ Paraphrasing the definition of 'autopoiesis' from the *Web Dictionary of Cybernetic and Systems*. 18 Feb. 2009. Available at <<http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ASC/AUTOPOIESIS.html>>.

ⁱⁱⁱ E. M. Foster, quoted in Allan H. Pasco 1994, p. 123.

^{iv} The definitions of 'bricolage' and 'pastiche' are from *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Retrieved November 20, 2008, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pastiche> and <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bricolage>

^v Shakespeare and Goethe, quoted in Randall Jarrell 1994, p. 3.