



‘On Grieving and Holding on’ in Kate Osias’s Flash Fiction “Dinner For Two”: A Stylistic Analysis

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growth in research interest in stylistic analyses of fiction. However, stylistic studies on the very short story genre called *flash fiction* remain scant. To fill this gap, the present study aims to conduct a stylistic investigation of one flash fiction written by a Filipino. Specifically, it examines “Dinner For Two” by Kate Osias based upon the following stylistic aspects: lexical categories, grammatical categories, and figures of speech. By combining linguistic criterion (or discrimination) and literary criterion, the stylistic analysis has helped in the deciphering of the language of the flash fiction under study by providing a more critical and objective approach to literary interpretation. Based on the analysis of the textual features along stylistic lines, it can be assumed that with brevity at its heart, flash fiction’s *limitations* are strengths because they may not only hook the readers but may also propel them to concentrate on the power of language, association, and inference. From this description, it can be argued that understatement and purposeful ambiguity are vital in flash fiction. Through the use of evocative language, flash fiction, as a literary genre, best works via implication.

Keywords: fiction, flash fiction, Philippine literature, short story, stylistics, stylistic analysis

Introduction

Just like any other form of visual arts, fiction serves as a medium of expression. Correspondingly, the characters and plot in fiction would serve as the subject and composition of a painting. On the other hand, language would comprise the rest of the artwork: the color, the texture, and the like. In a painting, the conglomeration of these elements creates a space and places a subject in that space; and how the artist applies these elements modifies the way a reader experiences or appreciates the finished art piece. In the same manner, language gives birth to a character, images a setting, and changes the way the readers encounter fiction. Alter a word or rephrase a clause, and one’s interpretation of the sentence may change.

The above paragraph puts forward the notion that language and literature should team up for their mutual benefit. According to Cañares (2002), relying on language *alone* can lead to a mechanical and soulless interpretation of a literary piece (emphasis, added); a purely literary criticism that is solely based on a reader’s intuition will not hold much water. As an area of

applied linguistics within this context, stylistics serves as the middle ground that forges the link or the overlap between linguistics and literary criticism as complementary disciplines. In the purview of stylistics, too, language is regarded as discourse; that is, through a text, a writer deploys discourse strategies, which serve as means to convey the function of language in context (Coupland, 2007; Fabb, 2010; Leech, 2008; Olateju, 2004; Simpson, 2004; Ufot, 2006, 2014; Widdowson, 1975). This role of linguistics in literary interpretation, i.e., stylistics, has been a subject of discussions among scholars from both disciplines of language and literature (Burke, 2010; Carter & Simpson, 2005; Hall, 2014; Jakobson, 1960, as cited in Burke, 2014; Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010; Leech, 2008; Leech & Short, 2007; Simpson, 2004; Widdowson, 1975).

In recent years, there has been a growth in research interest in stylistic analyses of fiction, which covered the following aspects: narrative and schematic structures of short stories (Wong & Lim, 2014); narratorial shift (Pakri & Openg, 2014); narrative point of view (Tismo, 2008); narrative and discourse strategies (Ufot, 2014); text fragmentation as a foregrounding device (Emmott et al., 2006); speech and thought representation (Lintao, 2013); character analysis through transitivity analysis (Salayo & Lontoc-Macam, 2019); corpus stylistics on comparing the language of fiction and oral narratives (Terblanche, 2016), on the pragmatics of *uh* and *um* in a novel (Jucker, 2015a, 2015b), and on parallelism used by an author in a novel (Zhao, 2012); connotation of adjectives (Elnaili, 2013); pronoun use as a foregrounding device (Levie & Wildshut, 2014); modality based on points of view (Pariña & De Leon, 2014); and translation as convergence or divergence of stylistic features (Tezcan, 2014; Ul, 2014). However, little attention has been paid to stylistic analyses of stories in English by Filipino authors. Likewise, there have been limited stylistic studies (Tarrayo, 2018a, 2018b, 2020) on the very short story genre called *flash fiction* (FF, for brevity), which has been receiving considerable attention in the digital age and has found its place in various anthologies, magazines, websites, and even in academic courses (Batchelor, 2012; Batchelor & King, 2014; Lucht, 2014). It should be noted, too, that most recent stylistic studies on fiction mainly focused on novels and short stories as major literary genres. Although FF is a short form of narrative that may be told in less than 700 or 100 words, it is assumed to have the essential story details and unique stylistic and structural features compatible with its brevity. To fill these gaps, the present study aims to conduct a stylistic investigation of one FF written by a Filipino. Specifically, it examines the FF “Dinner For Two” by Kate Osias based upon the following stylistic aspects: lexical categories, grammatical categories, and figures of speech.

Method

Focus of Analysis

The analysis was based upon three of the four linguistic and stylistic categories proposed by Leech and Short (2007), namely lexical and grammatical, and figures of speech (the other category is context and cohesion). The application of Leech and Short’s (2007) schema left no stone unturned in the scrutiny of the FF. The questions in the list provided in the said model were discriminately adapted to suit the needs of the analysis (cf. Leech & Short, 2007, pp. 61-66). Questions, which were not relevant were dispensed with, and only the useful ones were applied.

The entire text had to be scoured in the analysis of lexical and grammatical categories and figures of speech, peeling off the linguistic features of the text layer by layer. Specific features showing ‘consistency’ and ‘tendency’ could serve as evidence in interpreting the text. Leech and Short (2007) explain, “‘consistency’ and ‘tendency’ are most naturally reduced to ‘frequency’, and so, it appears, the stylistician becomes a statistician” (p. 34). They further clarify that a stylistic analysis may focus on one or several features as a selective approach. The

analysis of the textual features, which lend themselves well in describing the FF’s linguistic choices and interpretability, was done systematically, isolating and discussing important features regarded as ‘style markers.’ This phase of the present study combined linguistic criterion (or discrimination) and literary criterion in the analysis; therefore, the critic’s literary intuitions could be adequately confirmed through references to the text, thus looking into linguistic proofs.

The Flash Fiction Under Study

“Dinner For Two” was chosen among the 68 FF pieces in the anthology *Fast Food Fiction Delivery: Short Short Stories to Go*, edited by de Jesus and Katigbak-Lacuesta (2015), because Kate Osias wrote it, a winner of the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature (four times), the Gig Book Contest, the Canvas Story Writing Contest, the 10th Romeo Forbes Children’s Storywriting Competition, and the Nick Joaquin Literary Awards. She also coedited the sixth and seventh volumes of *Philippine Speculative Fiction*. In 2018, her debut collection of short fiction, *Heroes, Villains, and Other Women*, was published by the Ateneo de Manila University Press. The anthology, where the FF piece under investigation was taken, was published in the Philippines by Anvil Publishing. In 2016, this anthology was a finalist in the 35th National Book Awards for Best Anthology in English.

In “Dinner For Two,” the main character, who seems to straddle between reality and imagination, still holds on to hope as she struggles with the untimely death of a loved one, whom she imagines having dinner with (see Appendix A for the copy of the FF).

Findings and Discussion

Lexical Categories

General

“Dinner For Two” deals with how the main character overcomes grief and denies the death of the man she loves. The dinner for two is a fantasy, which is centered on a date that will never happen. Lost in a sea of grief, the woman seems to be drowned by the unremitting pain, and such a struggle is not within her control. She just cannot deal with this death, so she spins this tale. Later on, readers realize that the man died, and the main character knows this but chooses to keep on with her make-believe date, a dinner for two. This sort of fantasy or imagination of the woman, eventually blurred by reality, is vividly represented through the noticeable use of words that induce sensations, which can be visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, or gustatory:

Visual: ... *a chiffonade of dythlista into a fine pulp.*
 ... *wafts of yellow herb ...*
 ... *pretend that she's in a much larger kitchen ...*
 ... *the pot simmering with a few cubes of precious meat ...*
 ... *the large bowl ...*
 ... *mounds of freshly baked bread peeking out from a covered basket ...*
 ... *long-necked glasses glinting in candlelight ...*
 ... *pieces of cloth fashioned into swans adorning two plates ...*

... perfectly cooked meat barely visible beneath the murky broth

...

Auditory: *She hums as she stirs dylista ...*

Olfactory: *Wafts of the yellow herb's distinctive aroma ...*

... temporarily displacing the scent of meat and sweat and old wood.

The Triktikaran smells exactly as it should, with the heavy scent of dylista ...

The aroma coupled with the perfectly cooked meat ...

Tactile/Feeling: *... she grinds a chiffonade of dythlista into a fine pulp.*

... it's the delicate dylista that is most extravagant of all.

Dylista, if harvested and ground correctly ...

... unstarched cloth wings ...

A feeling of dread ...

But Triktikaran calms her down.

The aroma ... helps keep the fear at bay.

Gustatory: *... a few cubes of precious meat ...*

... imbues a potent smoke-and-mint flavor ...

... to elevate the taste of the food ...

... freshly baked bread ...

... perfectly cooked meat barely visible beneath the murky broth

...

To illustrate, the use of sensory details in the beginning of the story readily sets the stage for this fantasized dinner for two:

(1) *With practiced efficiency, she grinds a chiffonade of dythlista into a fine pulp. Wafts of the yellow herb's distinctive aroma fill the room, temporarily displacing the scent of meat and sweat and old wood. The smell makes it easier for her to pretend that she's in a much larger kitchen, in a much more pleasant time. When she looks at the pot simmering with a few cubes of precious meat, she finds it in herself to smile.*

The first part takes place in the kitchen, with the main character preparing dinner. It tells the readers that the dinner is special with the description that the pleasant aroma makes the woman pretend that *she's in a much larger kitchen, in a much more pleasant time*. It can be assumed that the woman is financially disadvantaged because of these details, including the *few cubes of precious meat* that make her smile and the mentioning of the *meat and sweat and old wood*, which are quite undesirable scents. The emphasis on olfaction or smell as a solid sensory device triggers memory and nostalgia. Lewis (2015) in *Psychology Today* explicates that olfaction or the sense of smell is closely linked with memories and emotions, probably more so than any of

the other senses, i.e., visual, auditory (sound), and tactile (touch). It is interesting to note, too, that the narrator mentioned the word *pretend* at the very onset of the story.

This technique of using words or expressions evoking sensations in FF adheres to the ‘show, don’t tell’ principle in fiction writing. It seems that a strong FF piece can balance vivid descriptions with a quick-moving plot, using imagery to help readers visualize as much as possible. Such has been similarly observed in Cañares’s (2002) and Tarrayo’s (2018a, 2020) stylistic analyses of stream-of-consciousness short stories and FF pieces, respectively. These words or expressions help make the feelings both more concrete and more personal, painting a mental picture in readers’ minds. Hooks (2017) accentuates that as a “*visual* thing . . . flash fiction needs to ignite the senses quickly and compellingly” (para. 3); thus, carefully chosen words are placed on an FF’s visual palette. In his article “Smart surprises in flash fiction,” Pieroni (2009) highlights:

Memorable images are natural elements of a scene that are developed to shock readers out of a routine feeling, mood, or expectation. When this shock, or jolt, has been achieved, images can actually carry an incredible amount of emotional weight within a story and extend that heavy emotion to the reader. (p. 66)

Nouns

A majority of the nouns in the story are concrete (56 or 77.78%; see Table 1). The frequent use of concrete nouns carries an essential part of the meaning of a story, a similar observation in Canares’s (2002) and Tarrayo’s (2018a, 2020) studies. The account of the fantasized dinner for two is direct and concrete, providing access to the emotional intensity of the confused main character who seems lost in a sea of grief and denial.

Table 1: Abstract Nouns and Concrete Nouns Found in “Dinner For Two”

Abstract	Concrete
efficiency	Chiffonade
time*	dythlista (dylista)*
life	Pulp
circumstances	Wafts
purpose	herb*
depth	aroma*
favorite	Room
urge	scent*
thought	(cubes of) meat*
name	sweat*
embarrassment	Wood
love	Smell
(raises a) toast	Kitchen
(feeling of) dread	Dinner
fear	Pot
hope	Cubes Mother Necklace root crops
	feast broth* bullet hole back skull brow body ground bowl* riches mounds bread basket glasses* candlelight swans* plates chair

(bottle of)	(bolt of)
wine*	lightning
(bags of) flour	vision
(bags of) sugar	water
Eggs	cloth wings
Milk	
Rations	
Soil	
Potato	
flavor*	
Taste	
Food	
Soup	
Plant	
Treasures	
<hr/>	
F = 16 (21.22%)	F = 56 (77.78%)

Through these concrete nouns, the readers share not only the writer's words that represent the main character's mind but also the images that she creates in her inner world of fantasy, situating the readers through a perceptual experience of the consciousness of the woman at the time she prepares the dinner for two with so much anticipation. The vividness and immediacy of this experience are achieved through these words, stimulating the readers to plunge into this make-believe scenario. The strong imagery manifested through the use of concrete nouns provides the readers a meaningful and memorable visual, which triggers a key emotion to color the story. The evidence to prove this is the group of concrete nouns that refers to the kitchen and the dining area, and the objects or things found in it, e.g., *chiffonade*, *dythlista* or *dylista*, *pulp*, *herb*, *kitchen*, *wood*, *pot*, *(bottle of wine)*, *(bags of flour)*, *eggs*, *(bags of) sugar*, *milk*, *bowl*, *bread*, *basket*, *glasses*, *plates*, *chair*, *cloth wings*. Noticeable, too, is the juxtaposition of the setting and the solid images attributed to the food being prepared by the main character. The house appears to be cluttered, for the small kitchen is worn and torn, but the food is in itself perfect in the woman's eyes.

Further, the second and third paragraphs of the story that follow build the main character's poverty and highlight her hard work in preparing for the date, which is a labor of love, so to speak. With meager sources, it seems that she cannot afford to prepare a special dinner, and yet she did. She gathered all the goodies she cannot usually afford, so she begged, bartered, and stole because that night is special and is worth it. The readers likewise can view how the woman values hard work and effort through the narrator's showcasing of the *dythlista* or *dylista* as the most precious of all herbs.

(2) *The dinner for two she's preparing is the most expensive she's ever made in her life. She bartered her **mother's necklace** for the meat. She traded **root crops** and a stolen **bottle of wine** for the **bags of flour** and **sugar**. The **eggs** and **milk** were part of the **rations** of a dead man.*

*But out of everything, it's the delicate **dylista** that is most extravagant of all. It's the **herb** that she herself grew in **soil** that could have been planted with the hardier, more practical **potato**. **Dylista**, if harvested and ground correctly, imbues a potent smoke-and-mint flavor that cannot be replicated even under the best of circumstances.*

It serves no other purpose other than to elevate taste of the food it is applied to.

Adjectives

In keeping with the preponderant use of concrete nouns to illustrate the fantasized dinner for two of the main character, the adjectives in the narrative bring sensory imageries (25), most of which are visual: *fine (pulp)*, *yellow (herb)*, *distinctive (aroma)*, *old (wood)*, *larger (kitchen)*, *simmering (broth)*, *a few (cubes)*, *delicate (dylista)*, *hardier (potato)*, *potent smoke-and-mint (flavor)*, *heavy (scent)*, *large (bowl)*, *baked (bread)*, *covered (basket)*, *long-necked (glasses)*, *two (plates)*, *empty (chair)*, *chipped (bowl)*, *small (basket)*, *filled (glasses)*, *lifeless (swans)*, *unstarched (cloth wings)*, *cooked (meat)*, *visible*, and *murky (broth)*. These adjectives help create the mood of anticipation as the woman, who refuses to believe that her loved one has died and escapes the emotions resulting from the wrenching sorrow of loss, plays make-believe about a special dinner and sets an extra place at the dinner table, awaiting her beloved. On the other hand, the recollected sensations intimated by these adjectives seem to bring the narrator back to that ‘identical moment’ when such a special dinner actually happened.

Adjectives, particularly those that present visual imageries, are vehicles through which readers create their own emotional experience. Lombardi (2003) emphasizes that sensory experience “lures readers into the fictional world” (p. 107). While FF requires tight writing and the art of subtlety, it makes every word count, utilizing words and actions to show emotions such as fear, anxiety, and pain.

Verbs

Verbs that denote movements and physical acts are frequently utilized in the FF (15): *grinds*, *is preparing*, *has made*, *bartered*, *traded*, *grew*, *could have been planted*, *is applied (to)*, *took*, *makes (a feast)*, *cobbled*, *stole*, *stirs*, *raises*, and *comes*. This similar textual feature has been found important in previous studies (Cañares, 2002; Tarrayo, 2018a, 2020). In FF, the “‘action,’ so to speak, is entirely internal, beneath the surface, intimate” (Leslie, 2009, p. 9). In the analyzed FF, the readers, through the writer’s use of these verbs, are engaged with the actions of the main character as she painstakingly prepares the made-up dinner for two; that is, in what the character notices and performs, she is revealed, and she becomes plot in a few words.

To complement these kinesthetic words are verbs that indicate sense perceptions (11), i.e., *looks*, *imbues (flavor)*, *gives (flavor)*, *hums*, *call (out)*, *smells*, *says*, *blinks*, *clears*, *sees*, and *look*. These sensory details help evoke an emotional response and maintain the mood of the story. For instance, in one part, readers learn that the man is dead—a realization that no one will come to join the main character in the dinner for two. After this heartbreakening revelation, the narrator takes the readers back to the kitchen to look at the excited woman, and they would see that everything is set for the dinner. A few more deeds are added to emphasize how romantic the night would be: *freshly baked bread peeking out from a covered basket*; *long-necked glasses glinting in candlelight*; *pieces of cloth fashioned into swans adorning two plates*. In particular, the poetic words *peeking out*, *glinting*, and *adorning* suggest romance. Gebbie (2009) maintains, “Flash stories are far bigger than their minimal word counts might suggest. The worlds created so quickly are entire, deep” (p. 55). Actions fused within compressed details in FF can help convey to the readers the tension between what is expressed and unexpressed, creating momentum and revealing character.

Moreover, a few yet salient verbs suggesting psychological states or activities (7), especially those of the main character, are employed in the narrative: *pretend*, *dared*, *will celebrate*, *had given (in)*, *muster (a thought)*, *calms*, and *hold (on to hope)*. The woman seems to avoid the

reality of the death of her beloved deliberately, and she finds herself unable to come to grips with all the ramifications of this cruel and unwelcoming reality. The idea of preparing the dinner for nothing assuages her painful feeling of loss. Worth mentioning, too, is the use of the counterfactual verb *pretend* in the first paragraph: *The smell makes it easier for her to pretend that she's in a much larger kitchen, in a much more pleasant time*. Leech and Short (2007) explain that “counterfactuals presuppose the negation of what is asserted” (p. 65). As explained earlier, the use of this verb sets the stage for the make-believe dinner for two that will never happen.

Adverbs

Interestingly, six adverbs of manner are associated with the meticulous process of cooking done by the main character. They help convey the idea that the act of perfectly cooking the Triktikaran soup only creates a powerful scenario of reminiscing (i.e., a tribute or in memoriam, so to speak), instead of depicting a celebration of a special occasion with the man who is now deceased. The contrast between the sets of words *temporarily* and *barely*, and *exactly*, *correctly*, *freshly*, and *perfectly* in the following extracts would suggest this insight:

- (3) *Wafts of the yellow herb's distinctive aroma fill the room, **temporarily** displacing the scent of meat and sweat and old wood.*
- (4) *Dylista, if harvested and ground **correctly**, imbues a potent smoke-and-mint flavor that cannot be replicated even under the best of circumstances.*
- (5) *The Triktikaran smells **exactly** as it should, with the heavy scent of dylista tempered by the meat.*
- (6) *Around the large bowl is an embarrassment of riches in these hard times: mounds of **freshly** baked bread peeking out from a covered basket ...*
- (7) *The aroma coupled with the **perfectly** cooked meat **barely** visible beneath the murky broth helps keep the fear at bay.*

Grammatical Categories

Sentence Complexity

In general, most of the sentences in the FF are simple. This linguistic feature can resemble a sort of short, laconic expression when one is overwhelmed; it supplements the sort of tension the readers may feel from the woman as she refuses to accept the physical fact that he is gone. The sudden death of her man so stuns her that she can hardly comprehend what has transpired. The simple sentences likewise accentuate how the idea of cooking reminds her of the man both pleasurable and painfully and how her life has become gray and empty. The following first and second paragraphs from the story illustrate the dominant use of simple sentences (excluding the last statement in the first paragraph):

- (8) *With practiced efficiency, she grinds a chiffonade of dythlista into a fine pulp. Wafts of the yellow herb's distinctive aroma fill the room, **temporarily** displacing the scent of meat and sweat and old wood. The smell makes it easier for her to pretend that she's in a much larger kitchen, in a much more pleasant time. When she looks at the pot simmering with a few cubes of precious meat, she finds it in herself to smile.*

The dinner for two she’s preparing is the most expensive she’s ever made in her life. She bartered her mother’s necklace for the meat. She traded root crops and a stolen bottle of wine for the bags of flour and sugar. The eggs and milk were part of the rations of a dead man.

In the above extract, the sentence premodifiers and postmodifiers in the first paragraph make sentence processing complex, and this seems to convey the difficulty of the main character in facing her loss. However, the sentences in the second paragraph are simpler and thus easier to process, which could suggest that the main character finds life/the pain more bearable in and through cooking preparations.

On the other hand, complexity also varies from one sentence to another to serve a specific stylistic function. To illustrate, the following paragraphs are reproduced:

(9) (a) *A feeling of dread comes like a bolt of lightning, so unexpected and so very certain, that she blinks.* (b) *When her vision clears, she sees only that the bowl is chipped, that the basket of bread is small, that the glasses are filled with water and not wine, that the swans look lifeless with their unstarched cloth wings.*
(c) *But Triktikaran calms her down.* (d) *The aroma coupled with the perfectly cooked meat barely visible beneath the murky broth helps keep the fear at bay.*

The above extract starts with a cumulative sentence (a) in which the main clause comes first, followed by two modifying phrases and one subordinate clause; this sentence tends to create a feeling of suddenness. After raising a toast to the empty chair in front of her, the woman suddenly awakens from her make-believe dinner for two. Adding depth to this idea is the subsequent complex sentence (b). On the other hand, the succeeding paragraph begins with a simple sentence (c), followed by another one (d) with the parenthetical elements *coupled with the perfectly cooked meat barely visible beneath the murky broth*. Overall, this showcase of sentence complexity as a linguistic mechanism allows the readers to feel more deeply the complex emotions of the woman as she tries to jolt herself out of her denial but suddenly refuses to do so. The idea of cooking and the aroma of the Triktikaran soup reduce the painful feeling of loss, yet it is also a reminder of absence and of the dinner for two that will never happen. Complexity in terms of sentence length (i.e., number of words) likewise carries an essential part of the meaning. Readers may find a combination of long and short sentences useful in literary interpretation. To be precise, a noticeably long sentence, which conveys a character’s distress, followed by a short sentence, can signal a momentary closure to the character’s thoughts (Kardos, 2013).

Noun Phrases

Because of the terrible memory implied in the make-believe dinner, the noun phrases in the following extract generate a lingering heavy sadness:

(10) *Around the large bowl is an embarrassment of riches in these hard times: mounds of freshly baked bread peeking out from a covered basket; long-necked glasses glinting in candlelight; pieces of cloth fashioned into swans adorning two plates.*

On the other hand, these noun phrases conjure the sort of the woman’s fantasy or imagination of a romantic dinner for two, situating the readers into her inner world of fantasy as she prepares dinner with much anticipation. In this way, she seems to escape reality and attempts to assuage her painful feeling of loss.

Verb Phrases/Tenses

The FF is generally narrated using the literary present. The main character's actions, perceptions, and emotional states are predominantly articulated in the simple present (e.g., *grinds, looks, hums, stirs*) along with the present progressive (i.e., *is preparing*) and the present perfect (i.e., *she's ever made*). This gives the plot a sense of immediacy and intensity, projecting the story into the readers' *now* and capturing the moment as the woman character prepares her man's favorite food and anticipates his coming home. The act of preparing the dinner for two using the present tense suits the main character who struggles to forget or repress her sense of past and future. She straddles between fantasy and reality and grapples with her emotions to accept the truth about her man's death.

In certain parts, however, the narrator recalls events in the past to contextualize more the dramatic tension and suspense in the story. For example, the extracts that follow demonstrate the abrupt shift from the present to past tense to illustrate how the idea of cooking suddenly reminds the woman of the untimely death of her man. Noticeable, in particular, is the absence of the transition to show the relationship among the ideas in this paragraph: from cooking to the past (i.e., the sudden death of the man) and then back to cooking. From this, it can be inferred that the protagonist seems to be drowned in a sort of emotional ambivalence; that is, cooking the Triktikaran triggers memory and assuages the feeling of loss and emptiness, but it is also a constant reminder of her man's absence.

(11) *She hums as she stirs dylista into the simmering broth.*

He died too quickly. The bullet came out of nowhere, driving a hole into the back of his skull that was momentarily exposed when he had given in to the urge to wipe the sweat from his brow. He didn't even have time to muster a thought much less call out a name. He was gone, even before his body slumped to the ground.

The Triktikaran smells exactly as it should, with the heavy scent of dylista tempered by the meat. Around the large bowl is an embarrassment of riches in these hard times: mounds of freshly baked bread peeking out from a covered basket; long-necked glasses glinting in candlelight; pieces of cloth fashioned into swans adorning two plates.

The use of the literary present and the switching between verb tenses to evoke a sense of immediacy and to relive and re-experience events in the past, respectively, have been found to be significant style markers in stream-of-consciousness short stories (Cañares, 2002) and FF (Tarrayo, 2020).

Punctuation

Salient to convey a dramatic pause, which creates a strong impression, and to add depth to the sentiment of the sentence is the following extract that demonstrates the use of a colon as a literary device:

(12) *Around the large bowl is an embarrassment of riches in these hard times: mounds of freshly baked bread peeking out from a covered basket; long-necked glasses glinting in candlelight; pieces of cloth fashioned into swans adorning two plates.*

Acting like an arrow pointing forward, the colon tells the readers that something important is coming. In the above extract, after the independent clause, the colon signals the enumeration of items that emphasize the amount of time and effort the main character has invested in making

the dinner special, e.g., freshly baked bread, elegant wine glasses, pretty table napkins. All this forges a scenario that leads to commemoration and hope, which keeps the woman pinned to the ground.

Figures of Speech

Grammatical and Lexical Schemes

Formal and structural repetitions are used in the story; they aim at logical emphasis, fixing the attention of the readers to the keywords in the narrative. The repetition of the word *today* at the beginning of the three consecutive sentences in the following paragraph is a case of *anaphora*:

(13) *Today, she took as much as she dared from her plant. Today, she makes a feast out of treasures she cobbled together, bartered for, grew and stole. Today, she will celebrate.*

Such a repetition tells the readers that ‘today’ is a celebration (although it is not clear what it is the woman is celebrating). It explains that all her hard work is done because she anticipates that her man is coming home for the celebration. On the other hand, the word *today* may connote the sort of obsession with the memory or nostalgia of the main character; she struggles to detach herself from the memory of the deceased, so her delusion consumes her. Even the apparent shift in verb tenses in the above sentences would imply this emotional ambivalence of the protagonist. The same word *today* begins each sentence, but the first is in the past tense; the second, in the present; and the third, in the future.

The made-up words *dythlista* or *dylista* and *Triktikaran* are likewise logically emphasized in the FF through repetition. As explained earlier, the narrator builds so much these words to reinforce the make-believe dinner for two. The scent of the *dythlista* or *dylista* and the aroma of the *Triktikaran* soup, which is the man’s favorite, leads the woman either to a sort of reflection or to a painful commemoration of the deceased.

Another notable scheme used is parallel clause structure, as exemplified in the following extract:

(14) *When her vision clears, she sees only that the bowl is chipped, that the basket of bread is small, that the glasses are filled with water and not wine, that the swans look lifeless with their unstarched cloth wings.*

Such parallelism establishes a stark connection among ideas, a form of symmetry that makes the clauses catchier and more compelling. In this part of the story, the woman realizes that she is alone, and that the dinner is not as extravagant at all, i.e., a chipped bowl, small bread, water-filled glasses, and lifeless napkins. These descriptions serve to emphasize the antithetical pictures of reality and a make-believe scenario (i.e., *mounds of freshly baked bread peeking out from a covered basket; long-necked glasses glinting in candlelight; pieces of cloth fashioned into swans adorning two plates*).

Grammatical and lexical schemes using formal and structural repetitions enhance the rhythmical effect of narratives. These linguistic schemes add balance and rhythm to sentences, making them more catchy, persuasive, and compelling.

Phonological Schemes

To convey a particular connotation, one onomatopoeic and alliterative line (i.e., set off as a one-sentence paragraph) is used to create a particular rhythm and mood:

(15) *She hums as she stirs dylista into the simmering broth.*

The onomatopoeic word *hums* complements the hissing sibilant *s*, which could resemble a sweet, calming sound. This phonological pattern echoes the idea that the act of cooking the *Triktikaran* helps appease the woman's feeling of loss; it keeps her attached to her memory of the deceased. On the other hand, the routine of cooking and preparing the dinner for two is also a constant reminder of this loss and absence.

Because they introduce a wonderful note to descriptions, onomatopoeia and alliteration lend themselves well to the poetic quality of FF. They capture the readers' attention on a particular section of a narrative, and since they create rhythm and mood, they can convey special connotations.

Tropes

Complementing the fantasy or imagination of the main character is the writer's use of the coined words (i.e., neologisms) *dythlista* or *dylista* (a sort of herb) and *Triktikaran* (a proper noun to refer to a kind of soup) [Note that in a personal communication with Kate Osias, the writer, the use of these invented words in the story was verified.]. Incorporating these words in the narrative serves a stylistic purpose, that is, to help emphasize that everything the main character does and thinks is all imaginary. Distraught and in pain, the lonely woman (or wife) is in a state of confusion and denies the brutal reality of the death of her man (or husband). To prove this, the narrator builds up so much the word *dythlista* or *dylista*, with the noticeable inconsistency in spelling, to suggest the emotional ambivalence of the woman.

The food, i.e., the *Triktikaran*, is likewise a powerful symbolism that concretizes essential details in the text. Such significance is maintained explicitly in this paragraph toward the end of the narrative:

(16) *But Triktikaran calms her down. The aroma coupled with the perfectly cooked meat barely visible beneath the murky broth helps keep the fear at bay.*

The *Triktikaran* per se may represent the false hope of the main character; it makes her static and keeps her holding onto nothing. The woman refuses to move on and to believe that her loved one has died. The dinner for two, which is made more special because of the *Triktikaran*, is a sort of false comfort—that is, just a grain of hope is heavy enough to make her forge or simulate a scenario where she tries not to face reality.

One case of a simile, on the other hand, reveals a central insight about the story:

(17) *A feeling of dread comes like a bolt of lightning, so unexpected and so very certain, that she blinks.*

The above extract is preceded by a single-sentence paragraph where the woman raises her glass for a toast to emphasize the celebration. Nevertheless, as she is alone, she awakens from her make-believe dinner for two. A toast requires a response—one to say Cheers!—but there is none, and the harsh reality manifests itself right before the woman's eyes *so unexpected and so very certain*.

Tropes add vividness and color and give supplemental meanings to FF by allowing the readers to think profoundly about an idea or a character and to intensify normal human feelings or consciousness into extraordinary emotions. They likewise express, though obliquely, the very private thoughts of a hidden consciousness.

Based on the analysis of the textual features of the FF under study along stylistic lines using Leech and Short’s (2007) schema as a guide, it can be assumed that with brevity at its heart, FF’s *limitations* are strengths because they may not only hook the readers but may also propel them to concentrate on the power of language, association, and inference. In the process, the readers can become active coauthors who situate their imagination and pay attention to the precision of FF’s punchy, succinct, and surprising language. With purposeful ambiguity, the FF examined conveys a poetic story hinted at through what is unsaid or unexpressed, which has weight, meaning, and intent. The poetic elements, e.g., figures of speech, the text incorporates are essential tools to make the language work double time, expressing something that illuminates another. The symbolic weight the FF carries drives the narrative forward, and the gaps within and around the story become big ideas in a small space.

FF necessitates practicing the art of economy. Making a few words represent something whole is a powerful effect that any good artist or creative writer knows: all spring in a day, or the world in a grain of sand. FF as ‘concentrated story’ is a matter of representation, which entails an acceptable definition of art. With brevity and focus as its outstanding features, FF finds a way to give shadows and depth to ideas, making them mean more than what they seem on the surface (e.g., a Ferris Wheel represents temporary happiness, a butterfly is a free spirit). Through its pithy or terse language, FF skillfully and artfully diverts and eventually gets readers’ attention and slip them the theme or lesson while they are engaged with the story.

Conclusion

Using Leech and Short’s (2007) schema as a guide for stylistic analysis, this present study thoroughly examined the FF “Dinner For Two” along with three principal categories: lexical and grammatical, and figures of speech. Every paragraph, sentence, clause, phrase, word, and punctuation the FF contains passed through a careful examination to determine how each textual feature has helped in the stylistic analysis and the deciphering of the language of the FF. It should be recalled that every stylistic analysis entails selecting some features and ignoring others; thus, it is a highly selective exercise, which may focus on one feature or a number of features (Leech & Short, 2007). The stylistic selection conducted in the present study attempted to establish the relationship between the significance of a text and the linguistic features through which the significance of the text was manifest. Thus, in selecting the features, a link was forged between linguistic discrimination and literary discrimination, which provided the researcher/critic specific features of style or ‘style markers’ that necessitated a more careful analysis or investigation.

Based on the stylistic analysis conducted in this paper, one may probably ask, “How can FF say so much in so little?” According to Leslie (2009) in her article “That “V” word” published in the *Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, “. . . flash fiction at its best has ambiguity on its side; it doesn’t shrink from mystery, it embraces it . . . flash fiction is *about* ambiguity. Flash fiction is about a singular moment, a slice of life, a sketch” (p. 8). From this description, it can be argued that understatement and purposeful ambiguity are vital in FF. Through the use of evocative language, FF, as a literary genre, best works via implication. To Casto (2009), the best flash fiction “manage[s] to reveal the hidden, accentuate the subtle, and highlight the seemingly insignificant. Such stories allow readers, as William Blake said in another context, ‘to see a world in a grain of sand’” (p. 24). Flash fiction as a highly charged story creates a movement for the readers, for it propels them to journey from the expressed to the unexpressed, to go beyond the surface details, and to allow the story to expand in the reading. Such a feature may seem to engage the readers to view the compression of time and words as a “need for urgency and profundity,” building tension and intensifying the emotional

impact (Brown, 2009, p. 69). The constraints of word and time can challenge and drive the readers to make sense of any FF piece—to make it matter.

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Appendix A: The Flash Fiction Under Study

Dinner For Two *Kate Osias*

With practiced efficiency, she grinds a chiffonade of dythlista into a fine pulp. Wafts of the yellow herb’s distinctive aroma fill the room, temporarily displacing the scent of meat and sweat and old wood. The smell makes it easier for her to pretend that she’s in a much larger kitchen, in a much more pleasant time. When she looks at the pot simmering with a few cubes of precious meat, she finds it in herself to smile.

The dinner for two she’s preparing is the most expensive she’s ever made in her life. She bartered her mother’s necklace for the meat. She traded root crops and a stolen bottle of wine for the bags of flour and sugar. The eggs and milk were part of the rations of a dead man.

But out of everything, it’s the delicate dylista that is most extravagant of all. It’s the herb that she herself grew in soil that could have been planted with the hardier, more practical potato. Dylista, if harvested and ground correctly, imbues a potent smoke-and-mint flavor that cannot be replicated even under the best of circumstances. It serves no other purpose other than to elevate taste of the food it is applied to.

It is what gives the depth of flavor in Triktikaran soup, his favorite.

Today, she took as much as she dared from her plant. Today, she makes a feast out of treasures she cobbled together, bartered for, grew and stole. Today, she will celebrate.

She hums as she stirs dylista into the simmering broth.

He died too quickly. The bullet came out of nowhere, driving a hole into the back of his skull that was momentarily exposed when he had given in to the urge to wipe the sweat from his brow. He didn’t even have time to muster a thought much less call out a name. He was gone, even before his body slumped to the ground.

The Triktikaran smells exactly as it should, with the heavy scent of dylista tempered by the meat. Around the large bowl is an embarrassment of riches in these hard times: mounds of freshly baked bread peeking out from a covered basket; long-necked glasses glinting in candlelight; pieces of cloth fashioned into swans adorning two plates.

“To us, my love,” she says as she raises a toast to the empty chair in front of her.

A feeling of dread comes like a bolt of lightning, so unexpected and so very certain, that she blinks. When her vision clears, she sees only that the bowl is chipped, that the basket of bread is small, that the glasses are filled with water and not wine, that the swans look lifeless with their unstarched cloth wings.

But Triktikaran calms her down. The aroma coupled with the perfectly cooked meat barely visible beneath the murky broth helps keep the fear at bay.

“To us, my love,” she says again, choosing once more to hold on to hope.