

# **Utilizing Narrative Devices:**

Experimenting with Style and Design in Short Fiction

to Heighten the Impression of

Character and Place

by

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## Abstract

This exegesis investigates the ways in which narrative devices can be implemented in short fiction, to heighten the impression of character and place. The devices are examined in relation to the creative writing in my master's thesis, *All That Could Happen*, and to experiments with narrative in contemporary American short fiction. The main findings of this study are that implementing specific devices of style and design can; i) give lyrical expression to character and place, engaging the reader in a 'listening' rather than mainly 'visual' interaction with the text; ii) direct the telling of the story through meanings and tensions residing in conversations between characters, or in the relationship between character and place; rather than through the narrative; and, iii) allow the reader greater contemplation of, and empathy for characters and places that are fractured and under stress.

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To the barefooted man with white hair and carry-bags, below AUT steps.

## Synopsis

This exegesis examines the narrative devices utilized in writing my master's thesis, *All That Could Happen*, a short fiction collection. My purpose for writing the collection was to improve my craft through experimenting with style and design. Central to this, is my interest in character and place. I wanted to see how the impression of character and place could be amplified by implementing these devices. I further hoped the devices would improve the rhythm and sound of my writing, which appeared to me toneless and flat. First, second and third-person perspectives are utilized in the stories; some narrated linearly, others fragmentedly. The thirty stories vary widely in length.

The exegesis also draws attention to contemporary American authors who have inspired the thesis. It investigates how the categories of style and design are similarly employed in their writing, to accentuate character and place. America has a rich history in experimental literature, and it is short fiction emerging from the 1950's beat era onward, that is examined here.

## Theoretical Framework

*In what ways can the use of narratological devices in short fiction, heighten the impression of character and place?*

Within the parameters of the above research question, the notion of 'place' might include the setting of a story, e.g., a house, inside a character's imagination; the environment or surroundings of a character, e.g., a workplace, pockets of nature, public spaces; or, a larger location with a sense of region or culture.

The following narrative devices are investigated.

- (i) Narrative style: i.e., lyrical and minimalist techniques.
- (ii) Narrative design: i.e., fragmentation techniques.

The method for this research is as follows:

- (i) Discussion by literary commentators on the nature of the above outlined devices and how they can heighten the impression of character and place in short fiction.
- (ii) Analysis by literary commentators of how these devices are used for the same purpose in the stories of American authors. Selected stories are: *Cathedral*, by Raymond Carver (2009), *Mrs. D and her Maids*, by Lydia Davis (2009), *Hills Like White Elephants*, by Ernest Hemingway (1987), *In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried*, by Amy Hempel (2006), *Escape from Spiderhead*, by George Saunders (2013), and two stories by Jack Kerouac; *Big Trip to Europe* and *Alone on a Mountaintop*, (2000).

- (iii) Discussion and analysis of how these devices are used for the same purpose in stories from the thesis, *All That Could Happen*. Selected stories are: *Queen St Scenes*, *Tea & Scones*, *Sequestered*, *Talking*, *Spectacularly Badly*, *Threads*, and, *In a Fissured City*.
- (iv) Analysis of the similarities and differences between the American literature and the thesis, in relation to how these devices are implemented.

## Lyricism

Lyrical prose in short fiction sees the fusion of poetic devices with the narrative, adding more depth of expression to the language. It invites the reader to participate in the music and rhythm of the language which almost sings, and benefits from being read aloud. In this way, lyrical prose can effectively heighten the impression of character and place. We see the interplay of speaking and writing in the prose of the author, Jack Kerouac, with its streams of melodic sentences or staccato fragments, sharpening our impression of places and cities in both America and other parts of the world. Two of his stories form the basis of discussion below. These are: *Big Trip to Europe* and *Alone on a Mountaintop* (Kerouac 2000).

The American poet, Clark Coolidge states, 'Jack Kerouac's writing is vocal in that the reader senses a voice rather than having a visual interaction with the words' (1995, p.43). Coolidge describes Kerouac's childhood, where oral practices and storytelling had a significant influence in his French-Canadian neighbourhood; his first language being a type of 'Quebecois called Joul', a very flowing vocal language made up of many other languages (p.43). During his adult years, Kerouac used this vocal technique to broadly portray the culture of the 1950's beat generation; his writing style strongly influenced by bebop in both its rapidity and sudden changes of tempo (1995, p.43).

Kerouac's lyrical technique has been further conceptualised as 'Spontaneous Prose'. Hunt (2012), expounds; 'Spontaneous Prose is also an attempt to replace the conventional figure of the "reader" (who interacts with the writer indirectly through the mediation of the composed text) with a reading listener who actively participates in the writing as if with the figure of the writer. In spontaneous prose, the writer "speaks" in writing rather than "writes" in writing' (2012, p.49).

*Big Trip to Europe* (2000), is written in a type of manic first-person narrative, where short sharp images of people and places are packed into long sentences bound together with little punctuation. These often stretch to paragraphs. Many scenes in the story appear plotless. The protagonist narrator doesn't linger long on detail but whizzes in and out of cafes, bars, streets and various attractions, in a narrative which more often reacts to, than interacts with the people and places encountered. Through the vibrant rhythm and ballsy sound of the prose, where both concrete and abstract language are skilfully blended, the scenes of Europe are highly evocative as the reader moves through or past them. The excerpt below is set in Paris.

'Walking, thence, in a cold brisk-red morning, over the Austerlitz Bridge, past the Zoo on the Quai St-Bernard where one little old deer stood in the morning dew, then past the Sorbonne, and my first sight of Notre Dame strange as a lost dream. – And when I saw a big rimed woman statue on Boulevard St-Germain I remembered my dream that I was once a French schoolboy in Paris. – I stopped at a café, ordered Cinzano, and realized the racket of going-to-work was the same here as in Houston or in Boston and no better – but I felt a vast promise, endless streets, streets, girls, places, meanings, and I could understand why Americans stayed here, some for lifetimes' (Kerouac 2000, p.136).

In many of Kerouac's scenes, the language is predominately concrete, running in long compressed lists, as shown in a second excerpt from *Big Trip to Europe*.

'What endless human types passed my café table:...' 'hippy pimply secretaries, bereted goggled clerks, bereted scarved carriers of milk bottles' ... 'frowning older students striding in trench coats like in Boston, seedy little cops (in blue caps) fishing through their pockets, cute pony-tailed blondes in high heels with zip notebooks...' (2000, p.137).

Considering at this point the thesis under analysis, *All That Could Happen*. One story which experiments with spontaneous prose is *Queen St Scenes*. As with Kerouac's prose, the narrative is rhythmic, vocal and swift in pace, with numerous images compressed into long sentences. The excerpt below illustrates this.

[REDACTED]

Concrete language is used in the prose to sharpen the impression of character and place; for example, the repeating image of the commanding Sky Tower, which presides over much of Queen Street. Here, the glitz and solidity of the Sky Tower is contrasted with the floating population on Queen Street beneath it by night. In particular, the movements of an ageing homeless man. In contrast to Kerouac's prose, the first-person narrator reflects on and interacts more with what they see. Another difference, is that a plot is more hinted at, traced; the story moving linearly through the changing seasons. This is shown in a second excerpt.

[REDACTED]

Taking another look at the lyrical techniques of Jack Kerouac. In *Alone on a Mountaintop* (2000), the narrative uses spontaneous prose for different effect. Here, during a reprieve to escape the rat race, the pace of the narrative is lulled through the insertion of more abstract language i.e., carefully chosen adjectives, similes and metaphors, which cause the reader to linger or reflect on the lengthened details and impressions of the place. The prose also draws attention to the more appeased protagonist narrator.

‘But in the morning – Sunday, July sixth – I was amazed and overjoyed to see a clear blue sunny sky and down below, like a radiant pure snow sea, the clouds making a marshmallow cover for all the world and all the lake while I abided in warm sunshine among hundreds of miles of snow-white peaks. – I brewed coffee and sang and drank a cup on my drowsy warm doorstep’ (Kerouac 2000, p.111).

The language continues to lengthen and draw out the reader's impression of the landscape with the insertion of abstract elements between concrete elements, as shown below.

'At noon the clouds vanished and the lake appeared below, beautiful beyond belief, a perfect blue pool'...'and the creeks like toy creeks'...'the joyous little unfolding liquid tracks'...'A perfect afternoon of sun, and behind the shack, I discovered a snowfield big enough to provide me with buckets of cold water till late September' (Kerouac 2000, p.111).

Moving on to a second story in the thesis; *Sequestered*. Written in third-person subjective, the narrative also uses spontaneous prose to facilitate a change of pace, drawing the reader's attention to the changing mood of both the protagonist and his surroundings. Not all of the story is written in spontaneous prose. Rather, it is inserted half-way through the text to quell a manic, introspective narrative. In the story, a writer with writer's block, moves from his cloistered apartment and choking thoughts, to an open, easeful rooftop café where he interacts with a person at his table. The excerpt below shows the momentum of the narrative before the infusion of spontaneous prose.

[REDACTED]

After a number of dense, impetuous scenes, the mood and pace of the narrative change with the insertion of spontaneous prose. The next excerpt demonstrates this.

[REDACTED]

The infusion of rhythm, rhyme and protracted verbs into the above scene, i.e., longer sounding verbs like, *stretched, lengthening, wandering*, which convey an expanding or drawing out, accentuates the protagonist's loosened-up mind and surroundings. The scene further transitions the reader to a thinner text, and consequently a more opened-out sense of place, where the protagonist engages with the person who has seated herself at his table.

### Summary

In its vibrancy of sound and rapidity of beat, spontaneous prose uses evocative, surface concrete elements, to sharpen character and place. It also uses deeper abstract elements to appease or lengthen the pace of the narrative. This enables the reader to linger on and contemplate character and place. Both elements are carefully blended. A key aspect to this narrative, is that it is a more sensory narrative. Both rhythm and sound enable the reader to interact with the prose, not so much in a reading capacity, but an unconstrained listening capacity. It is here that the impression of character and place is expanded beyond the visual landscape.

## Minimalism

Economy of style in narrative prose can facilitate a closer connection between reader and story, heightening an awareness of character and place. In a sparer, restrained narrative, readers are invited in to consider carefully what is being implied, more than merely absorbing spelt out text. This applies both to what is written in the text and what is not. Cain (2015) points us in the direction of Hemingway. 'The structure of Hemingway's sentences makes the reader keenly aware of the words that he has selected, just as much or more, the countless other possibilities that he has not selected' (p.80).

Hemingway conceptualised the minimalist style in his 'Iceberg Theory', where seven-eighths of a narrative may take place beneath the surface of the text, that is, as subtext. 'The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water' (Hemingway 1932, p.102). This concept is expanded in his 'Theory of Omission', which he outlines during a discussion on why he omitted the real end to one of his stories, *Out of Season* (1987), viz., that the old man had hung himself. Hemingway writes, 'This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood' (Hemingway 1994, p.43).

In *Hills Like White Elephants*, Hemingway inserted short strips of impersonal narrative which refrain from spelling out the action. The narrative offers simple images here and there, for example, repeated references to the heat. 'On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun' (1987, p.211). '... there was the warm shadow of the building' (ibid.). 'It was very hot ...' (ibid.). Additionally, there is repeated reference throughout the narrative

to the train tracks, and a bead curtain hanging across the door into the bar-room. We might interpret the heat in the air as the feeling of discomfort or discontent between the couple, i.e., the unnamed American and his companion, Jig, or that the railway junction suggests the couple's relationship is at a crossroads. We might interpret any manner of things from the bead curtain, or from the reference in the opening sentence to the hills being 'long and white' (1987, *ibid.*). Or, we could conclude that Hemingway has left the images vague to prompt the reader to focus more on the conversation between the couple. In essence, the narrative in the story is so uncertain that the telling of the story moves mostly through the conversation between these two. The key point here, is that the dialogue can be seen as a form of "narrative mode". Nykanen and Koivisto (2016) expound; '...resorting mainly to dialogue as a narrative mode works as a way of depicting tensions between the characters, and between them and the surrounding fictional world. This, in turn, engages the reader in an interpretative process of understanding the story's logic both within the fictional world, and at the level of communication between the implied author and the authorial audience' (2016, p.12). In *Hills Like White Elephants*, the pared narrative directs the reader to interpret more from the characters' words and what is happening between them; i.e., their repeated comments on whether Jig should have an abortion. Here, the dialogue appears simple and static, i.e., not really going anywhere, echoing the vague and repeated references to the surrounding place, as sketched in the narrative, viz., the hills, the heat and the railway tracks. The repetition of questions in the dialogue, e.g., "And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were...?" (1987, p.213), "But if I do it then it will be nice again...?" (*ibid.*), etc., is where much of the conflict is being played out, and it is here that the power imbalance in the couple's relationship emerges. Link (2004) explains; 'The

text depicts the couple's relationship as one in which the man is positioned as an authority, and Jig's questions both challenge that authority and seek reassurance from it. Hence the polarity of her questions – the man defines what is true, correct, or permissible by answering “yes” or “no” (2004, p.68-69).

Returning now to the thesis under consideration. *Talking* is a story which refrains from spelling out the interplay of tensions between characters. In the story, two long-distance friends are spending a weekend together in the Wairarapa, known for its vineyards and good food; Roberta who works as a lawyer, and Mini a schoolteacher who is on extended sick leave.

Written in third-person objective, there is no real access to either of the women's thoughts. Meanings and feelings reside in the subtext of their dialogue which functions as a form of narrative mode. Signifiers are omitted from the narrative. The story is told slight and at an angle to the matter at the heart of it, in much the same way *Hills as White Elephants* discusses the pending issue between the American and Jig. The obliqueness and discursiveness of Mini and Roberta's conversations is apparent in the way they skirt the edges of discussion about Mini's mental illness. There are vague responses and references where the friends test each other out in lines of dialogue which seem superficial and don't resolve into real conversation about it. At the crux of the situation, there is a conversation to be had about what Mini will do at the end of her sick leave, which doesn't really go anywhere. In the excerpt of conversation below, the two friends are eating lunch at a winery in Martinborough.

[REDACTED]

There are a loose chain of images in the story; soft toys to squash up to at night, sleeping pills, an olive tree which has snapped and buckled at the winery after being backed into by a wined driver, sheep napping on doorsteps and church steps around Martinborough. The reader might infer they give insight into Mini's illness, e.g., her sleep deprivation or fracturedness of mind, though the images have no real codifying device and, therefore, there is no solid conclusion to make. Instead, the reader is directed to speculate on Mini and Roberta's conversations for depth of meaning. In essence, to narrate a corresponding story of the interplay of emotional currents between the two; hence, connecting the reader to them on a deeper level.

The use of a restrained narrative to heighten awareness of character and place, is common in the writing of Raymond Carver. Like Hemmingway, Carver's stories have the illusion of being authorless with things being 'more than what they appear' (McCaffery 2012, p.228). McCaffery elucidates; 'Since there is little authorial presence and since Carver's characters are often both inarticulate and bewildered about the turn their lives have taken, the seemingly banal conversations between characters are typically endowed with intensity and meaning beyond their surface level meaning' (p.228). '... even the most ordinary gestures and exchanges have transformed meanings, hidden tensions, emotional depths' (2012, *ibid.*).

The characters in Carver's stories are ordinary middle-class, blue collar workers, the unemployed or marginally employed, the depressed, the broke. The starkness of Carver's narrative and the terse, flat dialogue of his characters, are expressive of their struggles and the environments and places they inhabit or live in. Kita (2014), conceptualises this style of American fiction as 'dirty realism', that is, where Carver explores the dirty reality of everyday life. Kita expounds; 'What is typical about "dirty realism" is the distinctive style characterised by sparse prose, simple language, and direct descriptions of ordinary people and events' (p.385). 'The characters in his fiction are exhausted with life. Their dialogue is spare and elliptical. It is usually cynical and ironic, concerned with what is below the surface, with the disjunction between what is said and what is meant' (2014, p.387).

The story, *Cathedral*, (Carver 2009), is narrated by a husband who is jealous of his wife's friend, Robert, who is visiting. The narrator sees himself as superior to Robert, who is blind, and makes it clear in the story that being able to see is everything. This is shown in the lead up to Robert's visit when the narrator suggests

to his wife that maybe he should take Robert bowling. An excerpt from the opening narrative of the story sets the clipped colloquial style.

'This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. His wife had died. So he was visiting the dead wife's relatives in Connecticut' (2009, p.514).

The constricted narrative continues through the story without imagery or metaphor, though loaded with meaning beneath the surface. In the following excerpt, the narrator is looking out of the lounge window as his wife pulls up in the car, having just collected Robert from the bus depot. His incredulity at his wife's response to Robert, implies a deficiency in his own relationship with her.

'I saw my wife laughing as she parked the car. I saw her get out of the car and shut the door. She was still wearing a smile. Just amazing' (p.518).

Meaning is implicit in the following excerpt, where the narrator and his wife are eating dinner with Robert.

'We dug in. We ate everything there was to eat on the table. We ate like there was no tomorrow. We didn't talk. We ate' (p.520).

The story reveals that it is Robert who knows the narrator's wife better, for although he can't physically see her, he fully listens to her. The narrator is unable to see or absorb the deeper aspects of things, though he gains new vision at the end of

the story. Here, Robert asks him to describe a cathedral which is being shown on the T.V. He is unable to articulate, i.e., 'To begin with they're very tall. I was looking around the room for clues. They reach way up.'... 'Towards the sky' (2009, p.526). At Robert's request, he draws a picture of the cathedral with his eyes closed; Robert's hand on his, to trace the pencil strokes. During this exercise he comes to realize the difference between looking and seeing; the latter requiring a deeper level of engagement.

*Tea & Scones* is a story from the thesis which narrates with little authorial presence. Written in third-person objective, it has just enough narrative sketching to set the simple rituals of ordinary people and their surroundings. Here, the term 'ordinary people' includes those who aren't considered important in society, those who are stuck in more mundane patterns of living, those who don't on their own, or even collectively, speak with a voice loud enough to create change. There are two main characters in the story; a woman who is filling her car with petrol at a garage, and an old man living rough, who asks her for money.

Throughout the story, meanings are transferred to the dialogue which acts as a form of narrative mode. Signifiers lie in the subtext of the constricted language. Two aspects are shown in the exchanges between the woman and the old man. Firstly, the irritation residing in her restrained responses to him. Secondly, the cynicism underlying his flat stoic manner. The following is an excerpt from the opening of the story.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

After an unanticipated event, the woman buys the old man a cup of tea at a café. The barista who serves them doesn't want him to stay, on account of his smell. He and the woman leave, each with a paper cup and a scone in a bag. The excerpt below picks up the story from there.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

It was in the redrafting of *Tea & Scones* that the authorial presence in the narrative was cut back. Initially written in third-person subjective, the inner tensions of the characters were spelt out. For example, the woman was described as feeling both 'put out' and 'guilty' when the old man asked if he could have the only coin in her purse. This was omitted in the redrafting. The change of POV to third person objective has restrained the narrative to describing mostly physical actions, e.g., the woman attempting to get back in her car, the woman flicking through shopping receipts in her purse, looking for coins; or to sketching simple images of place and setting, e.g., the gulls, the weather, the town. Within the rawness of place and setting, the tone of the dialogue is anchored. Consequently, the narration of *Tea & Scones* moves mostly through conversations, where meanings and tensions are relocated. For example, when the old man presses the woman about whether she has any coins, irritation is implicit in her reply, 'It doesn't look like it' (p.88). In addition, when he is confronted by the petrol attendant for annoying a customer,

cynicism underlies his reply that he can give the coin (a mere copper), back. It later resides in his reply to the woman, that sitting in her car would be too warm for him.

### Summary

In minimalist prose, the narrative is kept spare with little authorial presence, accentuating concrete, surface elements, i.e., simple images or actions. Things of deeper significance, e.g., feelings and sentiments, are omitted. This directs the reader towards the dialogue for greater perception or discernment of the text, which serves as a form of 'narrative mode' (Nykanen and Koivisto, 2016, p.12). Here, conversations are often constrained and oblique, precipitating a disjoint between, 'what is said and what is meant' (Kita, 2014, p.387). It is in this disjoint; this residing of meanings and feelings below the surface of the text, that the impression of character and place is honed.

### Fragmentation

Fragmented narrative, which interrupts the progression or sequencing of a story, can be used to scrutinize both people and places under stress. For example, fragmented text can accentuate the emotional distance between characters, one's fear of death, the piercing together of memory, and the brokenness of physical landscapes. Moreover, the use of gaps, titles and vignettes on the page, or the numbering of segmented pieces of text, can create subtext, giving readers the space to fully contemplate the circumstances of a character or place. The numbering of segmented text can further accentuate mood, setting and a sense of place in the text.

In her doctoral thesis, Bigler (2017) investigates how fragmented narrative and segmented formats are used to influence a reader's emotional reaction to the text and empathy towards a character's situation. For this purpose she examines *Mrs. D and Her Maids*, by Lydia Davis (2009), and *Escape from Spiderhead*, by George Saunders (2013).

Considering first, *Mrs. D and Her Maids*. In the story, the third person narrator tells of Mrs. D's difficulties in finding and keeping good maids, chronicling the employment of sixteen maids over several years in extracts from letters and random vignettes. Titles appear between these, some almost a story in themselves; 'How Many Maids Will Mrs. D Have in Her Lifetime?' (Davis 2009, p.618). Others are more fleeting; 'Two Weeks' (p.607). In her examination of the text, Bigler (2017) discusses fragmentation and empathy in relation to the segmented titles. She writes, 'The titles involve repetition to enforce the reality that the maids' employment under Mrs. D are often short. This includes: "Mrs. D Reflects on Gertrude, Who Didn't Work Out" (ibid.), "But Mrs. Langley Will Not Stay" (ibid. 609), "Minnie Does Not Work Out" (ibid. 611), and "Anna's Employment Is Not a Success" (ibid. 613).'... 'The understanding of this employment and situation are represented through the consistency of Mrs. D's replacement of maids. This would suggest that Mrs. D is the character creating the issues, not the maids.' (Ibid.). 'By Davis using the maids as sort of ambassadors, there could be an empathetic connection with the maids and the assumption that not one would be able to satisfy the expectations of Mrs. D (reiterated through Mrs. D's own letters and through third person-narration)' (2017, Ibid.).

Turning to the second story, *Escape from Spiderhead* (2013). Here, Bigler examines fragmentation and empathy in relation to the nature of gaps between the narrative, where ten sections of text are segmented by Roman numerals. Within the

gaps, contemplation of character is potentially amplified. The story is told by a prison inmate, Jeff, who with other inmates, has volunteered himself for laboratory experiments involving new age drugs which simulate emotional states such as, love. The story reveals that this volunteering is not wholly voluntary. In the story, Jeff and other inmates are connected intravenously to chemicals which are dispensed on instruction from Abnesti, the test administrator. Reflecting on the segmentation of text by Roman numerals, Bigler (2017) states, 'Saunders could be said to manipulate the segmentation in order to successfully create an opportunity for empathy with the protagonist and, indeed, the other characters involved as well' (2017, p.37). '... short segments are emotionally charged and abruptly cut off by the segmentation, giving time to consider the protagonist's interactions' (p.175).

An excerpt from the story shows the protagonist, Jeff, reflecting on an experiment he has just participated in.

'I spent all lunchtime thinking. It was weird. I had the memory of fucking Heather, the memory of having felt things I'd felt for her, the memory of having said the things I'd said to her. My throat was like raw from how much I'd said and how fast I'd felt compelled to say it. But in terms of feelings? I basically had nada left.

Just a hot face and some shame re having fucked three times in front of Abnesti.

### III

After lunch in came another girl' (Saunders, 2013, p.52).

At this point we will take up a story from the thesis under review. *Spectacularly Badly* uses numbers on the page to segment text, though for different effect. It is not to manipulate the spaces between the segments, but to accentuate mood and setting in each segment.

The story is about three disgruntled writing students who plot to sabotage an external marker to get clarity on his comments about their work. The text loosely represents a play, each numbered segment cutting to a new scene. The story opens with the final scene; scene vii, then flows linearly from scene i, to scene vi at the end. There is a setting up of each scene at the beginning of a segment, like backdrops on a stage, which further fragments the narrative. Here, the scenery and fixtures are spelt out to emphasize atmosphere, a sense of place and the mood of the moment. The narrative also describes the characters who occupy the setting. The following is an excerpt from the opening of a segment.

i

[REDACTED]

Throughout the scenes, the narrative is a mock on the all-seeing, all-knowing omniscient voice, which gives over-blown, open-world detail, like backgrounding to the story, by appearing in and around a character or the character's place. An excerpt below illustrates this. Here, the three students have just had an addled discussion about the ambiguity of the external marker's feedback.

[REDACTED]

A different take on fragmentation in relation to character and place, is found in the writing of Amy Hempel. Seemingly incomplete and plotless, Hempel's stories have the outward appearance of snapshots and vignettes, shifting between unrelated images and scenes. The composition of Hempel's writing is often ambiguous, disturbing all discussion of uniformity or linearity.

Jo Sapp, from the *Missouri Review*, probes into this during an interview with Hempel. She states, 'One critic says that "your structure is like the mongrel dog in 'The Center', part something and part something, and the best are those whose parts almost fly apart but don't." You start with your beach ball, and things collect on that' (1993, p.88).

Hempel replies; 'There is a way in which a writer does not have to spell things out, and the reader will get it. There's a way in which the mind works to impose meaning and order automatically on seemingly random bits of information, so you can almost offer these bits up without knowing yourself how they fit together—suspecting that they do—and trust the reader to make some sense out of it' (1993, *ibid.*).

Hempel's story, *In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried* (2006), uses fragmentation to emphasize emotional detachment between characters and the fear of dying; the latter laying out the theme. Scattered vignettes suggest that we don't often respond to death in an arranged way; our responses and thoughts being shattered, all over the place. Written in first-person POV, the unnamed narrator who is visiting a dying friend in hospital, reflects on her shame and guilt at not having visited for months. From the outset of the story, the dialogue is scattered with trivial detail, as shown in the excerpt below.

“Tell me things I won't mind forgetting,” she said. “Make it useless stuff or skip it.”

I began. I told her insects fly through rain, missing every drop, never getting wet. I told her no one in America owned a tape recorder before Bing Crosby did. I told her the shape of the moon is like a banana – you see it looking full, you're seeing it end-on' (2006, p.29).

The narrator's fear of dying, and her feelings of detachment, prevent her from discussing her friend's imminent death openly; being fixated instead on images like earthquakes and airplane turbulence, and apparently, a man who dies after seeing his mutilated arm. In the following fragment, the narrator is reflecting while taking a break from the hospital to walk along a beach across the road.

'What seems dangerous often is not—black snakes, for example, or clear-air turbulence. While things that just lie there, like this beach, are loaded with jeopardy. A yellow dust rising from the ground, the heat that ripens melons overnight—this is

earthquake weather. You can sit here braiding the fringe of your towel and the sand will all of a sudden suck down like an hourglass. The air roars. In the cheap apartments on-shore, bathtubs fill themselves and gardens roll up and over like green waves. If nothing happens, the dust will drift and the heat deepen till fear turns to desire. Nerves like that are only bought off by catastrophe' (2006, p.33).

Here, there is a shift from the abstract to the concrete, i.e., the narrator's fears are expressed through vignettes about fractured landscapes. Hence, the story is more a set of disjointed thoughts, interrupting an apparently absent plot and hinting at it in its absence.

A second story under discussion from the thesis, uses fragmented elements for similar effect. *Threads* traces the abusive circumstances of a young woman's childhood, in a series of unrelated vignettes. Narrated in second-person POV, the vignettes move in and out of time, piecing together memory and scrutinizing emotional gulfs between characters. Below, is a vignette set in childhood.

[REDACTED]

Throughout the story, fragmented snatches of conversation intrude as motifs, accentuating the protagonist's feelings of entrapment. Moreover, tiny shards of thoughts and conversations are 'hidden' in the gaps between vignettes, motioning to the story's theme of 'secretness', and the psychological motives underlying it. These are shown in the following two excerpts. The first is a thought by the protagonist adult during a counselling session. The second is a conversation between the protagonist child and an older sibling when they are alone together.

[REDACTED]

A final story from the thesis under review, is set in the aftermath of the Christchurch 2011 earthquake. *In A Fissured City*, is told minimally and at a slant to the predicament at the core of it, i.e., a man's struggle with post-traumatic stress and alcohol addiction. Narrated in third-person subjective, the story skirts the edges of the conflict, namely, the problems the protagonist, Matt, is experiencing with his teenage daughter and a separation from his partner which is imminent. In the following extract, Matt and his daughter are taking the puppy to the vet, a small crisis which has sprung, diverting him, temporarily, from the main conflict. The voice of the narrative feels fissured, drawing the shape and sounds of a broken landscape and the people within it.

[REDACTED]

Vignettes appear in the midst of the main crisis, seemingly rash and irrelevant to the story, with similar purpose to those employed by Hempel (2006). Plot moments are disrupted, and the reader left to fathom and piece together the relevance of the fragments in the sequencing of the story, i.e. the subtext. Like, for example, the sketching of Matt's thoughts in the vignette below, which occurs after his daughter asks unexpectedly, if he and her mother are going to split up.

[REDACTED}

Here the text is alluding to Matt's failing relationship with his partner, depleted of little things that mattered, once at the heart of it.

## Summary

In its disruption of the text and through a variety of formats, fragmentation enables reflection of and empathy for character and place. The reader's attention is diverted by the insertion of random fragments between scenes moving the story forward. These appear not to fit, leaving the reader to make sense of deeper meanings below the surface of the story. Subtext is inferred, themes are elucidated. In addition, segmenting pieces of text by numbers allows space for contemplation of character in the gaps between segments. It further accentuates mood, setting, and a sense of place in each single segment. Finally, fragmentation is a powerful device for telling the story of people and places under stress, of people and places that are already fragmented.

## Reflections

In concluding, I hope this exegesis will expand existing notions of what a short story is. It is a more ambiguous, flexible form, and not to be treated as a small novel where we should do all of the things that are done in a novel except more concisely. For example, adhering to a three-act structure. The fragmented stories of authors, Amy Hempel and Lydia Davis, bear this out. As does the prose of Jack Kerouac, with its main focus on augmenting rhythm and sound. And how much structure is there in minimalist stories with mere wisps of narrative, where any detail that might distract from the dialogue, is squeezed out? In essence, the short story is a complex, very crafted form, and not to be seen as a small town we pass through, to get to somewhere else.

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