

**Plot in Flash Fiction: A Study of Irony
in the Flashes in Lydia Davis' *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007)**
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Abstract: Flash fiction, stories of extreme brevity, is a subgenre of short story writing in which special attention is paid to the choice of words, grammar and punctuation to actively involve the reader in the act of unravelling the multiple layers of meaning evoked. Upon reading a flash, “Readers move in time in such a way that it catapults them from beginning to end and back again” (Rohrberger 2004: 7). The brevity of the flash and the abrupt ending bring the reader full circle back to the title. Upon reflection on the title and the irony interwoven in the fabric of the flash, the latent meanings start to evolve constructing a plot as complex as that of longer narratives. Although critics claim that flash fiction lacks plot, the present paper proves through interpreting the flashes in Lydia Davis’ *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007) that flash fiction has plot and that irony is what gives rise to it.

Keywords: Flash fiction, irony, Lydia Davis, plot, *Varieties of Disturbance*

1. Introduction:

Born in Massachusetts, 1947, Lydia Davis is a short story writer, novelist, essayist and translator. Though first acclaimed for her translations of Marcel Proust and Gustave Flaubert, she has been later recognized as the master of flash fiction, a subgenre of short story writing also known as micro fiction, sudden fiction, or short shorts. Coined in 1992 by James Thomas, flash fiction refers to very short stories of up to 750 words (Thomas & Shapard 2006), that range from 50 words to 1,000 words (Batchelor 2012), or from 75 words to 1,500 words (Gurley 2015). Although this subgenre has its origin in fables and parables, it emerged in the Nineteenth Century at the hands of Walt Whitman, Kate Chopin, and Ambrose Bierce. The six-word “For sale: baby shoes, never worn,” generally attributed to Ernest Hemingway, is the best-known flash fiction story from this time. In the Twenty-first Century, Flash fiction gained popularity due to the availability of the internet, the one-byte-and-go culture that favors short texts.

2. Literature review

According to Irving Howe (1982), flash fiction is characterized by focusing on a single action. In flashes, Mose explains, “we find fixations of the moment and a focus on the singular, such as a single exchange between two people, a single object, a single word, a singular gesture” (83). Characters flatten out and recede as circumstance becomes dominant. Howe observes: “Situation tends to replace character, representative condition to replace individuality” (1982: xi). The setting

is only mentioned in flash fiction (Mose 2004: 83). As for the duration of narrative time in flash fiction, Howe notes, “The time span is extremely brief, a few hours, maybe even a few minutes” (1982: xiii). Rohrberger explains, “Readers move in time in such a way that it catapults them from beginning to end and back again” (2004: 7). “The epiphanic moment,” Rohrberger maintains, “is parenthetically enclosed by the story's beginning and end” (2004: 9). This explains the reader's strong desire to reread flashes.

Howe mentions lack of plot as one of the chief characteristics of flash fiction, he writes: “The usual short story cannot have a complex ... plot, but it often has a simple one resembling a chain with two or three links. The short short, however, doesn't as a rule have even that much—you don't speak of a chain when there's only one link” (1982: xi). Admittedly, the Chronotope or the configurations of time and space that give each genre its particular narrative character, as Bakhtin (1937) explains, is not dominant in flash fiction given its extreme brevity. The question is: how can short shorts be regarded as fiction if they lack a plot? If flashes are ironic, can irony, which evokes the unstated in the reader's mind, give rise to plot in this extremely brief subgenre of fiction?

D.C. Muecke (1969) defines irony as “ways of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc., in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with, the ostensible or pretended meaning” (53). This definition is adopted because it is not limited to spoken or written discourse, but is comprehensive enough to include all forms of expression including acting, behaving and painting. Moreover, it ingeniously takes into account subtle irony that is evoked rather than overtly presented. In addition, it encompasses all forms of irony including “not only saying one thing and meaning another but also saying two things and meaning neither” (Muecke 1969: 53). Muecke classifies irony into three grades (overt, covert and private) according to the degree to which the real meaning is concealed, and four modes (impersonal, self-disparaging, ingenu and dramatized) according to the kind of relationship the ironist and the victim of irony have (Muecke 1969: 54).

3. Methodology

The present study investigates the use of irony in Lydia Davis' National Book Award finalist, *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007). The thematic title of the collection, which indicates the “subject matter” of the text (Gennette 1997: 76), is a parody of “Five Signs of Disturbance,” Davis' last story in the acclaimed *Break it Down* (1986), which describes different kinds of stimuli that cause disturbance for a sensitive narrator. In *Varieties of Disturbance*, Davis revisits the same idea but subverts it: instead of writing about perception of signs of disturbance, she examines disturbed perception itself. To further confound the reader, *Varieties of Disturbance* forms the title of one of the stories of the collection which tells about the different varieties of disturbance the narrator and members of her big family experience as a result of the narrator's mother refusal of her son's offer to help with his father's illness by staying with them during the summer vacation. The following

is an analysis of the use of irony in the shortest flashes in the collection that hardly exceed one hundred words.

4. Data analysis:

A Man from Her Past

I think Mother is flirting with a man from her past who is not Father. I say to myself: Mother ought not to have improper relations with this man “Franz”! “Franz” is a European. I say she should not see this man improperly while Father is away! But I am confusing an old reality with a new reality: Father will not be returning home. He will be staying on at Vernon Hall. As for Mother, she is ninety-four years old. How can there be improper relations with a woman of ninety-four? Yet my confusion must be this: though her body is old, her capacity for betrayal is still young and fresh. (Davis 2007: 3)

The first flash lays the foundation for the interpretation of subsequent stories. In each story, there is incongruity between an old factual reality, and a new imaginary one. The old reality that comes unexpectedly and creates the ironic situation is the fact that the narrator's mother is ninety-four. The new imaginary one is the mother's relationship with a man from her past. The reader is shocked to learn that a 94-year-old woman is capable of betrayal. The title here acts as a threshold that explains this internal contradiction. This aging woman is still capable of betrayal because her lover is “a man from her past.” It is implied that the probability of her having an affair is very low unless he is an old lover. However, there is a problem with the narrator's perception because she concludes that her mother is betraying her father based on a mere suspicion of her mother's flirting with a man from her past; that is, an imaginary character, and despite her mother's old age and her father's death.

There is a sharp contrast between imagination and reality, between the mother's old body and young passion, between the near abode of the father and far home of Franz, between stability as exemplified by the father and transience as symbolized by Franz, the European. Franz is a man's name of German origin meaning “Frenchman or free man.” Hence, it is a highly significant name for the character of the mother's lover. In America, the name is often associated with Bohemian novelist and short story writer Franz Kafka, famous for his expressionist flash fiction. His work fused the realistic and fantastic and discussed themes of alienation, anxiety, and guilt. Kafka led a dissolute life and never married: he visited brothels and was interested in pornography. The reference to Franz Kafka, therefore, brings to the reader's mind not only the recurrent themes in the fiction of this celebrated writer but also reminds the reader of his dissolute behavior, thus describing the character of the mother's lover and imparting to the reader the feelings of alienation, anxiety and guilt without saying much.

Dog and Me

An ant can look up at you, too, and even threaten you with its arms. Of course, my dog does not know I am human, he sees me as dog, though I do not leap up at a fence. I am a strong dog. But I do not leave my mouth hanging open when I walk along. Even on a hot day, I do not leave my tongue hanging out. But I bark at him: “No! No!” (Davis 2007: 4)

In this flash, the reader is confronted with another variety of disturbed perception. The parenthetical “too” significantly indicates that such a tiny and contemptible creature can exceed all limits, challenge and even threaten to attack one. Verbal irony arises from the use of covert impersonal irony: the narrator misrepresents her man who has the guts to attack her with bare arms as an ant and then as a dog. Naturally, her man, the scoundrel, does not see her as human with equal rights. The use of the fixed expression, “Of course,” is significant because it indicates that this perception is natural and well-expected because no man regards women as equal human beings. Ironically, the narrator's man misrepresents her as a dog even though she is faithful and does not have affairs with other men. The narrator, however, accepts her man's description of her only to subvert it. Using double irony, she admits that she is a dog, but of a strong breed, one that can counterattack whoever challenges her. Unlike dogs, however, she is not drooling on men even when she feels hot and excited. She resists temptation and rejects men's advances, barking like a dog to keep them away. The narrator seems to be saying that if a man dares attack her with his arms, she can rub off his skin with the mere sound of her cry.

Like all the other stories in the collection, there is confusion between an old reality, being misrepresented as a dog, and a new imaginary one, seeing oneself as a dog but in a positive sense. The covert irony lies in the incongruity between the two different perceptions. The absence of an article in the title leaves the signified of dog vague: it can either signify her man, or her man's perception of her. The use of the coordinating conjunction “and” to separate dog and the personal pronoun indicates that these are two different entities. The female persona is set in sharp contrast to her man, on the one hand, and her true nature is juxtaposed to her man's perception of her, on the other. The title thus allows for multiple interpretations of the covert internal contradiction in the story. The narrator is everything that her man is not. Instead of talking ill about him, however, she just describes herself from his and her point of view. It is the reader's job to reconstruct the meaning and infer the character of her man by contrast: the scoundrel, who has affairs with other women, regards the faithful woman as a dog. Rather than defending herself, she admits she is a dog only to show her good traits and let the reader infer the qualities of her man without mentioning them. Thus, she succeeds in turning the table on him, rubbing off his skin and beating him at his own game.

Collaboration with Fly

I put that word on the page,
but he added the apostrophe. (Davis 2007: 8)

Here is another variety of disturbed perception: the ironist perceives the role of the insignificant fly as more important than hers. Understating herself as writer whose only role is the placement of words on the page, the narrator overstates the role of the fly as editor, or so it seems, thus creating verbal irony. It is significant that she refers to the fly using a masculine pronoun because editors are traditionally thought to be male. Such roles are so culturally engrained in collective consciousness that the female writer adheres to them even in her imagination. Again, there is confusion between an old reality; it is just a fly, and a new imaginary one, the fly as editor. The word fly itself preceded by no article in the title is ironical because of its ambiguity: it can either refer to the flying insect or the male sexual organ. By choosing such an ambiguous word to assume the role of editor and by keeping the edited word vague, the writer actively involves the reader in a guessing game. In both senses, however, there is incongruity between the low status of the fly and the high role of editing. Despite the insignificance of man, whether viewed as an insect or reduced to the phallus, he has always dominated discourse subordinating woman and effacing her creativity. Western and Eastern cultures alike have long been dominated by the phallogocentric philosophy of determinateness. What Davis attempts to do through this ingenious text is to counter this philosophy with an equal force of feminine indeterminateness. She intentionally leaves “that word” vague to give the reader the freedom of interpretation. Meanwhile, she implies shared knowledge preceding it with the anaphoric pronoun “that.” Thus, there is confusion between an old reality, the word is vague because it is not mentioned, and a new imaginary one, it is too obvious to mention. Meaning, therefore, is left indeterminate on purpose and readers are free to guess what that word refers to and interpret it in whatever way they like, with or without the apostrophe.

As readers, let us assume this role and guess what this word might be! Can this word be the “Id”? Can identity be the main theme the writer is hinting at but never mentions? Can the writer's aim be asserting her identity as a female writer? It can be; unfortunately, this project is thwarted by the insignificant fly's addition of the apostrophe “I'd,” thus turning the serious theme of identity into one about desire. Davis seems to be saying that no matter how hard women writers try to assert their identity as intellectuals, they are always viewed as merely women; that is, objects of desire. Can “that word on the page” be “cant,” pronounced the same as the disparaging slang word “cunt”? It can be and the collaboration of the fly, preceded by no articles in the title to show its insignificance, would then be the insertion of the “apostrophe,” or the sperm, inside the woman's womb, thus changing her body and swelling her belly. On another level, the addition of the apostrophe to the word “cant” signals the masculine domination of discourse and culture turning it into “can't,” which signifies woman's abasement and subordination to man. To him, woman can't be; she does not exist. Collaboration, therefore, is positive on the part of woman, but negative on man's part. Davis thus overtly praises man in order to blame him. Collaborating he is, but on subordinating her and imposing his own meaning and discourse. Davis' text, however, succeeds

in deconstructing this culturally constructed role of women. Through the skillful choice of the verb “added,” Davis emphasizes that the masculine point of view is superfluous to the overall meaning; that is, it can simply be removed. There is, therefore, hope that things turn right: that women writers reach their aim and drive their ideas home, that women are treated on equal terms with men. In a highly economical style, the text thus subtly touches on serious issues without mentioning any: inequality of the sexes, as well as the gap between writers and editors.

Tropical Storm

Like a tropical storm,
I, too, may one day become “better organized.” (Davis 2007: 19)

Another variety of disturbed perception figures here. The persona employs the overt irony of analogy to stimulate the reader's thinking. The word “like” is ambiguous: as a conjunction, it indicates similarity; as a verb it refers to the narrator's admiration of the tropical storm. The parenthetical adverb “too” emphasizes parallelism: like a mirror, it reflects the dual relationship between the persona and the tropical storm. Both the persona and the tropical storm may become better organized one day. The use of the modal verb “may” indicates that the goal of becoming “better organized” is possible in the future; however, the expression “one day” implies that this wish is unattainable at least in the near future. The use of inverted commas is a clue that “better organized” carries more than what its surface meaning suggests. But why did Davis choose the comparative adjective “better” rather than “more”? The answer is that “more organized” implies lack of organization skills, while “better organized” indicates that the persona is organized, but she wishes she would have better organization skills. As in all the other stories of the collection, there is confusion between an old reality, the organized nature of the speaker, and a new imaginary one where she is “better organized.” The ironic situation here arises from the fallacious reasoning inherent in the belief that there is much order in such a chaotic phenomenon as the tropical storm. As Poe and Davis (2000) note, chaos theory, developed by Edward Lorenz while working on weather predictions in 1960, has proven that there are self-similar patterns that follow a deterministic motion in apparently random processes such as tsunami or tropical storms. In other words, these natural phenomena are orderly. The unpredictability of such natural phenomena, however, is due to their dependence on initial conditions: a one-part-in-a-thousand change in initial conditions leads to a completely different path, commonly known as the butterfly effect (Poe & Davis 2000: 203-5). Just as nature amplifies small fluctuations, thus causing a totally unpredictable phenomenon, the narrator wishes to follow the same order of chaotic systems to eventually achieve novelty and creativity.

Idea for a Short Documentary Film

Representatives of different food products manufacturers try to open their own packaging (Davis 2007: 22).

In this flash, there is confusion between an old reality, customers opening food products packaging, and a new imaginary one, “representatives of different food products” trying to “open their own packaging.” The title, both thematic and rhematic, suggests making a documentary film just to record this scene. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a documentary film is “a motion picture that shapes and interprets factual material for purposes of education or entertainment.” If the purpose of the documentary film is education, then it is ironical that customers need “representatives of different food products” to teach them how to open food product packaging. If, on the other hand, the aim of the documentary film is entertainment, then it is ironical to make a documentary film featuring “representatives of different food products” struggling to “open their own packaging.” In both cases, therefore, the title signals covert situational irony. It is quite unexpected to see representatives of different food products trying to open their own packaging in a documentary film. Without irony, there is no plot and the story is rendered meaningless.

Two Types Excitable

A woman was depressed and distraught for days after losing her pen. Then she became so excited about an ad for a shoe sale that she drove three hours to a shoe store in Chicago.

Phlegmatic

A man spotted a fire in a dormitory one evening, and walked away to look for an extinguisher in another building. He found the extinguisher, and walked back to the fire with it. (Davis 2007: 25)

The title of this flash, “Two Types,” both thematic and rhematic, ironically comments on the male-female dichotomy which reduces humans to only two genders and only two types of temperaments. By ironically reinforcing the cultural view, Davis is actually stimulating readers’ thinking and helping them realize the faulty classification of humans into two genders with just two types of temperaments. Verbal irony arises from the incongruity between the culturally constructed view of man and woman and their behavior in real life. Davis’ classification of genders into excitable and phlegmatic seems to reinforce the male-female dichotomy: man as rational, and woman as emotional. The word excitable has a negative connotation and is associated with irritability and lack of control on one’s emotions. The adjective phlegmatic, used to describe man, has the positive connotation of calmness and emotion control. In action, however, the woman who gets easily excited is seen positively while the man who is not moved even when a building is on fire comes to be viewed negatively. There is thus confusion between an old reality, woman as negatively excitable and man as positively phlegmatic, and a new imaginary one, woman as positively warm and lively and man as negatively chilly and boring. The mood swings from depression to excitement, for which women have always been criticized, turn out to be what gives life its flavor. Rationality, on the other hand, for which man has always been praised turns out to

be equal to stagnation and boredom. This incongruity between the old reality that is so well engrained into collective consciousness, and the new one Davis wants readers to realize is only one of the multiple layers of meaning the covert impersonal irony gives rise to.

Another layer of meaning arises from the incongruity between woman's faithfulness even after the loss of her partner and man's treachery even when his partner is alive and exciting: after the loss of her man, a woman does not take another partner: she does not change partners as one might change shoes. However, she may accidentally find something exciting that raises her interest such as "an ad for a shoe sale." She spends time, money and effort to get what she imagined would be the source of her happiness, but is in fact no more than a pair of shoes put on sale. Man, on the other hand, is never content with one partner: he always seeks another, even when his partner is exciting, to quench his burning desire. It is irony, therefore, that gives rise to the plot in this flash; without it, the story will be meaningless.

Hand

Beyond the hand holding this book that I'm reading, I see another hand lying idle and slightly out of focus—my extra hand (Davis 2007: 30).

Even this single sentence has a plot thanks to the employment of irony. The story exhibits the speaker's disturbed perception of self and life. There is confusion between an old reality, the hand that is holding the book she is reading, and an imaginary one, her extra hand. The speaker feels so immersed in the act of reading that she loses sense of her bodily organ and sees only the imaginary one; that is, the hand of fate. The choice of the word "extra" instead of "other" seems to legitimize this interpretation, while the use of the ambiguous adverb "beyond" that can either refer to temporal or spatial distance seems to ascertain it. The hand of fate is out of reach in terms of both time and space. It lies outside one's control; however, it controls one's life. The ironic situation arises from overtly praising the extra hand that is lying idle, a quality that is not worth the praise. Upon reflection, however, the idle extra hand turns out to be much more important than the actively moving human organ. Though "lying idle and slightly out of focus," the hand of fate predetermines life course beyond human agency.

An equally valid interpretation is that the hand holding the book the writer is reading refers to the minute hand. The book the writer is reading is no more than the writer's transient and short life, which does not exceed the time necessary for reading a book. Beyond the minute hand that is actively moving, thus indicating the passage of time, lies the hour hand of the clock "idle and slightly out of focus." What preoccupies the speaker, however, is not the short life on earth, but the "extra hand," that is past the understanding, reach or scope of this moment. This "extra hand" lies "beyond" the bounds of time and refers to the unknown that exceeds one's perception; that is, the hereafter.

Child Care

It's his turn to take care of the baby. He is cross.
He says, "I never get enough done."

The baby is in a bad mood, too.
He gives the baby a bottle of juice and sits him well back in a big armchair.
He sits himself down in another chair and turns on the television.
Together they watch *The Odd Couple*. (Davis 2007: 33)

This flash looks like a soap opera scene and displays another variety of disturbed perception. There is confusion between an old reality, the man as taking care of the baby, and a new imaginary one where the baby is treated as an adult. Rather than narrating events, the writer has decided to draw a common scene to comment on the socially constructed roles, woman as child-carer and man as breadwinner. Perceiving child-care as woman's role, man feels annoyed and opposes the idea of taking care of the child. He feels tortured, like a crucified man, when it is his turn to take care of the baby. Particularly apt, therefore, is the use of the adjective "cross" to describe how the man feels when it is his turn to take care of the baby. He perceives the child's bad mood as a valid excuse for skipping it. Soon, however, the reader is confronted with situational irony: the man's unexpected behavior ironically displays his perception of childcare. To pacify the baby, he gives him "a bottle of juice and sits him well back in a big armchair." He does not even care to hold the baby or feed him. The parallelism between the man and the child, both are seated in armchairs, is highly significant. On the one hand, the baby is treated as an adult; on the other, the man is viewed as a baby: "He sits himself down in another chair." The parallelism is further reinforced by featuring them watching the same movie or sitcom series, "*The Odd Couple*," which tells the story of two divorced men living together. Again, it is irony that gives rise to the plot in this skillfully drawn scene.

Getting to Know Your Body

If your eyeballs move, this means that you're thinking, or about to start thinking. If you don't want to be thinking at this particular moment, try to keep your eyeballs still. (Davis 2007: 66)

This flash displays disturbed perception of self. There is confusion between an old reality, moving eyeballs as a signal of thinking, and a new imaginary one, stopping thinking by trying to keep one's eyeballs still. The overtly ironic situation arises from the fallacious reasoning that one can stop thinking by keeping one's eyeballs still. However, Eastern philosophy holds that stilling the eyeballs can bring about stillness of mind. Therefore, one of the Yoga practices is external and internal gazing. Although the suggestion is intended to be ironical, it is actually true that gazing can clear one's mind and bring about peace. Thus, there is double irony which allows for multiple and even conflicting interpretations of the plot.

Lonely

No one is calling me. I can't check the answering machine because I have been here all this time. If I go out, someone may call while I'm out. Then I can check the answering machine when I come back in. (Davis 2007: 86)

This flash makes the reader experience another variety of disturbed perception without mentioning it. The writer confuses an old reality; no one is calling her while she is home, with a new imaginary one, going out hoping that someone might call her. The ironic situation arises from the overt impersonal irony of fallacious reasoning. The narrator is only trying to find an excuse for checking the answering machine rather than attempting to find a solution for her feeling of loneliness. Deep inside she knows that it is highly improbable anybody is going to call her. Instead of taking action and calling someone herself, she waits passively for someone to call her. She does not even venture to go out to meet people and change her mood but soothes herself with the false hope that someone might call if she goes out, which creates situational irony. The question is: is it just a phone call the speaker is waiting for? Or is she waiting for someone to ask her for a date? Has she recorded a message on the answering machine? What could the content of the message be? All these questions are left unanswered. One thing, however, is certain: the immediacy of the feeling of loneliness imparted to the reader. The story consists of four sentences; the last two affirmative sentences parallel the first negative ones. Though affirmative, they accentuate the feeling of loneliness imparted by the first two. The first two sentences describe the status quo; that is, they represent reality. The last two, on the other hand, are hypothetical; that is, imaginary, but it seems that the feeling of loneliness is constant whether in reality or the imagination of the writer.

The Way to Perfection

Practicing at the piano: My Alberti basses were not even. But did my movement float this morning? Yes! (Davis 2007: 135)

Another variety of disturbed perception figures here: there is confusion between an old reality, the narrator's uneven Alberti basses, and a new imaginary one, perceiving her movement as floating. The ironic situation arises from this overt internal contradiction: although the narrator's Alberti basses were uneven, her movement was floating. Alberti bass is a broken chord where the notes are presented in the following order: lowest, highest, middle, highest. This pattern creates a smooth and flowing sound on the piano. But how can her movement be floating if her Alberti basses are not even? The answer is that she has mastered the technique of moving up and down the keyboard with her fingers, but she has not mastered the Alberti bass yet. She, however, deems mastering the technique as more important on her way to perfection than producing a smooth and flowing sound. It is situational irony that gives rise to the plot and creates meaning.

The Fellowship

1

It is not that you are not qualified to receive the fellowship, it is that each year your application is not good enough. When at last your application is perfect, then you will receive the fellowship.

2

It is not that you are not qualified to receive the fellowship, it is that your patience must be tested first. Each year, you are patient, but not patient enough. When you have truly learned what it is to be patient, so much so that you forget all about the fellowship, then you will receive the fellowship. (Davis 2007: 136)

In this flash, there is confusion between an old reality, not receiving the fellowship, and a new imaginary one, imperfect application or insufficient patience as the reason behind not receiving the fellowship. The ironic situation is that being qualified has nothing to do with receiving the fellowship. However fallacious this reasoning is, it is often the case: one does not receive the fellowship despite being qualified because the application is not good enough or because one is not patient enough. The use of the expression “each year” is especially ironic. It suggests that one’s application cannot be below standards each year and that one cannot be impatient when submitting an application each year. What makes an application perfect? Is it not the way information is presented and supported? Is not patience necessary when filling out an application to avoid making mistakes or missing out important information? There is double irony here. The narrator ironically presents imperfect application and impatience as fallacious reasons for not receiving the fellowship. However, it seems that these are quite valid and logical reasons. Imperfect application is a sign of lack of essential skills and impatience leads to mistakes. The final comment, which is intended to be ironical, is especially true: when one focuses on the process and forgets about the goal the latter is easily achieved simply because focusing on the process rather than the goal inspires perfection.

Mother's Reaction to My Travel Plans

Gainesville! It's too bad your cousin is dead! (Davis 2007: 181)

This flash displays another variety of disturbed perception: there is confusion between an old reality, planning to travel to Gainesville, and a new imaginary one, the mother’s inexplicable regret. Is it because that cousin stayed in Gainesville and could provide her daughter with accommodation? Or does the daughter's plan to travel to Gainesville remind the mother of that cousin? This is left indeterminate. Dramatic irony arises from this covert ambiguity that gives rise to the plot and makes it open for different interpretations.

A Strange Impulse

I looked down on the street from my window. The sun shone and the shopkeepers had come out to stand in the warmth and watch the people go by. But why were the shopkeepers covering their ears? And why were the people in the street running as if pursued by a specter? Soon everything returned to normal: the incident had been no more than a moment of

madness during which the people could not bear the frustration of their lives and had given way to a strange impulse. (Davis 2007: 186)

Another variety of disturbed perception is dramatized here: there is confusion between an old reality, the shopkeepers standing in the warmth of sunshine and watching the people go by, and a new imaginary one, the shopkeepers covering their ears and looking at “the people in the street running as if pursued by a specter.” The narrator explains these strange acts of the shopkeepers and the people as “no more than a moment of madness during which the people could not bear the frustration of their lives and had given way to a strange impulse.” However, is it true that it was a moment of madness? If yes, was it a moment of madness on the part of the shopkeepers and the people or on the part of the narrator? Can the whole scene be an act of the narrator’s own imagination? Dramatic irony arises from this covert ambiguity. One cannot decide whether the shopkeepers and the people gave way to a strange impulse or it is the narrator who suffers from disturbed perception. Again, it is the irony that makes meaning indeterminate and open for multiple interpretations.

Nietzsche

Oh, poor Dad. I’m sorry I made fun of you.
Now I’m spelling Nietzsche wrong, too. (Davis 2007: 114)

This flash employs the same type of irony used in “Tropical Storm;” namely, the overt impersonal irony of false analogy, to present a different variety of disturbed perception. The narrator confuses an old reality, her father’s misspelling of Nietzsche’s name, with a new imaginary one, where she misspells it too. The irony is displayed because the narrator actually spells Nietzsche correctly in both the title and the body of the story. Her strong attachment to her father, however, makes her draw this analogy. She is sad for the loss of her dad and regrets having made fun of him when he was still alive. The use of the adjective “poor” does not only refer to the fact that her father is dead but indicates her sympathy with him now that she has matured. The story thus carries deep emotions while reflecting on the act of composition. When a writer is immersed in a topic, s/he might make mechanical mistakes. However, the narrator did not realize the importance of free writing back then. Being immature, she criticized her father for misspelling Nietzsche’s name. But why Nietzsche? It is not only because his name is hard to spell, but because he advocated the independence of “free spirit” from the conventions of religion and society. Having grown up as a writer, the narrator has come to accept the idea of making mistakes. However, the fact that she has spelled Nietzsche correctly proves that she is not like her father, thus creating situational irony. Far from being a free writer, she is totally conscious of writing conventions. Moreover, she is offering a meta-critical view of the act of composition and reflecting on it. It is irony that gives rise to the plot and the plethora of ideas about writing.

Insomnia

My body aches so —

It must be this heavy bed pressing up against me (Davis 2007: 128).

Again, there is confusion here between an old reality, the ache of the narrator's body as the cause of insomnia, and a new imaginary one, the "heavy bed pressing up against [her]" as the real cause behind it. The narrator surmises her body aches because of the "heavy bed pressing up against [her]," but how can the heavy bed cause her pain when it is underneath her? The weight of the bed is the force acting on it due to gravity. If it is below her, how can she feel its weight? The narrator explains that it is "pressing up against" her. In other words, the bed is acting against gravity and causing her body a dull, sustained pain. The narrator uses the overt impersonal irony of fallacious reasoning to impart her experience of insomnia to the reader. By countering rules of logic and subverting laws of physics, she succeeds in creating situational irony and making the reader undergo the same experience. Pain is a highly complex and multi-faceted experience. It is individualized and perceptual; that is, no two people perceive it or experience it the same way. The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) defines pain as: "An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with, or resembling that associated with, actual or potential tissue damage" (Raja et al. 1977). Pain starts with a physiological or psychological stimulus that leads to suffering. The narrator does not describe this pain but uses the verb "ache" which signifies dull, ubiquitous and sustained pain. Moreover, she uses the ambiguous "so," which can be understood as short of so much, to describe the degree of her ache. She concludes the reason for her body ache must be the "heavy bed pressing up against [her];" that is, the bed is pushing her away and preventing her from falling asleep. There is a collision of wills: the narrator's will to sleep is in conflict with the will of the bed. When reflecting on the title again, the reader wonders: is physical pain the real cause of the narrator's insomnia? Or is she sleepless because she is thinking about the cause of her physical pain? The irony lies in the fact that the real cause of her insomnia is mental rather than physical. It is overthinking that keeps her awake. The proof is that her mind strays and imagines illogical causes of physical pain. Through the ingenious use of irony, the writer thus succeeds in stimulating readers' minds and making them experience the feeling of dull, sustained pain associated with insomnia.

Suddenly Afraid

because she couldn't write the name of what she was: a wa wam owm
owamn womn (Davis 2007: 189)

This fragment imparts to the reader a variety of disturbed perception from which most women writers suffer; namely, self-perception as a woman. Unexpectedly, without warning or premeditation, the narrator reports the feeling of fear. Who is "suddenly afraid?" She never mentions. Is the narrator afraid because of the writer's inability to inscribe her gender? Is the writer herself afraid because

of her realization that she cannot inscribe her identity as a female writer? What is meant by the ambiguous adjective “afraid”? Does it mean fear or regret? These questions are left unanswered. Women writers could not inscribe their female identity; that is, they could not reserve a unique place for themselves in the world of writing. This is a reason for both fear and regret. They regret their inability in the past to inscribe their identity as female writers and feel apprehension about the future. There is confusion here between an old reality; she is a writer, and a new imaginary one; she cannot “write the name of what she was.” Verbal irony arises from this overt internal contradiction. It is not the word the writer is unable to inscribe, but her female identity. This is indeed a frightening feeling, which is ingeniously imparted to the reader through the fragmented writing of the word woman. Both the fragmented style of writing the word woman and the fragmentary structure of the story correspond to the fragmented identity of the writer; indeed, of any female writer. On the one hand, she is a writer; on the other, she is a woman. Through this fragment, Davis proves that personal issues are in fact universal.

Head, Heart

Heart weeps.

Head tries to help heart.

Head tells heart how it is, again:

You will lose the ones you love. They will all go. But even the earth will go, someday.

Heart feels better, then.

But the words of head do not remain long in the ears of heart.

Heart is so new to this.

I want them back, says heart.

Head is all heart has.

Help, head. Help heart. (Davis 2007: 191)

Punctuation plays a very significant role in this flash which presents a variety of disturbed perception common to all humans; namely, the conflict between head and heart, or reason and emotion. Again, there is confusion between an old reality, reason as consolation for feelings of loss, and a new imaginary one, where one insists on the return of the lost ones. Dramatic irony arises from the employment of covert ambiguity: head and heart are ostensibly treated on an equal footing in the title and ending; even the relationship between the two seems to be well-balanced throughout. However, the scale is tipped in favor of the heart, mentioned ten times, in contrast to the head that is mentioned only six. The irony lies in that the winner is appealing to the loser for help.

When one’s heart is full of grief over the loss of a loved person, the head tries to offer help by reasoning that it is the natural end of every living being, of earth itself. The verb “tries” indicates that this attempt might not be successful, while the adverb “again” shows that this is not the first time the heart grieves over the loss of someone, nor is it the first time the head tries to ease the heart's suffering. For a short while, the heart feels relieved. However, these words of wisdom are short

lived, for soon the heart relapses and mourns the loss of the loved ones. The “ears” do not only signify the hearing organ but also balance. The head's words are supposed to keep one's balance and alleviate the intense feeling of grief. However, rationality is quite foreign to the heart that insists: “I want them back.” The heart appeals to the head for help, for the head is all the heart has after losing the loved ones. In addition to dramatic irony, there is stylistic irony in the last line: though the two invocations seem quite different, they mean one and the same thing: the heart is asking the head for help.

The Busy Road

I am so used to it by now that when the traffic falls silent, I think a storm is coming (Davis 2007: 194).

In this flash, the narrator presents a different variety of disturbed perception. The cause of disturbance is the busy road. But how is the road busy? Is it simply overcrowded? If it is, the narrator views it negatively. There is confusion between an old reality, the busy road as a cause of disturbance, and a new imaginary one, getting used to it. However, her getting used to it does not mean that she has adapted to crowd and noise. Rather, it means that the road is constantly busy: it only falls silent when a storm is coming, which is very rare. Alternatively, the road may be described as busy when it sustains much activity, in which case it is to be cherished. Though disturbed, the narrator has grown accustomed to its sustained activity; that is, she has even begun to like it that when it falls silent, she thinks something bad is going to happen. Dramatic irony which arises from the use of ambiguity thus allows for different interpretations of this very brief flash that does not exceed one sentence.

The Fly

At the back of the bus, inside the bathroom, this very small illegal passenger, on its way to Boston (Davis 2007: 196)

In this fragment, there is confusion between an old reality, the fly as an insect, and a new imaginary one, the fly as an illegal passenger. Situational irony here lies in the fact that the fly, though small, can ride the bus to Boston without a ticket. However, the fly can also refer to the phallus, in which case riding illegally means having an illicit relationship and breaking the law. Again, it is the covert irony of ambiguity that gives rise to the plot and allows for different interpretations.

Index Entry

Christian, I'm not a (Davis 2007: 199)

This flash takes the form of an index entry as announced by the thematic title. However, the only entry selected from the index is negated. The variety of disturbed perception presented here concerns one's religion. There is confusion between an old reality, born Christian, and a new imaginary one, having no Christian identity.

Verbal irony arises from the overt use of internal contradiction: what is written is not what is meant. The narrator tells the reader that she is not a Christian, but she means she is not one in practice. The irony thus makes the reader reflect on the dilemma of adherence to religion. True religion is not acquired by birth; it is what one believes in and practices.

Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room

Your housekeeper has been Shelly (Davis 2007: 201).

This flash is based on a real note that Davis found in a hotel room. Again, there is confusion between an old reality, Shelly being a poet from the romantic age, and a new imaginary one, Shelly as the housekeeper of the hotel room. This internal contradiction gives rise to verbal irony. Shelly is known as one of the most prominent romantic poets; therefore, the speaker indirectly comments on the romantic atmosphere of the hotel room by saying that Shelley has been the housekeeper. Could there be another layer of meaning in addition to this surface one? Could the hotel room be the speaker's heart? Could it have been visited by many, but kept its romance? All these questions are left unanswered. The thematic title displays overt verbal irony of internal contradiction: although the writer chooses the continuous past tense as a title, she uses the present perfect to indicate that Shelly has continued to be the housekeeper from the past till the present. However, the present perfect tense means that the past is continuing, so there is double irony.

A Different Man

At night he was a different man. If she knew him as he was in the morning, at night she hardly recognized him: a pale man, a gray man, a man in a brown sweater, a man with dark eyes who kept his distance from her, who took offense, who was not reasonable. In the morning, he was a rosy king, gleaming, smooth-cheeked and smooth-chinned, fragrant with perfumed talc, coming out into the sunlight with a wide embrace in his royal red plaid robe... (Davis 2007: 219)

This flash displays another variety of disturbed perception: there is confusion between an old reality, the man as he appears in the morning, and a new imaginary one, how different he appears at night. What is the man's true nature? Is he the pale, boring, distant and unreasonable man who appears at night? Or is he the lively, attractive, warm and inviting man who appears in the morning? It seems he is pretending to be lively and attractive in the morning because he cares about others' views of him and wants to maintain the façade of the perfect man, but his true nature is revealed at night when he is alone with her. However, the narrator's perception of the man is further complicated by the doubt she has regarding how he appears in the morning. She is uncertain about knowing him for who he was in the morning. If her perception of him in the morning was true, she could hardly recognize him at night. The dramatic irony lies in the fact that the narrator can hardly recognize him

in the morning as well. The word different is especially apt because of its ambiguity: it has neither positive nor negative connotations. Thus, it keeps the man's true nature vague and open for readers' various interpretations. It is thus the covert irony of ambiguity that gives rise to the plot.

Almost Over: What's the Word?

He says,
 "When I first met you
 I didn't think you would turn out to be so
 ...strange." (Davis 2007: 218)

Contrary to all the other flashes of the collection, this one exhibits the predicament of a man who cannot find an excuse for a break up. He starts his talk with a clause that sounds familiar: "When I first met you, I didn't think you would turn out to be ...," a cliché that no one mistakes to be an introduction for breaking a relationship and that is often followed by the reason. Situational irony lies in the man's inability to find a valid reason for separation. He keeps searching for a word, as is evidenced by the three dots, but all he can say is that he found his partner to be "strange," a vague word that can either mean peculiar, alien, distant, or unfamiliar. It is the reader's job to guess what is meant by this word. The man suffers from disturbed perception: usually one feels his partner is strange at the beginning of a relationship not after spending some time together. There is, therefore, confusion between an old reality, the partner as familiar at the beginning of the relationship, and a new imaginary one, the partner as strange now when it is almost over. However, there is double irony in the choice of the word "strange." The writer suggests that this is the natural consequence of the gap that keeps widening between the couple until they suddenly feel, contrary to what is expected, like strangers. Rather than getting closer because of spending more time together, they grow more distant until they can no longer recognize one another. The thematic title of the story is indicative of this weak relationship which is "Almost over": all is needed is just one word to end it.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of flashes in Davis' *Varieties of Disturbance* thus proves that they have a plot and that the plot arises from the employment of irony. The title of each flash plays a significant role as a threshold in the creation of irony and formation of plot, while the twisted ending refers back to it in what can be described as a "time loop." The reader may think the ironist is merely repeating the same idea mentioned in the title; however, this repetition soon turns out to be ironical subverting the idea mentioned in the title. At the macro level, the reader is bluffed into believing that each flash will offer a different variety of disturbance as indicated by the thematic title, *Varieties of Disturbance*. After reading the collection, however, one ironically finds out that there is only one kind of disturbance repeated over and over again; namely, the disturbed perception of self and others as a result of confusing an old reality with a new one. Upon finishing the collection, the reader discovers that the

rhematic title, *Stories*, which signals the genre of the collection, is not less ironic than the thematic one. Although it refers to the collection as stories, the texts one has closely read can hardly be designated the genre of stories. Some texts are better designated the genre of poetry like “Tropical Storm,” drama like “Head, Heart,” or soap opera like “Child Care,” or everyday conversation like “Almost over: What is the Word?”; others resemble excerpts from entries on a police blotter like “Idea of a Short Documentary Film,” index entries like “Index Entry,” reports like “Two Types” or even grammar lessons in school textbooks like “Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room.” Upon reflecting once more on both thematic and rhematic titles, one realizes the double irony involved and the varieties of disturbance turn out to be the different ways of disturbing and destabilizing the conventions of story writing. To summarize, irony works on both the micro and macro levels of flashes in Davis’ *Varieties of Disturbance*, thus creating interesting plots and opening the extremely brief narratives to multiple interpretations. To ascertain this finding and generalize it to the subgenre of flash fiction, it is recommended to conduct more empirical studies on other collections of flash fiction by different writers representing a wide variety of cultures and writing in languages other than English.

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