

LINGUISTIC INNOVATIONS IN LYDIA DAVIS’S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The author of this thesis reviews the genre of flash fiction in Lydia Davis’s works. The thesis covers a wide determination of the term flash fiction and gives an explanation Lydia Davis’s flash fiction style in her short stories with textual examples, taken from short stories of Lydia Davis. She has 5 books of collections of stories. Her stories are extremely short even some of her stories consist of several words. This paper also tries to place Lydia Davis as a great example of flash fiction within Modern American short story genre. Totally, this thesis studies short stories of Lydia Davis on the characteristics of selected stories from her books which depict the categorization of her stories.

Key words: Flash fiction, sudden fiction, pieces, letter of complaints, stories from Flaubert.

Short stories date back to ancient times. Most short stories we know start from with the phrase: “Once upon a time” and has standard structure and elements. Throughout time short stories didn’t lose actuality in literature. Modern short stories become even shorter because of innovation, discovery of new styles, development of society and technologies. These very short stories are called also pieces. Today the form of writing modern short stories can be categorized into 6 categories: flash fiction (maximum word limit 2000), sudden fiction (maximum 750 words), drabble (maximum 100 words), dribble (50 words), twitterature (maximum 280 and six-word

stories). Lydia Davis as the author of prolific number of modern short stories has already been recognized as an innovator of flash fiction. The first examples of flash fiction date back to Grimm’s Fairy tales and Aesop’s Fables. These masterpieces of world literature made flash fiction popular. This form “flash” may not focus on a plot, characters or structure, but it must emphasize on movement. Each sentence must reveal new layer of information about characters, actions, movement and appearance that wasn’t visible at previous sentences. Besides having several features, flash fiction often offers a “play” of words. Every short story can be written directly from author’s real-life experience and style.

Lydia Davis had great influence from translating Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust’s works, and reading Samuel Becket’s works and other representatives of French literature. It took a few years from her to try a traditional way of writing short stories. When she first started, she worked very hard, copying sentences out of favourite writers and trying to use them on her stories. These were years of struggling how to set the theme, and start the dialogue, how to introduce characters, how to make time pass and all these things she found as burden. It is natural to go straight from first sentence to the end for Lydia Davis. Eventually, finding her own peculiar form led to long-lasting pleasure for writing short stories.

Lydia Davis’s most short stories are extremely short. Even some of her short stories are shorter than their title. For example: Lydia Davis’s story 'Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room' consists of 5 words: Your housekeeper **has been** Shelly. She has 6 books of short stories: *Break it Down* (1986), *Almost No Memory* (1997), *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (2001), *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007), *Can’t and Won’t* (2015) and a novel called *The End of the Story* (1995).

There are a lot of creativities in her writing style. In addition to distinctive structure, her stories are so specific, that we can put them into several categories: In her biggest book *Can’t and Won’t* 27 stories out of 137 are “dream” stories –stories from night dreams and also dream-like experiences. She calls them “dream pieces”, they were written in the midst of her literary career. They are stories that shaped from

either her dreams and life-dreams and friend's dreams or strange parts from possible dream. Bringing dream-related issues into short stories is utterly innovative way. For example, in *The Piano Lesson*: “I am with my friend Christine. I have not seen her for a long time, perhaps seventeen years. We talk about music and we agree that when we meet again she will give me a piano lesson. In preparation for the lesson, she says, I must select, and then study, one Baroque piece, one Classical, one Romantic, and one Modern. I am impressed by her seriousness and by the difficulty of the assignment. I am ready to do it. We will have the lesson in one year, she says. She will come to my house. But then, later, she tells me she’s not sure she will be returning to this country. Maybe, instead, we will have the lesson in Italy. Or if not Italy, then, of course, Casablanca”the author shares with her personal dream experience. In the beginning of the story tells about her friend Christine, whom she has not seen for seventeen years. They talk about music, and they agree that when they meet again she will give lesson to her. She gets an assignment to select and study one Classical and one Modern piece. Impressed by friend’s seriousness, she is ready to do it. They should have the lesson in one year whether in Italy or Casablanca, which is situated in Morocco. In the end the author surprises the reader, as Casablanca is mentioned here. Lydia Davis spent some school years in Europe where she met friend from Morocco.

In her *Can’t and Won’t*, fourteen stories called *Stories from Flaubert* is the fruit of her translating career. When she was translating *Madame Bovary* she read Flaubert’s letters from the time she was working on the novel in order to learn and to get to know him better and to ease the translation process. So, as she read the letters she started finding stories that he was telling. Lydia Davis regarded worthy to find stories of Flaubert and she decided to publish them. And *Stories from Flaubert* were shaped out of anecdotes that Flaubert utilized in his letters. As Lydia Davis said they are nice stories, so she extracted them, she didn’t add fictional elements or another literary material to Flaubert’s language, but she could change sense. If we take some examples of these stories: *The Execution*, *The Visit to the Dentist* or *Washerwomen*,

we can see historical background, compassion, philosophical value of the time. In the Execution the author pulls our attention to the execution of a young man, who murdered a banker and his wife, and raped the servant girl and drank all the wine in the cellar. He was tied and found guilty. There was such interest in seeing this fellow die on guillotine that ten thousand came night before. And because the inns were full, people spent the night outside to see this man die, they slept in the snow. As we see there, some phrases were remarked to emphasize the extract of the story. Reader can be surprised to face the word “guillotine” in modern short story Here, translation resources are signed with her name and contain her authorial intervention linking them to the main part of the text that she has signed as an author. There were some texts, she translated that have no apparent connection to her work, to her stories, but she managed to get an extract or the meaning of them and published some parts of Flaubert’s letters under her authorship with the category “stories from Flaubert”

There is also another type of her stories. There are 6 short stories “letters of complaints” in her story collection Can’t and Won’t. They are Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer, Letter to a Marketing Manager, Letter to a Peppermint Company, The Letter to the Foundation, Letter to A Hotel Manager and Letter to the President of the American Biographical Institute, Inc. They are intellectual stories with abrupt ending. If we analyze Letter to a Peppermint Candy Company we can see a relatively long story about purchasing a can of the peppermint candies. It is slightly ironical and politely expressed complaint with the play of words. The author emphasizes her ideas shortly with some phrases after seeing this bright red canister of candies: “When I went to pay, though, I was shocked at the price, which was \$15 for the canister of peppermints, net weight 13 ounces (369grams). After a moment of hesitation, I bought it anyway, partly out of embarrassment in front of the impatient and unsmiling young woman at the cash register and partly because I did not want to give up those peppermints.” Lydia Davis shows a detail of her purchase with these words. But the main aim of writing of the letter, addressing the manufacturer was shown in next some sentences: “When I got home, I read your tongue-in-cheek warning on the can

about letting the peppermint soften in one’s mouth before biting down. You said: “Your teeth will thank you!” Well, it is quite true that the peppermints appear soft but then have an iron grip when one bites down.” The author continues in detailing the purchase, making it up story from it. She also prepared readers to read the main idea of the letter, which is a flash point of the short story: “Frankly, I did not think there were 74 pieces of candy inside. After I pointed this out to my family, we decided to place bets on how many candies there were and then count them. My bet was 64 pieces. My husband, being more trusting of your claims, bet that there were 70. My son, being a teenager and more daring, bet that there were only 50 pieces. Well, I counted them out there on the dining table and who do you think won the bet? I’m sorry to say it was my son. There were only 51 pieces in the can (or tin)!” Lydia Davis somehow approaches to the complaint literally by giving detailed information. She also describes the package that is filled to the top. You will continue reading without expecting the ending of the story. Even if you have some expectation after reading till the mid of this story, like many of her “letters of complaint” your expectation will be defeated. The defeated expectation we will try to show in the next example: “I cannot verify this estimate by weighing the candies because by now we have eaten them all. They were delicious, but we are feeling shortchanged, or should I say ... cheated? Can you please explain this discrepancy?”

Yours sincerely.

If we take her “letters of complaint”, we can see there: intellectual approach, ironical elementsexpressing ideas through optimistic vision. This makes reader get aesthetic pleasure after reading her stories.

The last category stories are the creativities after a long period of observation. For example, Lydia Davis spent three years to complete *The Cows*. This story is the fruit of a long-time observation. Lydia Davis wrote the story in a funny way. As this story is quite long, she started giving the description of cows: as if nobody doesn’t know about cows or just as a funny description. “Their bodies are entirely black, but they have white on their faces. On the faces of two of them, there are large patches of

white, like a mask”.The next sentences, taken from this story makes people smile or just get an aesthetic pleasure: “They are motionless until they move again, one foot and then another – fore, hind, fore, hind – and stop in another place, motionless again.

So often they are standing completely still. Yet when I look up again a few minutes later, they are in another place, again standing completely still”.The story is written in descriptive way with some ironical elements: “Just because they are so still, their attitude seems philosophical.” This given phrase from cows shows us how the story was written in a funny and positive way. Lydia Davis also enriched the story with different stylistic devices and contradictions: “She moos towards the wooded hills behind her, and the sound comes back. She moos again in a high falsetto. It is a very small sound to come from such a large, dark animal”.

So Lydia Davis’s short stories are so distinctive among modern American short stories. Her short stories are funny, very short and sometimes full of the play of words. Even though she writes her short stories in the form of poem, they are the reflection of her translation career, family life, her influencing parents and bright education.

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