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**“Everything is a story: Lydia Davis’s Very Short Fiction”**

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**Abstract**

For Lydia Davis, writing has always wished to be as concise as possible. Her very short stories have almost no plot, emerging as reiterative pieces of thoughts where the chronology becomes a subject rather than a formal device. One of the most important aspects of her tales is that they are nourished by ordinary people and by the frustrations we find around us. They ingeniously manage to focus on what is important in everyday life, revealing its beauty and rescuing what is valuable in the simple actions of each day, immortalizing them with a very particular style. Davis’s narratives may be bizarre, absurd and strange but they keep a secret truth to be discovered. Her short stories are undoubtedly short ways to express the secrecy of many truths that not even a long story could tell. Like good pictures, her very short fiction is really very powerful to capture instant glimpses of deeper dimensions in every common routine or experience of our daily lives, where everything is a story. If her writing was acknowledged as belonging to an American tradition, her fiction also persists in evoking the influence of many other writers such as Beckett, Thomas Bernhard, Kafka, Hemingway, W.G. Sebald or Peter Handke. Like them, Lydia Davis is a radical expert of making a long story very short.

Keywords: Lydia Davis; Short Story; Flash Fiction; Micro-Fiction.

Lydia Davis’s fiction starts from a liberating impulse to put something on the page and consider it a finished work. She has always refused to conform to the usual expectations of storytelling, enjoying the fact that her work isn’t for everybody. Consequently, this author has developed a way of defining the short story by challenging any kind of categorization, but not by abdicating her three main ingredients: humor, language, and emotion. As a very original writer, she succeeded in getting into really deep emotional dimensions, whenever she broke things down, grammatically or in vocabulary, into simple terms. Her intention was always to write stories that were simple narratives of something that had really happened to her, but slightly transformed, without fictionalization.[[1]](#footnote-1)

For Davis, writing has always wished to be as concise as possible. Her micro-stories have almost no plot, emerging as reiterative pieces of thoughts where the chronology becomes a subject rather than a formal device. They ingeniously manage to focus on what is important in everyday life, revealing its beauty and rescuing what is valuable in the simple actions of each day, immortalizing them with a very particular style. Like good pictures, her flash fiction is really very powerful to capture epiphanies or instant glimpses of deeper dimensions in every common routine or experience of our daily lives, where everything is a story. In *Can’t and Won’t* (2014), “The Language of Things in the House” is a catalogue of the words or phrases that can be detected in the noises made by a knife scraping a cutting board or the agitation of the washing machine. Davis explained that in this story, the domestic things all around a person (along with a few birds outside the window) are speaking, are having a voice “in their own little ways.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition, the author said:

Some stories point to the richness and even exoticism of the world we witness without leaving home. The cataloguing of what interests me and what doesn’t, incidentally points to all the possible subjects there are to write or talk about in the world, from bumblebees to Ronald Reagan, to a history of the accordion, to a lawnmower museum, to T. S. Eliot’s fountain pen.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Characterized by its extreme brevity, flash fiction possesses a unique literary quality, in its ability to hint at or imply a larger story. In the United States, early forms of flash fiction can be found in the nineteenth century, especially in the writing of [Walt Whitman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman), [Ambrose Bierce](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambrose_Bierce), and [Kate Chopin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kate_Chopin). In the 1920s flash fiction was referred to as the “short short story” and was associated with Cosmopolitan magazine. In the 1930s, it was collected in anthologies such as *The American Short Short Story*. Some well-known writers associated with this kind of fiction are: [Anton Chekhov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Chekhov), [O. Henry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O._Henry), [Franz Kafka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Kafka), [H.P. Lovecraft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.P._Lovecraft), [Ernest Hemingway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Hemingway), [Julio Cortázar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julio_Cort%C3%A1zar), [Arthur C. Clarke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_C._Clarke), [Richard Brautigan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Brautigan), [Ray Bradbury](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_Bradbury), [Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Vonnegut,_Jr.), [Fredric Brown](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fredric_Brown), [John Cage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cage), [Philip K. Dick](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_K._Dick) and [Robert Sheckley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Sheckley). Hemingway also wrote eighteen pieces of flash fiction that were included in his first short story collection, *In Our Time* (1924).

Lydia Davis can be considered a master of flash fiction but she usually doesn’t like to be categorized because she thinks “people may expect a kind of miniature short story when they begin reading a piece of flash fiction rather than the less usual offering of meditation, logic game, extended wordplay, diatribe – for which there is no good general name.”[[4]](#footnote-4) She thinks that to define **a short story only by its length is missing something. Knowing that in reviews of her collections the list of words used to describe her work includes story, poem, prose poem, zen koan, she thinks it** is easier just to call them very short stories. She once said: “I write a story in whatever form seems to be demanded by the subject matter, and that is why some are so short. How much, really, can you say about this fly on the wall of the bus or this notice in a hotel room? Some of my thoughts… are very brief, and their brevity is part of what I enjoy about them.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In *Can’t and Won’t*, we can find the expression of her free will to always remain true to her style:“(…) because, they said. I was lazy. What they meant by lazy was that I used too many contractions: for instance, I would not write out in full the words cannot and will not, but instead contracted them to *can’t* and *won’t*” (Davis 2014: 48). She explained this tendency to brevity and concision by saying: “My grandmother, my mother, and me − we were always making do and saving, very economical. I like the idea that the writing would belong to that practical tradition.”[[6]](#footnote-6) However, what *Can’t and Won’t* really expresses is her desire for freedom of speech and a vehement defense of this American democratic literary tradition. In an interview to *The Times Literary Supplement*, Davis confessed that her challenge “is to find a time and a place – a regime and a century – as free as possible of repression, political repression or the pressure of conventional mores. I’d want the freedom to write as I pleased (…).”[[7]](#footnote-7)

By writing a very elliptical short fiction, which avoids a straightforward narrative in favor of a microscopic examination of language and thought, Davis creates stories reduced to merely a title, as “Mother’s Reaction to My Travel Plans” in *Varieties of Disturbance* whose entire text reads: “Gainsville! It’s too bad your cousin is dead!” (Davis 2009: 695). Everything is concentrated in a line where we must be attentive to each detail of form, language and punctuation, so that we don’t miss the insight it conveys. Davis’s fiction intends to provoke this self-reflexiveness in the reader, creating the necessity of a particular attention to the logic of syntax and the value of words that reveal the essence of a certain subtext hidden in the apparent simplicity of the story. As *Time*magazine observed, her stories are “moving (…) and somehow inevitable, as if she has written what we were all on the verge of thinking.” Her intention is to make the reader alert as she also was when writing a certain story.

Flash fiction can be particularly adequate to this author’s curiosity and interest in very quickly seizing the evanescent moment, but without losing her clairvoyant power that creates so many and original epiphanies. Based on her everyday experiences, Davis’s stories are like *objects trouvés* that have the power to reveal the world.They are found objects that emerge frequently as source and as finished work such as “Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room,” where we can find only one note saying: “Your housekeeper has been Shelly” (Davis 2009: 715). Many of these objects contain memories that seem to have their own independent lives evoking a sort of animism that fascinated Proust so much. We can find hints of this in several stories in *Can’t and Won’t*. One of these examples is “The Cornmeal”: “This morning, the bowl of hot cooked cornmeal set much a transparent plate and left there, has covered the underside of the plate with droplets of condensation: it too, is taking action in its own little way” (38).

Paul Auster commented on the method of Davis’s writing: “She would get an idea, three or four sentences or a paragraph, and she would write it clean off the top of her head and that would be it. The stuff she labored over never turned out as successfully.”[[8]](#footnote-8) She works from life, in the way that Samuel Beckett did − reporting life’s experiences estranged from their contexts. Her subjects can be varied: lost socks, car trips, neighbors, small fights. “Disagreement” is a very good example of this: “He said she was disagreeing with him. She said no, that was not true, he was disagreeing with her” (Davis 2009: 201). Fictionalizing real events, Davis says, has to do with the selection of material, similar to a teenager recounting to her mother how an evening was spent: “We went over to Joan’s house and hung out and listened to music, and then we went to McDonald’s.”[[9]](#footnote-9) What is at stake here is that nothing is said about the vodka in the orange juice, nor the part about the making out. Not a lie, just a different story. She even confessed that “I have to guard against the tendency − I could make anything into a story.”[[10]](#footnote-10) However, everything that is observed is isolated from its system of habitualisation in order to penetrate into a deeper existential dimension that could be very meaningful to represent several aspects of the human condition at certain moments of life. Davis explains: “When you’re spying, when you’re looking, when you’re on the alert for a story, part of it is seeing the thing in isolation, apart from the normalizing context” (*Ibid.*). Many of her stories are about certain peculiarities and absurdities of our daily lives, little moments, our common experiences, introspective thoughts, etc. These may be little experiences, which we vaguely recognize, or those moments which we consider too trivial to give a thought to.

After moving to the countryside, Lydia Davis began watching a group of cows across the street from her house. Overtime, she wrote short meditations on their movements, attitudes, and expressions without imposing on her subjects any overt interpretation, instead allowing them to gaze in placid prose. In an interview with *The Paris Review* Davis said: “If something interests me, whether it’s a piece of language or a family relationship or a cow, then I write about it. I never judge ahead of time. I never ask: Is this worth writing about.”[[11]](#footnote-11) What is here in question is that the most mundane and overlooked aspects of life can inspire great art, as it happened with the most inspiring moments in the history of modern art. Lydia Davis is like a philosopher, sculptor, jeweler, and scholar of the minute. Few writers map the process of thought as well as she does, few perceive with such emotional intelligence. She writes, in the first sentence of *The Cows* (2011): “Each new day, when they come out from the far side of the barn, it is like the next act, or the start of an entirely new play” (7). *The Cows* is a close study of the three much-loved cows that live across the road from her. The piece, written with understated humor and empathy, is a series of detailed observations of the cows on different days and in different positions, moods, and times of the day. It could be compared to some sections of Wallace Stevens’s’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” or to Claude Monet’s paintings of Rouen Cathedral.

E. M. Forster once wrote, “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot” (134). Davis’s stories have almost no plot. They almost seem poems or fragments, but she always preferred the deeper associations of the word ‘story’. When asked in an interview how she could know a story was a story, Davis answered: “It’s a hard thing to define, but to be simple about it, I would say a story has to have a bit of narrative, if only ‘she says,’ and then enough of a creation of a different time and place to transport the reader. But, of course, it is not a narrative poem. It is flatter, rhythmically different from a poem, and less elliptical.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Due to the absence of a plot, Lydia’s narratives may be bizarre, absurd and strange but they always keep a secret truth to be discovered. As one of her narrators says in “Our Trip”: “You can’t tell everyone the truth all the time, and you certainly can’t tell anyone the whole truth, ever, because it would take too long” (Davis 2009: 700).  She does not need any words to describe the setting nor the characters. Her stories can be so relatable that we can often draw the setting from what is around us, and we can substitute ourselves as the characters. Using only a few words, Davis puts a mirror in front of us to reflect our true identities.

There is a good deal of variety in her stories, both stylistically and in terms of content. Some are written like academic reports, some play around with language, some deal with imperfect familial ties, some are absurd and funny. However, in many of them, there is an undercurrent of loneliness, while others speak of an unbearable sadness: “(...) 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 2009: 201); “I would like to disappear into the earth like that mole. I would like to stuff myself into the drawer of the laundry chest, and open the drawer from time to time to see if I have suffocated yet. It's so much more surprising that one gets up every morning at all” (Davis 2009: 509-519). Lydia Davis confessed that she wrote from the viewpoint of characters who had difficulty functioning in the world, and often what they did and said was funny because it reflected a funny reality. In “Writing,” a text from *Can’t and Won’t*,she also observed: “Writing is too often about people who can’t manage. Now I have become one of those people. I am one of those people” (Davis 2014: 214).

Davis rearranges our view of the world by looking beyond our preconceptions, through a bizarre truth – a source of delight and surprise. In *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007), her fourth collection, Davis extends her reach as never before in stories that take every form, from sociological studies to concise poems. These tales approach themes such as sex, family, love and betrayal, and subjects such as the five senses, fourth-graders, good taste, and tropical storms. She offers a reinterpretation of insomnia and re-creates the ordeals of Kafka in the kitchen. She questions the lengths to which one should go to save the life of a caterpillar, proposes a clear account of the sexual act, rides the bus, probes the limits of marital fidelity, and unlocks the secret to a long and happy life.

If these characteristics of her writing were acknowledged as belonging to an American tradition, her fiction also persists to evoke the influence of many other writers such as Beckett, Thomas Bernhard, Kafka, Hemingway, W.G. Sebald, Peter Handke, Russell Edson or Elizabeth Hardwick. Like them, Lydia Davis is an expert in penetrating into the human mind and making a long story short. In what concerns the influence of French writers on Davis’s work, we can say that, apart from Proust, her influences include French thinkers and writers such as Maurice Blanchot, Michel Butor and Michel Foucault. In reading Davis’s stories, therefore, we are likely to be reminded as much of the poststructuralist emphasis on language (for instance, in the works of Blanchot), as well as of the antinarrative impulse of French nouveau-Romanists like Butor. These literary references explain that, despite the range of emotions Davis’s writing deals with, she is never too sentimental, because the considerable emotional component of her stories is often sub textual. She always uses a calm, detached voice and manages to condense the essence of a story to a few sentences which cause a strong impact on the readers, reminding us of a famous Kafka’s quote: “A bookmust be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Jonathan Franzen once said that Lydia Davis is like a shorter Proust and a magician of self-consciousness.Being very self-conscious about language, Davis’s subject is often language itself. Some of the stories that are most obsessed with syntax are even the most fascinating, such as “Grammar Questions” and “We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters From a Class of Fourth-Graders,” which is written in the clinical tone of a cultural anthropologist or a literary theorist. However, departing from an apparently dry subject created in her laboratory of samples of language, Davis reveals many idiosyncrasies of personality and society. She truly believes that language can be both the subject and the medium of fiction.

Another very good example, to illustrate Davis’s exceptional writing skills, is “The Walk” where a female translator of Proust meets a male critic at a conference in Oxford. Here, Proust is again evoked in Davis’s work. The translator-narrator, like Davis herself, or her alter ego, has just completed a translation of *Swan’s Way*. This narrating writer, translator, reader, and traveler is our constant companion through *The Collected Stories* (2009). Many of them result from different events from Davis’s life, whose context is only imagined from some recurring images: a husband, domestic loneliness, a baby, rice casseroles, books by Beckett. But the mystery remains in everything.

Lydia Davis enjoys this mystery and lives it together with the readers, trying to analyze it. The protagonist of “The Center of the Story”, in *The Collected Stories*, is compelled to write about a hurricane, religion, or a man who thought he was dying. Her story seems to have no center and she wants to imagine where the center should be and/or what it should contain: “ ‘Perhaps if she takes out things that are not interesting, or do not belong in the story for other reasons,’ she thinks, ‘this will give it more of a center, since as soon as there is less in a story, more of it must be in the center’” (174). There seems to be a rational system that imposes a certain order, where none of the terms in this equation is subordinate to any other. Like in Beckett’s play everything is inconclusive and challenges the reader expectations: the hurricane is necessary, though it never arrives, and the dying man is necessary, though he never dies, and the Bible is necessary, though the writer is not a believer.

The empty center is, then, not within any story at all, but the point around which all stories orbit. As she strips her texts of more and more, she brings them closer to the center, so that when there is nothing in a story, everything will be in the center. The center will be made of nothing, albeit a positive nothing. The desire to create positive nothings is not unique in Davis’s work – one character even makes it her New Year’s resolution in *The Collected Stories*. It is difficult work: “I’m pretty close to nothing all morning” (355). But nothing is also everything condensed in Lydia Davis’s fiction, because nothing is what it seems, as Ali Smith noticed in *The Guardian* (2013): “What looks like a game will open to deep seriousness; what looks like philosophy will reveal playfulness, tragicomedy, ordinariness; what looks like ordinariness will ask you to look again at Davis's writing.”[[14]](#footnote-14) And if we look again, we can find everything there: humor and tragedy, love and loss, happiness and misfortune, emotion and intellect. Indeed, Lydia Davis is a radical expert of making a long story of everything very, very short.

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1. In an Interview with Brendan Matthews (2014), Lydia Davis was asked about the fact that, in spite of knowing her stories are fiction, **her readers often read them with an autobiographical impulse. She answered: “**I don’t mind it. (…), they do all have something to do with the way I think but I like the fact that it’s Flaubert’s story as much as mine and my friends’ dreams as much as my story, but the narrator is never exactly me, she’s always a construct. So it isn’t exactly me, but I don’t mind that assumption. I don’t feel as if they’re too close to me. They don’t make me uncomfortable that way because they are constructions. This isn’t the whole truth. I’m not confessing to you. This is a made object.” (Davis, Lydia. Interview by Brendan Mathews. *Salon*, 28 Apr. 2014, https://www.salon.com/2014/04/28/lydia\_davis\_i\_kind\_of\_like\_the\_fact\_that\_my\_work\_isn%E2%80%99t\_for\_everybody/. Accessed 2 June. 2018.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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