

# Horacio Quiroga and Charles Baudelaire as Precursors of Contemporary Flash Fiction

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## Introduction

Micronarratives are petite, compressed streaks of texts. In a way, they are comparable to the ice cube chunks that used to form a part of an iceberg, before breaking off beginning to roam freely all across the narrative sea. Their mere existence is a consequence of literary fragmentation and alienation from the long narrative vein.

Due to the plural nature of their structure and length, they have been called by multiple names: from short fiction to short short story and flash fiction, to the more recent, pompous titles such as: Six-Word Story, Twitterature (140-character stories), Drabble (100 words) or Dribble (50 words).

The prehistory of micro-narratives lies in the first written words, recorded from oral tales; in folk forms such as fables (notably Aesop's fables in the West) as well as worldwide parables laden with socio-cultural content (as in the Panchatantra and Jataka tales in India). The tales of Turkish populist philosopher Nasreddin or Nasreddin Hodja with their subtle touch of humour and moralising intend are another example. In China, Chan (Zen) koans compiled by the Chinese Wumen Huikai epitomize the polarities of consciousness that form and obstacle/barrier to one's insight.

In this paper, I underline the influence of Charles Baudelaire and Horacio Quiroga, pioneers of modern short fiction. Baudelaire's *Little Poems in Prose* gave its first name to this new genre.

## Themes and motifs in Quiroga's works

One of the most important motifs present in the works of Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937) is that of death. The representation of death in his narratives is extremely realistic. Death appears as a place of no return, and almost all the protagonists in his stories die suddenly and violently. Alongside death, another recurring motif in Quiroga is that of insanity. It is often a cause of death or linked to the motif of death, sometimes anticipating it or rather acting as its intermediary. The best example of what I have just mentioned would be the famous quiroguian story "The slaughtered hen" when the foolish children of the Manzini married couple kill their only healthy daughter. Due to their madness, they saw her as a hen. Another motif highlighted in this story is that of terror. Some of Quiroga's most successful stories are horror stories, as for example "The feather pillow". The jungle motif, as a symbol of everything that is wild and barbaric, also appears as part of the contrast between the natural and the artificial. The jungle environment serves Quiroga to interpret a sort of return to the origins of humanity, when there were still strong ties between human beings and nature. His descriptions of vast forests, rivers, wild animals (for instance, snakes) are very powerful, and he also focuses on endemic fights between humans and the untamed jungle, which in most cases end up as tragedies.

Eroticism is yet another motif which appears in many of his stories. Initially, he seems to focus exclusively on clandestine relations between men and women from different social classes. With the passage of time, the writer begins to replace the bourgeois type of woman by a sort of daring jungle woman with higher sexual inclinations. These stories were well received by his female readers' cycle. (Rocca, 81)

Finally, another type of stories are children stories. Quiroga wanted to contribute to a children's storytelling market focused towards the education system in Uruguay. This prompted him to write his own book of short stories, entitled "Tales from the Jungle". Unfortunately, his book was rejected by school inspectors which found it distasteful. Pablo Rocca, however, convinces us of the existence of didactic intentions behind the book, explaining that he was trying to offer a humanized version of animals, often portrayed as conscious beings. Other values that these stories presents are generosity, braveness, and solidarity. (Rocca, 106)

Quiroga's personal experience greatly influenced his creations, sometimes, especially in the stories he wrote after 1930. It is often difficult to tell where life ended and literature began. But Quiroga's works also feature the influences of other writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Maupassant, Kipling,

Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Joseph Conrad. From each of these authors, Quiroga inherited a certain trait, maintaining also a personal touch (Orgámbide, 132). Critics have pointed out that Quiroga's world features permanent contradictions, love and eroticism coupled with fantastic elements, madness, fear, horror and death. A style characterized by its synthetic brevity and intense dense objectivity. He chose terms like 'concision', 'concentration', and 'strength' to characterize the primary qualities of the short story, and even created a *Decalogue for the perfect storyteller* where he emphasizes the power of the noun next to the adjective, the importance of a sharp phrase rather than long circumlocutions, always underlying the economy of words which is precisely one of the most important features of modern short-short stories.

### Charles Baudelaire and his influence on Horacio Quiroga

Charles Baudelaire, a pioneer of modern short fiction, exerted great influence on Horacio Quiroga. In turn, *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1842), a posthumous book by the Belge Aloysius Bertrand, inspired Baudelaire's prose poetry, which crystallized in the famous *Little Poems in Prose*, opening the door to the new literary genre and giving name to it. The 'accursed poet' as Paul Verlaine, called Baudelaire an appellative also used to refer to Tristan Corbiere, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, and other melancholic, anarchic, bohemian authors known as the "Parnassians", opposed traditional social values with creations often referred to as repugnant that served to marginalize the members of the group.

Baudelaire's personality had a lot in common with the contents of his literary work, especially since the writer had lived as a prisoner of his own subjectivity. Being intelligent and perceptive, inordinately objective and flexible, the French author was able to capture the vices of the contemporary society in which he lived. Inspired by Aloysius Bertrand, Baudelaire wrote *Little Poems in Prose* a collection full of melancholy and images of the city of Paris. The truly wondrous thing about the book are the stylistic devices Baudelaire perused in order to describe the heart of France. He managed to do so merely by using a few words imbued in visual metaphors with a strong significance. In order to show the workings of such metaphors, let us look at one of the poems and compare its features with similar characteristics in flash fiction.

"The Stranger" is an extraordinarily well-written poem in prose, which, at the same time, possesses great many characteristics of short-short stories.

L'Étranger

- Qui aimes-tu le mieux, homme énigmatique, dis? ton père, ta mère, ta soeur ou ton frère?
- Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni soeur, ni frère.

- Tes amis?
- Vous vous servez là d'une parole dont le sens m'est resté jusqu'à ce jour inconnu.
- Ta patrie?
- J'ignore sous quelle latitude elle est située.
- La beauté?
- Je l'aimerais volontiers, déesse et immortelle?
- L'or?
- Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.
- Eh! qu'aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger?
- J'aime les nuages... les nuages qui passent...là-bas...là-bas...les merveilleux nuages!

At this point, it is important to emphasize the importance of the language economy as far as short stories are concerned. One word on a blank piece of paper might offer a tremendous impact upon the reader's perceptions and comprehensions, creating a metaphorical image that expands in parabolic representation. Such is the power of the word and the void; the empty space that seems to ask to be filled in.

"L'Étranger" is a prose poem with little adjectives. Nouns stand alone in their multiple connotations, like the title itself; a visitor, a voyager, someone from abroad, whose customs may be different, perhaps a speaker of an alien language, someone who might inspire curiosity but also fear. The imaginative reader can almost feel the silent texture of the gap between the stranger and his interlocutors; "l'homme énigmatique", without family ties (père, mère, soeur, frère); Without a country (patrie), standing at the border between the land within and the land beyond; where words, "une parole dont le sens m'est resté jusqu'à ce jour inconnu," are continuously rewritten and rediscovered and the distance between speaker and listener, author and reader, re-situated, like "les nuages qui passent".

Brevity, the essential characteristic of the flash-fiction, is met. The short story follows its own principles of a literary genre and it allows itself to start in *medias res*. Abruptly, escalating in a dialogue of questions and odd answers that rises to the clouds, "L'Étranger" is an exercise in 'estrangement' that stages the futile attempt to remove the aura of mystery that surrounds "l'homme énigmatique". The story indulges in the shock value of the encounter with the mysterious stranger, whom we would wish reduced to a normal, common human being, with the same fears and problems that the rest of us. "Enigmatic" is one of the few adjectives in the prose poem. It has connotations related to the mysterious, the unknown, and someone or something difficult to understand and/or read.

The words that are perused are “mother”, “father”, “brother” and “sister” allude to the significance of the family, a sacred institution, in which a child learns how to talk, makes his first steps, and feels the first paternal and fraternal love. Such symbolic words are impregnated with meaning and they practically represent key words of the poem or a short story. The answer of the stranger is short, enumerative and sad; he has no family. He has no friends. He has no homeland. “Patrie” invokes the roots and all the connotations associated to fatherland (the term comes from Latin *pater*).

Such questions help to ‘identify’ a person, to make him or her known to us. But “L’Étranger” remains a stranger to his interlocutors and to the readers. Identification fixes meaning. A proper name identifies but also maps the person to a certain group, family, friends, community, nation. The stranger does not want to be ‘fixed’, *situé*. He wants to be like “les nuages qui passent”, forever in movement.

At the mention of the word beauty, associations with femininity and the immortal goddess are triggered, “Je l’aimerais volontiers, déesse et immortelle.” However, there are no indications of personal relations in this reply, of love relations (perhaps) that might have provided a hint to the more humane level of the stranger. The association of beauty with the goddess, the muse of creation, merely situates L’Étranger as an artist, interested in the beauty of life in the abstract, and whose bohemian background is further established by his rejection of ‘gold’: “L’or? Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.” The thought of material wealth is immediately dismissed, as the stranger confesses that he hates gold just as his interlocutors hate God. The clever use of personal pronouns is there to enhance the effect of separation, the positioning of the almost invisible border between the stranger and his interlocutors. With merely two words, a deep chasm is opened, a gap widened by the use of the adjective ‘extraordinary’ (*extraordinaire étranger*), that informs the readers of the remote, distant, and perhaps exotic nature of the stranger.

The ephemeral image of the floating passing clouds closes the poem delving the readers into an abyss of white and blank. Cosmopolitan travellers, free wanderers, the images of clouds bring forth connotations of escape, of freedom from mundane troubles, of light hearted travel and naïf, almost pure, imagination. It immediately recalls William Wordsworth’s famous “I wandered lonely as a cloud”, inspired by an event on 15 April 1802, in which Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy came across a “long belt” of daffodils, as the poem is also known, when taking a walk around Glencoyne Bay in the Lake District. The topic of Wordsworth poem is recollection; in particular, his poem explores how a particular moment can be captured and almost frozen in time by a powerful image that stays in the mind and in memory forever.

This is exactly the meaning of the ‘shock’ that Walter Benjamin uses in his writings, inspired by Baudelaire himself. This is how short narrative operates. It saves words by indulging in connotative images that help transversal reading: Baudelaire > Benjamin > Wordsworth > Baudelaire, and not necessarily in this order.

The beauty of “L’Étranger” is that it captures the feelings associated to estrangement: the shock that makes readers wonder and wander; the extreme brevity that helps the critic write thousands of pages of interpretation; the few words, made up of white paper and cloud (imagination) that seek to be forever strange.

To summarize, Baudelaire’s ‘Stranger’ has the following characteristics: brevity, start *in medias res*, key words with multiple semiotic connotations that yield multiple interpretations, few unnamed unknown characters, well planned structure, dialogical form open to the reader, and an unexpected turnover at the end that leaves the story open and the climax forever postponed. These features are shared with many contemporary short story and approach, epistemologically, postmodern concerns.

Interwoven in figurative speech, the play between words and tropes brings forth a break in discursive contingencies and enables the irruption of transversal readings. Similarly, the dialogical open structure creates a temporal flux, conveying the idea of change and process, present also in the image of the cloud. Such open and fragmented patterns allow interpretative gaps that work as points of connection between past, present and future events, translating the brevity of the short-short narrative in a moment of shock that allows the presentness of the past and projects it in the future.

### Quiroga’s Coral Reefs (1901)

*Coral reefs* (1901), the first volume published by Horacio Quiroga, reflects the influence of symbolism and modernism in its ability to use symbols and play with rhythms as if they were musical notes. Some critics have described the pieces as tiny musical poems, sustained by the sonority of words and their symbolic correlations. The work of an artisan, capable of working within the shadows of his room to create a private art piece that triggers the complicity of the reader. (Orgambide, 60) The volume was printed in “El Siglo Ilustrado”, Montevideo and dedicated to Leopoldo Lugones, whom Quiroga worshiped. It was a limited edition of five hundred and ten copies, with elaborate typesetting, and today it is one of the oddities of Uruguayan literature.

The book was not well received by critics or by most reading circles, and not much attention was paid to it. Nowadays is a significant source of infor-

mation on Quiroga's motifs, style and narrative technique, with characteristics similar to the micro-stories of today. *Coral reefs* hosts an extraordinary variety as far as their content is concerned. Compositions are in verse and prose and all creations are short, distinct and varied. The poetic part of the book is shorter. Short stories have greater protagonism, showing Quiroga's future inclination towards narrative rather than poetry. We discover a general trend to name almost all the stories with the first two or three words of the tale, without revealing any further content. In fact, reading the titles one cannot deduce what the stories are about. It is a trait that his short stories share with contemporary micro-narratives, as sometimes the very title forms part of the short story. This technique also serves to attract the interest of readers, compelled discover the secret hidden within.

In the following lines I will focus on the story entitled "All Night Long..." ("Toda la noche ..."), which has less than two hundred words distributed on nine lines of text (excluding the title) and complies with the trait of brevity. The theme is the contrast between life and death; the context is a ballroom where happy couples dance merrily and carefree. They wear bright masks which represent life. In stark contrast to them, there is a man, also in disguise, that is slowly dying of tuberculosis.

Toda la noche había estado sentado en un rincón de la sala, con las manos sobre las rodillas, sonriendo dulcemente a las parejas que pasaban bailando. Era una delicada visión de baile, solo, asombrado y enfermo, a ratos tosía, llevaba el pañuelo a los labios y oprimía con solicitud cariñosa su pobre pecho. Con los compases de la orquesta se mezclaba su seca tosecilla.

Pasó una máscara y se detuvo, mirándole.

—¡Pobrecito!—exclamó.

Él sonrió débilmente, tratando de levantarle el antifaz con su dolorida mano. La máscara huyó riéndose. Y él volvió a los espejos de su enharinada cara de pierrot, bajo la cual dos manchas de vivo carmín agonizaban en los pómulos, tan rojas como las manchas del pañuelo que llevaba a la boca... (Quiroga, 62)

All night long he had been sitting in the corner of the room, hands on his knees, sweetly smiling at the dancing passing couples. A delicate vision of dance, alone, attentive, ill, coughing at times; a kerchief over his lips, pressing it warmly against his chest. The dry cough mixed the rhythms of the orchestra.

A mask passed, stopped and stared.

—Poor thing!—exclaimed.

He smiled weakly, and tried to lift the mask with his painful hand. The mask ran away laughing. And he returned to the looking-glass, his floured pierrot face hiding two crimson cheeks as red as those stains on the kerchief covering his mouth.

Quiroga, like Baudelaire, chooses to describe life as a fleeting dance of masks, with the brevity of people's encounters, passing glances and gestures evaporate. The only remnant is the blood left behind. Any attempt to grasp the Other, to take off his or her mask, is futile. They dance among us and we never get to know them. The gesture of separation between the sick man and life is reinforced by the person's escape, his/her laugh, and the uncaring remark "Poor thing!" The man's silence speaks more than the words. The attempt to remove the mask of the dancer is almost the last try of the agonizing man to discover the hidden essence of life. Life pulls away, laughing. A great deal of attention is paid to the construction of the short short story, explains David Roas, with a scarce structure, lacking detailed descriptions or references to the concrete persons and places (49).

With only two words, the structural economy of Quiroga shows the man seated (weakness, immobility, illness) and the couples in the movement of life (dance is synonymous with strength, health). The adjectives and the adjectival compositions used are indicative of his poor health: "delicate vision of the dance", "alone", "amazed", "ill". The sound the "orchestra" is played along the man's "hacking, dry cough". The reader is invited to visualize the scene and also to listen to it. Metaphorically speaking, the music of the orchestra is the music of life, while the hacking, dry cough is the sound of death.

The prose poem ends like contemporary flash fiction masterpieces, in an incomplete narrative sequence. The well-known figure of the sad clown 'pierrot', a stock character of Italian pantomime and Commedia dell'Arte of the late 17th century, represents the fool in love with Columbine, sometimes his master's daughter, sometimes a dancer who breaks his heart and leaves him for Harlequin. The origins of this figure, among Italian bohemian players in France, have been traced to Molière's peasant Pierrot, in *Don Juan, or The Stone Guest* (1665). The character in Quiroga's story is presented unmasked among the masks, with a whitened face emblem of his naïveté and trusting idealist nature.

The figure of Pierrot invaded the arts at the turn of the 20th-century. He became an inspiration to writers, visual artists and movie makers. Inspired by the French Symbolists, especially Verlaine, the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, famously used the sad poet and dreamer in opposition to the materialistic fatal woman in his 1898 prose-poem *The Eternal Adventure of Pierrot and Columbine*.

During the carnival of 1898, Quiroga had met his first love, Mary Esther Jurkovski. The parents of the young girl disapproved of the relationship because Quiroga was not Jewish. The following year, Quiroga's stepfather committed suicide by shooting himself and the poet found the body. He decided to travel to Paris, seeking to come to terms with these two losses. The trip was a failure and he came back sad and discouraged. "All Night Long..." was published soon afterwards.

Pierrot stands not just for the poor sad poet who feels like a clown. It contrasts with colorful and patterned Harlequin. Pierrot may stand also for the blank piece of paper of the short short story, the *tabula rasa* of a child-like and uncertain mind, struck by awe. Careful attention to the palimpsest reveals the impressions and shocks of life; the strong and deep marks, almost scars, when they first occur, fading, in time. Covered in patterns and lines, Harlequin is the longer story, full of itself and of words. Tinted with "two intense carmine patches...as red as the stains on the handkerchief upon his mouth," the gap between Harlequin and "the floured pierrot face", between the Stranger and his masked Other, between long and short, is as wide as the gap between sensation and imagination, between rationality and feeling, between life and death: one and the same, red. And, thus, I finish this section "Among School Children" with the ending lines of William Butler Yeats (*The Tower*, 1928):

Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Written in third person singular, an omnipotent narrator witnesses the scene and presents it to the reader. The brief dialogue is not developed because the man never responds with words, but with a simple and eager movement to get closer to "life" by removing the mask. His failure and the laughing escape reaffirm the separation from life. Characters are economically described with no psychological traits; specific references to places and people are reduced. (Roas, 49) Several stylistic figures immediately raise as a proof of virtuosity of quiroguian narrative and they simultaneously characterize many contemporary micro-stories: they are the symbol, contrast, allegory, paradox and irony. Couples and mask are the symbol of life. "Pierrot" represents decay, disease and death. It brings to mind Shakespeare's idea of life as a theatre where everyone plays a role. The time comes when you have to get off the stage and die; when the masks and costumes are removed, and both the king and the beggar are equal in death.

Maria Isabel Larrea underlines that the use of paradox and allegory giving a pragmatic feature to short-short stories (Larrea, 2). Indeed, the plot of this quiroguian prose poem operates with the help of precise and carefully chosen vocabulary, with the careful words, contrast is always present, until the very end, when we realize that man is dying. We have traced a scheme to show the effectiveness of the structural organization of Horacio Quiroga's work and economy of words which the author managed in the following way. First. The pierrot is sitting and the reader begins to glimpse of his weakness and illness because the couples are dancing (a symbol of strength, mobility and health). By using these two verbs of immobility and motion, Quiroga economically

achieves the contrast between death and life. The author also uses adjectives connected to the physical and psychological state of the man: "delicate vision of dance", "alone", "amazed", "sick". The contrast is emphasized in perceptual terms that included differences in visual perception but also sound. In this way, the sound of the "orchestra" contrasts with the "dry cough". Metaphorically said, the orchestra music is the music of life, while the dry cough is the "music" of death. When one of the masks senses that something bad is happening to him, it stops to look, at him, using the adjective "poor". The lack of response and silence of a man speaks louder than words. He is so weak and close to death that he cannot even talk and his effect to unmask the dancer is the last attempt of a dying man to discover the hidden essence of life. However, "life" slips away laughing. The ending is surprising and enigmatic, representing an incomplete narrative sequence, as it occurs in contemporary micro-narratives. The reader remains thoughtful, reflecting on the fugacity of life.

To conclude, this paper has try to point out the relevance of Baudelaire and Quiroga's short stories. Often known as prose-poems because of their brevity, density and poetic qualities, they share important characteristics of contemporary micro-stories, both in terms of style, descriptive concision and narrative form; in one. In the case of Quiroga, his obsession with death is most obvious in his short narratives, almost as an echo of the fragility and fugacity of life.

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# Mythical Realism in North African Fiction: Ibrahim Al-Koni's *Gold Dust* and *The Bleeding of the Stone*

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## Introduction: Magical Realism and the North African Tradition

In Ibrahim al-Koni's "spacious realm," the reader faces an interpretation of a highly complex reality that challenges his/her understanding of fiction and reality. The reality that novels usually disclose is the one of presence as the setting is usually a city or a well-defined place. Al-Koni puts forward the reality of absence or "life in the desert" as perceived by the outsider. What is absent, invisible or imperceptible in a realist novel, becomes central in al-Koni's magical/mythical realist stories.

In this paper, I aim to elucidate what I mean by mythic realism through showing how mythic realism is different from the concept of magic realism and how it prevails in the case of the fiction on the desert in Ibrahim al-Koni's novels mainly *The Bleeding of the Stone* and *Gold Dust*.

North African ancient Tuareg culture besets the mythic and mystic systems that explained nature and life through millennia and helped them cope with the harshness of the space. Desert gods and detailed myths accounting for creation, life, and the after-life gave the space its spiritual dimension. Furthermore, myth and reality as intertwined facets of life is central to Tuareg cultural demarcation of collective lines and shared imaginary. In this case, it will be argued that the means by which al-Koni represents identity is essentially magical/mythical and that, by examining these magical/mythical narratives, the reader recognises the way al-Koni approaches his native space and how his texts recreate an authentic North African desert identity.