

# Parodies of Six-Word Stories: A Comic Literary Metagenre\*

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## Abstract

The article discusses parodies of six-word stories and locates them within the broader context of metagenre in general, and humorous metagenre in particular. Parodies of six-word stories offer a playful, ironic perspective on the genre’s form and its most famous example, the story (wrongly) attributed to Hemingway: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” The genre of six-word stories is a newcomer to the repertoire of narrative genres: it emerged in the 1990s and since then has become a fast-growing literary phenomenon with a great number of followers, both readers and writers. After describing the central characteristics of this peculiar mini-genre (e.g. the tip of the iceberg principle, the punch line structure, its poetic-like patterns), I focus on a detailed analysis of selected parodies of the form, and show how examples such as “For sale: this story format. Overused.”; “For sale. BMW. Blinkers never used.” and “Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin.” present a close imitation of conspicuous aspects of the generic model, in being embodied in its prototypical member, together with a comic, tongue-in-cheek, manipulation of that model. I conclude by arguing that parodies of six-word stories offer further indirect evidence of the diversity and productivity of this peculiar mini-genre.

## Introduction: Genre, Metagenre, Parody

In this article I will discuss parodies of six-word stories and locate them within the broader context of metagenre in general, and humorous metagenre in particular. Parodies of six-word stories offer a playful, ironic perspective on the genre's form and its most famous example, the story (wrongly) attributed to Hemingway: (1) "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."<sup>1</sup> Before discussing different examples of metagenre and parodies of six-word stories, I shall first briefly describe this peculiar genre (or mini-genre). This newcomer to the repertoire of narrative genres emerged in the 1990s and since then has become a fast-growing literary phenomenon with a great number of followers, both readers and writers, especially on the Internet. To illustrate the genre's growth suffice it to say that a search for the string "six-word stories" on Google in September 2017 produced 382,000 results, and by November 2021 the number had risen to 801,000. When we realize that some of these websites contain dozens of six-word stories, and others even hundreds,<sup>2</sup> the magnitude of the phenomenon becomes apparent (even after deducting the many repetitions). Can this popular form of creativity qualify for the title of a literary genre? To answer that question, and to prepare the ground for the analysis of specific examples, I shall first offer a working definition of the key concepts used in this article: genre, metagenre, and parody.

*Genre* is understood as "a combination of prototypical, representative members, and a flexible set of constitutive rules that apply to some levels of literary texts, to some individual writers, usually to more than one literary period, and to more than one language and culture" (Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre* 8). I add two clarifications to this working definition: first, it highlights the important role played by prototypical members in our understanding of generic categories. This emphasis is based on works in cognitive linguistics that demonstrate the central role of prototypical members in categories in general (see Rosch and Mervis; Rosch), and the pertinence of these works to generic categories

(see Fishelov, "Genre Theory and Family Resemblance"; Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre* 55-68; Fishelov, "The Structure of Generic Categories"); and, second, the postulation that generic rules apply to several levels of the text was introduced in order to distinguish literary genres from other types of rules (e.g. prosodic) that apply to only one level of the text. Whereas literary genres are usually associated with one dominant characteristic, be it formal (e.g. fourteen lines in sonnets), or structural (e.g. specific plot-structures in detective stories), or thematic (e.g. the theatre of the absurd), or rhetorical (e.g. criticizing and ridiculing social phenomena in satire), this dominant characteristic will usually be accompanied by other characteristics at other textual levels.

I shall briefly illustrate this working definition with the well-established literary genre of the Italian sonnet. The genre has many of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* as prototypical examples, and its rules apply to meter (fourteen hendecasyllabic lines), to rhyme-scheme (octave with ABBAABBA and sestet with CDECDE or CDCDCD), and to themes (first and foremost, romantic love with an idealized beloved). Thus, even a genre defined primarily by its formal, prosodic characteristics also has prevalent, characteristic themes. Whereas romantic love was closely associated with the genre, new themes were introduced (e.g. Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, Wordsworth's landscape sonnets), and of course new versions of the sonnet emerged (e.g. the Shakespearean sonnet in England), but these developments will not obliterate the genre's original, prototypical examples.

The working definition of genre can be equally applied to six-word stories. First, this genre has a universally accepted prototypical member: the Hemingway story. According to literary legend, the story was composed as part of a bet: Hemingway claimed that he could write a whole novel compressed into only six words, and won.<sup>3</sup> The Hemingway story is mentioned in almost every discussion of the genre, and has inspired many followers who have written innumerable texts.<sup>4</sup> Second, the genre has at least two essential rules: it is composed of exactly six words, and it is committed to tell a story (as opposed to, say, making a general statement). Whereas the formal rule of using only and exactly

six words is quite straightforward, the narrative element is sometimes less obvious, and some texts seem to hover between six-word *stories* and neighboring mini-genres which are not committed to tell a story (e.g. aphorisms, epigraphs). Still, in most popular and successful texts of the genre, the narrative element stands out.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for example, (2) “Best friends. Some beers. New lovers.” qualifies as a typical six-word story but “Passion is born deaf and dumb” (a saying attributed to Balzac) will be labeled as a typical aphorism, even if it is composed of six words: whereas the former invites us to imagine a specific chain of events with causal connection, the latter formulates a general truth. Perhaps Balzac’s general observation emerged out of witnessing chains of events like the one described in (2), but it does not tell a story. In addition, the genre has several prevalent structural rules such as the tip of the iceberg principle (i.e., important parts of the story are construed, not stated),<sup>6</sup> and a punch-line structure (i.e., the story’s last part is surprising and makes us reread the previous segments), as well as poetic-like patterns (e.g., the six words’ sequence is parsed into 2-2-2 or 3-3 segments).<sup>7</sup> Thus, our working definition of a genre can be easily applied to six-word stories, perhaps with one qualification: whereas other literary genres usually have several prototypical members (e.g. tragedy has Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, among others), six-word stories have only one privileged prototypical member, namely the Hemingway story.

*Metagenre* is understood as texts that call attention to the conventions of a specific genre or its prototypical members.<sup>8</sup> Note that this broad definition can be applied not only to literary works but also to scholarly discussions of genres. Since the present discussion is interested in literary works, it is useful to distinguish scholarly metagenre from literary metagenre: whereas the former aims at a systematic description and interpretation of genres, the latter strives to achieve artistic goals. Such texts offer a pleasurable invitation to reflect on the evoked genres by paying homage to or, alternatively, ridiculing their conventions. Literary metagenre may contain descriptive elements but such elements will be subordinated to its literary goals (in a complementary manner, a

scholarly discussion may use literary devices but these will be subordinated to its academic objectives).

Finally, *parody* is understood as texts that closely imitate but also distort a specific text, or a specific author, or a specific genre and its prototypical members, and this double structure is accompanied by a comic incongruity.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for example, (3) “For sale: BMW. Blinkers never used.” and (4) “Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin.” closely imitate the structure of the prototypical Hemingway story, but they both substitute the specific element offered for sale, and the specific substitutions create a comic tension (we shall later offer a detailed analysis of these two parodies, together with more similar examples, in the section “Parodies of Six-Word Stories”). As this working definition suggests, parody can be manifested in many ways.<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of the present discussion, I shall add four clarifications and distinctions. First, if we take parody as the umbrella term, we can distinguish within it between high and low burlesque: in the former, the “high” style of a genre is retained but its content (e.g. characters) is substituted with trivial elements. High burlesque can be best exemplified by Mock-Epic or Mock-Heroic in which the formal conventions of epic poetry (e.g. invoking the muse, extended similes) are used to describe the trivial quarrels of belles and beaux, rather than the bloody battles of dignified, mythical heroes (e.g. Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock”). In its mirror-like case of low burlesque (sometimes called travesty), a culturally “high” content (e.g. a knight) is described in low, colloquial style (e.g. Butler’s *Hudibras*).<sup>11</sup>

Second, unlike other genres, parody does not have any specific formal or thematic characteristics: rather, due to its “parasitic” or chameleon-like and protean nature, it adopts the specific characteristics of the text or genre that it chooses to parody—but with a twist. Still, like other literary genres, parody too has its prototypical members (e.g. Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock”). Third, formulating simple criteria is problematic when it comes to determining whether or not a specific imitation and distortion of a literary model produces a comic effect that is strongly associated with parody. Although *Paradise Lost* imitates certain conventions of the classical epic and substitutes the mythical, Greco-

Roman gods and heroes with the biblical God and his son, Adam and Eve, and Lucifer, among others, the text produces no comic effect whatsoever and should not be read as a parody of the epic tradition. The reason for this is probably because both substituted and substituting characters belong to an elevated cultural sphere, while a comic effect usually requires an incongruity between “high” and “low” substituted and substituting elements. Even after introducing this postulate, it is almost impossible to devise a specific formula for producing a comic effect in the double structure of imitation and substitution. To succeed in this endeavor, authors require talent, keen literary sensitivities and, of course, an excellent sense of humor. The fourth clarification, also pertinent to the discussion of parodies of six-word stories, is that the comic, critical element of parody can be put at the service of satirizing different goals.

#### Criticizing the Parodied Genre *or* an External Target

To illustrate how parody’s comic “mechanism” and its satirical element can be aimed at different goals, let us look at two prototypical examples of parody of English literature. First, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 with its parody of Petrarchan love poems:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;  
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks,  
 And in some perfumes is there more delight  
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound.  
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.  
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
 As any she belied with false compare. (*The Sonnets* 141)

The underlined words in the poem are the—here parodied—Petrarchan “building blocks.” Their comprising more than half of Shakespeare’s text manifests how closely Shakespeare’s parody is modeled after a Petrarchan love poem. While the Petrarchan parodied model is actually embedded in Shakespeare’s parody, instead of using the collection of beautifying similes as part of a eulogy of the beloved woman (with an edifying *blazon*), Shakespeare deflates them with the ironic needle of negation: e.g. his mistress’s eyes are *nothing* like the sun, etc. Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 perhaps parodies contemporary Elizabethan poets imitating Petrarchan love poems (e.g. Thomas Watson, Samuel Daniel, Richard Linche; see notes on Sonnet 130 in Kerrigan’s edition, 359-60) more than Petrarch himself. In any event, the constant move between the high images and the realistic appearance of Shakespeare’s beloved creates a comic tension. Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 calls attention to the conventions of a Petrarchan love poem (i.e., metagenre), and its comic element is at the service of satirizing the Petrarchan lover-speaker as someone detached from reality, absorbed in “false compare.”

Let us now look at the opening lines of another famous prototypical parody in English literature, Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock”:

What dire Offence from am’rous Causes springs,  
 What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things,  
 I sing—This Verse to *Caryll*, Muse! is due;  
 This, ev’n *Belinda* may vouchsafe to view:  
 Slight is the Subject, but not so the Praise,  
 If She inspire, and He approve my Lays. (*The Poems* 218)

Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock,” while imitating some conventions of classical epic poetry (e.g. a declaration of the subject matter of the poem in the opening lines, invoking a muse), does not seem to criticize the imitated model (or writers in that tradition). Rather, the butt of the satire lies within Pope’s contemporary social world, its mores, morals, and norms. The imitated conventions of elevated classical epics serve to highlight the triviality, or even the debasement, of the characters and

society that Pope is exposing. Belinda, the charming but superficial heroine, is nothing like the elevated Homeric heroes and heroines. The butt of the satire is definitely not that of the parodied generic model and its world.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the parodied genre of classical epic effectively sets a high standard against which the contemporary social world is judged as trivial and debased. Thus, although both Shakespeare's and Pope's parodies have the double structure of imitation and distortion, and both create a comical-critical effect, the butt of the satire of the two is each located in a different domain. Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 criticizes writers in the Petrarchan style for fostering "false compare" and for their inability to love a real, not idealized woman, and thus the butt of the satire is closely associated with the parodied genre, unlike in Pope where the butt of the satire is not related to the parodied model.

The distinction between parodies that criticize the parodied generic model and certain values and assumptions associated with it (as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130) and parodies that direct their criticism at cultural and social phenomena outside the imitated genre (as with Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"), is pertinent to parodies of six-word stories, as we shall shortly see.

### Serious and Comic Metagenre of Six-Word Stories

As most activity pertaining to six-word stories occurs on the Internet, the following examples are taken from a website devoted to posts and discussion of six-word stories: <https://www.reddit.com/r/sixword-stories/top/?t=all>. More specifically, they are taken from a collection of the top 500 stories in the year 2018 (indicated by the number of "Ups"—this website's version of "Likes"—they received from members of the community).<sup>13</sup>

In the above working definition of parody, I emphasized the humorous, comic tension that characterizes the double structure of imitation and distortion of the parodied model. We should not forget, however,



that comic tension can also be found in texts that are not parodic. Although the prototypical member of the genre of six-word stories (i.e., the Hemingway story) is in the realm of the tragic,<sup>14</sup> amusing six-word stories are not a rarity. Here are three randomly chosen amusing six-word stories:

- (5) I invented a new word: plagiarism.
- (6) I'm a prostitute, not your therapist!
- (7) Lincoln awoke, still drunk..... "Freed who?"

In example (5) the comic-satirical element is directed at the naivete, ignorance, and pretentiousness of the speaker; in (6) the butt of the satire seems to be the client of the prostitute, who mistakes her willingness to satisfy his sexual desires as the attentiveness of a therapist; and (7) invites us to substitute the accepted image of Lincoln as the heroic freer of slaves, with Lincoln as a confused drunk. All three examples, as well as many other amusing six-word stories, do not have any metageneric or parodic dimension.

One final clarification before we step into the realm of metagenre: while metagenre is closely related to the self-referential, these two concepts are not identical. Here, for example, is a six-word story with a clear self-referential element:

- (8) loop! Help, I'm trapped in a

By means of the abrupt, ungrammatical ending (a ... what?), the text invites us to go back to its beginning, thus creating a loop that foregrounds the structure of the text, its specific words, and how they can be integrated despite the ungrammatical ending. This self-referentiality of the text, however, should not be confused with metagenre: there is nothing in the text that directly or indirectly evokes the conventions of six-word stories. In order to illustrate the independence of self-referentiality from metagenre, let us imagine the following variation of (8):

- (8-a) loop! Help me, I'm trapped in a

This variation has the same self-referential structure, but it consists of *seven* words, and its self-referentiality has nothing to do with the meta-genre of *six*-word stories.

So far, we have looked at amusing six-word stories with no meta-genre element and a self-reflexive six-word story that cannot be qualified as metagenre. It is time now to read a few six-word stories that do qualify as metagenre, because they call attention to the specific conventions of the genre or to its prototypical member. Let us begin with a few examples of the six-word story metagenre without a comic effect and without the parodic double structure of imitation and distortion:

- (9) Redditor Tries [r/sixwordstories](#), Writes Headlines Instead
- (10) Attempting Haiku / Difficulty Magnified / Minimal Wordage
- (11) Happy six word story not marketable.
- (12) Challenge: write happier six word stories.
- (13) "Extra, Extra! Tiny Story Lacks Tragedy!"

Example (9) refers to someone in the sub-community of Reddit ("Redditor"), which is devoted to six-word stories ("r/sixwordstories"), and by pointing out that this Redditor shifted to write headlines, it invites the readers to think about the intriguing resemblance between the genre of six-word stories and the "genre" of headlines in a newspaper: apparently, in both cases very few words are used to evoke (or encapsulate) a whole story (or reported event). Thus, (9) is in fact a double metagenre: it makes us ponder on the conventions and formal constraints of two genres: six-word stories and newspaper headlines.

Example (10) also invites us to think about the conventions of two genres, this time regarding six-word stories and haiku. In these two genres authors work under strict quantitative constraints—to tell a story in only six words or to write a poem consisting of three lines of 5-7-5 syllables. While this example complies with the essential conventions of the two respective genres, it also emphasizes the difficulty of their production due to the double formal constraint ("Difficulty magnified").

The following three examples (11)-(13) refer to one conspicuous thematic characteristic of six-word stories, probably a result of the enormous influence of the tragic Hemingway story. These examples express discontent with authors' tendency to write tragic six-word stories. Examples (11) and (12) use a subtle and ironic tone to criticize this tendency, and example (13) invents a fictional, humorous scene in which the publication of a six-word story without a tragic effect becomes the headline of a special edition of a newspaper ("Extra, Extra!").

The humorous element in (13) brings us closer to the next category: six-word stories with a conspicuous metageneric element *and* a comic component. This category is very close to parodies of six-word stories but, as I will show, the two categories are not identical. Here are several six-word stories with a conspicuous metagenre element together with a comic touch:

(14) What are these? Stories for ants?

(15) FUCKYOUTHISISONWORD

(16) Mods are asleep, post seven words.

(17) Mods are asleep, post seven word stories.

Example (14) resembles in one respect the above examples of (11)-(13): it criticizes the genre as inadequate, either because of its propensity to tragedy as in (11)-(13) or because of its very tiny nature as in (14). The two rhetorical questions of (14) suggest that six-word stories are not truly stories; rather, their extreme brevity makes them befitting "for ants." While the text does not specifically mention the number six, it criticizes the most conspicuous convention of the genre, namely its extreme brevity. Example (14) has, in addition to the metagenre element, a comic effect, which arises, first and foremost, from the exaggerated image of the ants.<sup>15</sup>

Example (15) can be described as a tricky version of Magritte's "ceci n'est pas une pipe": it is printed as one word in capital letters, but in the continuous sequence of letters in fact six words are hidden: "fuck you this is one word." Thus, the text simultaneously and paradoxically

exemplifies and challenges the basic rule of the genre, namely to use exactly six words, playing on the convention of putting spaces between words in printed texts.<sup>16</sup> Examples (16) and (17) address too, with a wink, the essential rule of using exactly six words. The authors hint that moderators (“Mods”) of the forum are absent and therefore cannot enforce rules, followed by the suggestion to break them. Example (16), which consists of six words, invites readers to imagine another text of seven words that was posted, and example (17) is even trickier: it humorously demonstrates the moderators’ lack of alertness by posting a text, this very text, which consists of seven words.<sup>17</sup> In all last four examples readers are invited, even compelled, to think about essential characteristics of six-word stories, notably its commitment to use only and exactly six words (hence, a metagenic dimension), and in all of them there is a comic element that raises a smile. This comic dimension, however, is *not* a result of a typical parodic structure: except for using six words (or referring to six words in a seven-word text as in #17) and telling some kind of a story—thus signaling that they are affiliated with the genre—these texts do not have the typical parodic combination of imitation and distortion of conspicuous characteristics of the genre and/or its prototypical member.

### Parodies of Six-Word Stories

In the last few selected examples of humorous metagenre, the comic element was not related to the parodic double structure of imitation and distortion. In the following parodies of six-word stories, it is this relationship that is the source of the comic element. We can illustrate the relationship between metagenre and parody with an analogy, as a recipe for authors: take a metagenre element, combine it with the special comic mixture of imitation and deviation, and—voilà, you have a parody.

The most typical, easily identifiable, and prevalent parodies of six-word stories are those that imitate (and distort) a particular text, as opposed to texts that parody a general model. It is no surprise that the specific text chosen for the parodic manipulation is not just *any* six-word story, but the one most associated with the genre: namely, the Hemingway story. This offers further, indirect evidence of the important role played by prototypical members of genres in our perception of genres in general, and of the Hemingway story vis-à-vis six-word stories in particular.

Before analyzing a series of parodies that provide a playful version of the Hemingway story, let us examine two texts that humorously evoke it but nevertheless should not be treated as parodies:

(18) "Mine's still best" cried zombie Hemingway.

(19) Zombie Hemingway bellowed: "These aren't stories!"

Example (18) evokes the legend behind the creation of the Hemingway story, and example (19) may remind us of example (14) discussed above, because they both challenge the status of six-word stories as genuine stories. While (18) and (19) evoke the Hemingway story and both have a humorous aspect, they lack the double structure that is the hallmark of parody, i.e., imitation and distortion spiced with a comic tension.

The following parodies of six-word stories that offer a playful take on the Hemingway story are not only the most typical parodies of the genre but they are also the most prevalent: from the corpus that I used of around five hundred texts (see n13), about twenty are clear-cut cases of parodies based on the Hemingway story. While they make up only about four percent of the corpus, they are an identifiable and conspicuous group. Here are a few selected texts:

(20) For sale: This story format. Overused.

(21) For sale: baby shoes, contain feet.

(22) For sale: hipster music, never heard.

- (23) Guitar for sale. No strings attached.
- (24) Violin for sale, no strings attached.
- (3) For sale. BMW. Blinkers never used.
- (4) Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin.

All these examples use the opening two words of the Hemingway story (“For sale”), but play with the rest of the text. The fact that the majority of parodies of the Hemingway story use its opening phrase illustrate the “strategic” role of openings of texts, notably memorable ones, which become closely associated with them (e.g. *Anna Karenina*’s “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”).

Example (20)—“For sale: This story format. Overused.”—uses the famous two opening words (“For sale”) but substitutes the remaining four (“baby shoes, never worn”). The explicit reference to the genre’s format in (20) foregrounds the metageneric element. Note, however, that this explicit reference is not part of a scholarly discussion (aimed at describing and interpreting the genre) but, rather, works in the service of artistic goals: to create a humorous effect and to convey a critical comment on the parodied genre. The author suggests that there is an inflation of six-word stories (“Overused”), that too many of them are written, and most of them have very little literary value. In that respect, this parody recalls the critical element in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130, directed at poets’ overuse of hyperbolic similes.

The next example (21) is unique not only because it uses four out of the original six words, but also because the two last words (“contain feet”) create a grotesque, gruesome, and even frightening image. Despite such effects, it can be argued that the text still belongs to the realm of the comic, perhaps to the black humor section, thanks to its parodic structure. Example (22)—“For sale: hipster music, never heard.”—plays on a much lighter cord. Note that its criticism is directed not at practitioners of the genre of six-word stories but, rather, at a specific kind of artist and social milieu (“hipster music”). Here, again, we can see the usefulness of the distinction between the different kinds of crit-

icism that can be found in parodies: those that satirize elements associated with the parodied genre and more specifically the authors who practice these genres (e.g. Shakespeare's Sonnet 130; example #20), and those that satirize targets outside the parodied genre (e.g. Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"; example #22). The next two examples, (23) and (24), are very similar (the only difference is the specific string instrument), and their comic effect arises not only from the parodic structure but also from the pun of "no strings attached."

The next two examples, which were mentioned earlier (3)—"For sale. BMW. Blinkers never used." and (4) "Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin."—also offer a playful version on the selling of an item. Example (3) substitutes the simple and tragic content of shoes in the original story (presumably of a dead baby) with the selling of a luxurious car. On one level, we are invited to contemplate the contrast between the basic, intimate item offered for sale in the Hemingway story and the prestigious, luxury car in this parody. In addition, the unexpected detail used in the BMW ad ("Blinkers never used") may suggest not only that the car is brand new but also, perhaps inadvertently, implies that the car was involved in a serious accident probably caused by not using the blinkers. Despite the story's potentially sad implications (e.g. the driver was badly injured), the overall effect is humorous—again perhaps to be included in the black humour section—first and foremost because of the text's parodic structure. Another, less dramatic and more humorous reading of (3) is that it refers to a prejudice fairly common in Germany about drivers of BMWs: they always drive on the left lane (fast lane) and therefore never use (or know how to use) the blinkers.

Example (4)—"Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin."—can be described as a mock-epic that explores the comic tension between "mighty" and "trivial" things (to use Pope's terms). It opens with the misspelled first two words of the Hemingway story, but in this pretend-to-be ad, instead of a tragic story about the untimely death of a baby, we meet a swindler who tries to sell a defective typewriter. The humor in this example is not necessarily that of criticising the specific conventions of the genre of six-word stories. Rather, the typos in the ad suggest that

sometimes we cannot control technological tools that produce unintended mistakes, while also humorously exposing the seller as incompetent as he has failed to notice that the typed words betray the typewriter's defects. Another reading may suggest that words in the ad are not misspelled so much as offer a play on the abbreviated words (omitting vowels) used in ads to save space and money, which also functions doubly here to mock the seller's misguided attempt.

The salient opening phrase of the Hemingway story usually appears verbatim in most of its parodies, but there are those that use either the next pair of words ("baby shoes") or the final pair ("never worn" or a close paraphrase of it—"never used") to signal their status as parodies. Here are several examples:

(25) Clarification: Baby shoes were wrong color.

(26) Woo! Bought some cheap baby shoes!

(27) Blue and white facepaint, never used.

Example (25)—"Clarification: Baby shoes were wrong color."—presents itself as an addendum to the Hemingway story, undermining its tragic reading by offering an alternative, mundane explanation for the selling of the shoes. As opposed to the tragic reading that most readers opt for with the Hemingway story (i.e., the baby shoes are being sold because of the death of the baby), (25) suggests a different, trivial explanation: the shoes are offered for sale simply because they were the wrong color. This alternative explanation comically exposes the common tragic reading of the Hemingway story as just one possible reading, perhaps as too literary or even artificial. Thus, the satirical element of this parody may be directed at the readers of six-word stories who construe the missing element of a story (i.e., the hidden part of the iceberg) without considering alternative, perhaps even more plausible, interpretations.<sup>18</sup>

Example (26) also offers a materialistic version of the original. This time, instead of an addendum to the original ad, the text quotes what someone had presumably said after buying the advertised shoes. The joy of the buyer at getting a good deal stands in sharp contrast to the



tragic content of the original story and exposes the buyer as someone who is unable or unwilling to understand the tragic circumstances behind the original ad. Hence, the satire in this example is probably directed at insensitive readers of the original ad, or insensitive people in general and not at the genre and its practitioners.

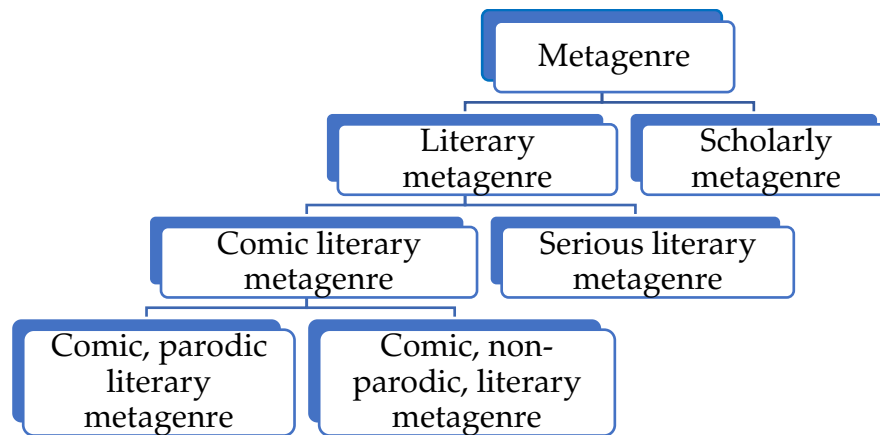
Example (27) can be read as a tragic story: a group of people (say, a tribe) that has the custom of painting their faces before going into battle, was surprisingly and viciously attacked and annihilated before they had a chance to use their warpaint. It can be argued, however, that, alongside this sad interpretation, the story has a comic element, thanks to the parodic use of the phrase “never used” that echoes Hemingway’s “never worn.” Admittedly, this is not a very typical nor a very funny parody of the Hemingway story. If we take into account the fact that (27) was posted in 2014, another plausible reading of the story is that it alludes to the unsuccessful Scottish Independence referendum of September 2014.

Just like in many parodies of other genres, the above parodies of six-word stories present a close imitation of conspicuous aspects of the generic model, in being embodied in its prototypical member, together with a comic, tongue-in-cheek, manipulation of that model. Note that all the above parodies of the genre of six-word stories adhere to this genre’s two essential rules: they use exactly six words, and they tell a story. In most of them we can also find several additional important conventions of six-word stories, such as the tip of the iceberg principle, the punch-line structure, and a rhythmic, poetic-like parsing of the sequence of six words.

### Concluding Remarks

Before offering concluding remarks based on the analysis of the examples, I present below a schematic summary of the different versions of serious, comic, and parodic manifestations of the general category of metagenre. Note that the following schematic distinctions do not pre-

sent separate, either-or categories; rather, they usually point out continuous, gradated distinctions reflecting categories that have a specific *dominant* element (e.g. literary against scholarly; comic against serious, etc.):



The umbrella term of metagenre refers to texts that call attention to generic conventions or prototypical members of a genre. This general category can be manifested in literary texts that aim at achieving artistic goals, or in scholarly texts (like the present article) that aim at a systematic description, interpretation, and possibly also explanation of genres. The literary metagenre can be divided into comic and serious versions. The comic version can be manifested in parodies, in which the comic incongruity is associated with the playful tension between imitated and distorted elements, and in non-parodic versions in which the comic dimension arises from incongruous elements not related to the parodic double structure. Thus, every parody of six-word stories has a metagenre element and a comic element; but not every metagenre, not even a comic one, is a parody, as the above examples (14)-(17) have shown.

Parodies of six-word stories resemble parodies of other genres in many respects. One shared aspect, for example, is the diversity of the targets of criticism: in some parodies, the parodic double structure is at the service of criticizing the parodied genre and its world (i.e., its writers, readers, and their values), but in others the parody is at the service of criticizing phenomena external to the parodied genre. Yet there is one interesting aspect in which parodies of six-word stories seem to

differ from parodies of other genres. Most readers of parodies of other genres (except of highly subtle parodies) can usually identify them *as* parodies, even if they do not have a first-hand acquaintance with the parodied genre. This ease of identification emerges from the exaggerated, hyperbolic, and incongruous elements in the parodic text. Most readers of parodies of six-word stories, however, need to have a first-hand acquaintance with the genre of six-word stories and its prototypical member if they are to identify the texts *as* parodies.

This point can be presented from another angle: readers of parodies of other genres can guess how the parodied original texts might have appeared even if they have never read one: e.g. readers of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 can construe a hypothetical Petrarchan love poem just from reading Shakespeare's poem; readers of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* can guess how a chivalric romance looks like without having read one; and readers of *Northanger Abbey* can have a pretty good idea about the parodied Gothic fiction just from reading Austen's novel. In reading parodies of the Hemingway story, by contrast, readers cannot guess the Hemingway story—or even know it existed—just from these parodies. In order to identify at least some parodies of six-word stories *as* parodies, and to fully enjoy their wit and humor, readers must be acquainted with the genre and its prototypical member. Without such prior knowledge, most parodies of six-word stories may look like short jokes or puns from which it is practically impossible to infer the parodied generic model. When we take this postulation into account, it becomes clear that authors of parodies of six-word stories assume, and rightly so, that their readers are familiar with the genre and its prototypical member. Thus, parodies of six-word stories offer further indirect evidence of the diversity and productivity of this peculiar mini-genre as well as of its popularity.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>To facilitate following the discussed examples, they will be numbered according to their order of appearance in the article.

<sup>2</sup>The six-word memoirs of the *Smith Magazine*, a category very close to six-word stories, has thousands of texts (see: <http://www.smithmag.net/sixword-book/about/>); and the Reddit sub-community devoted to six-word stories sends its members a six-word story every day (see: <https://www.reddit.com/r/sixword-stories/>).

<sup>3</sup>See O'Toole and Wright for a systematic discussion of different precursors of this famous story and a persuasive refutation of the urban legend that attributed it to Hemingway (perpetuated mostly by Miller). These two articles also identified the real source of the story in a play by De Groot, *Papa: A Play Based on the Legendary Lives of Ernest Hemingway* (1989). However, for convenience sake, I too refer to it here as the Hemingway story.

<sup>4</sup>A new genre emerges when writers start to imitate a text that serves as a model, just like the Hemingway story in the new genre of six-word stories (for the emergence of a new genre, see Fishelov, "The Birth of a Genre").

<sup>5</sup>In my discussion I rely on a basic meaning of a narrative element: a represented action that involves "a change of fortune" (see, for example, Aristotle 1451a) or a change or evolvment from one situation to a significantly different situation.

<sup>6</sup>The metaphor of the tip of the iceberg was used by Hemingway himself in discussing prose writing (*Death in the Afternoon* 227). The stated tip of the iceberg is in many cases understood as the result in a causal chain of events. Formulating the result while omitting possible causes is consistent with the process of summarizing stories, in which we tend to keep the result, perceived as the important part of a story, and omit its causes (see Shen). As far as poetic economy is concerned, the genre provides, in Aristotelean terms, an end (or a middle and end), and the reader supplies the beginning to make the story whole, or else the text provides the separate links of the chain and the reader adds the causal relation between the links to make it a whole story, like the above-mentioned example (2): "Best friends. Some beers. New lovers."

<sup>7</sup>For a detailed discussion of the characteristics of the genre of six-word stories, see Fishelov, "The Poetics of Six-Word Stories." Some, but not all of these characteristics are shared by texts of microfiction (for the latter, see Nelles).

<sup>8</sup>Niederhoff defines metagenre as "a quality or dimension of a literary text: the way the text reflects on the genre it belongs to" (Niederhoff 1), while the definition offered here is broader: it applies also to scholarly discussions of genres and does

not necessarily require a self-reflective element in the text itself. My definition also calls attention to prototypical members of a genre, a concept that can bridge the gap between generic categories and individual literary texts.

<sup>9</sup>For an emphasis on the discrepancy between the two textual levels of parody, see Tynianov 31. Whereas according to Tynianov parody's discrepancy is not necessarily comic, and hence parody of comedy can be a tragedy, my working definition of parody requires a comic tension between the two levels.

<sup>10</sup>For the multifaceted nature of parody, see the *Connotations* Symposium on "Sympathetic Parody": <https://www.connotations.de/special-issue/sympathetic-parody/>

<sup>11</sup>Interesting examples of low burlesque in late nineteenth-century English theatre were presented during the symposium by Dorothea Flothow in her talk on "Victorian Theatrical Burlesque as a Comment on Theatrical Genres and Conventions."

<sup>12</sup>For a useful distinction between parody as the manipulation of texts, and satire as the criticism of social reality, and for a study of whether the criticized social norms are part of the parodied text, see Ben-Porat; and Hutcheon 43-49.

<sup>13</sup>[https://www.reddit.com/r/sixwordstories/comments/9erwj1/top\\_500\\_six-word\\_stories\\_2018/](https://www.reddit.com/r/sixwordstories/comments/9erwj1/top_500_six-word_stories_2018/)

<sup>14</sup>For a detailed, sensitive reading of the Hemingway story as "a whole tragic world encircled by silence," see Gilead 120.

<sup>15</sup>Example (14) also has an intertextual element that is not related to six-word stories. For readers attuned to popular culture, it alludes to "What is this, a center for ants?" a memorable quote from the 2001 comedy film *Zoolander*. In the film the main character, Derek Zoolander (played by Ben Stiller), says the line in anger after confusing a scale model of his charity project "Derek Zoolander Center for Kids Who Can't Read Good" with the actual building itself.

<sup>16</sup>The *scriptio continua*, which is used here in a playful manner, was the norm of written classical texts for centuries until it was gradually replaced with texts that parse words, a practice that began with Anglo-Saxon Bibles and Gospels in the seventh century.

<sup>17</sup>Violating the essential rule of using only six words is very rare in collections of six-word stories. Authors will play with different linguistic norms (e.g. use short forms like "it's" instead of the normative "it is") in seeking to avoid breaking this rule.

<sup>18</sup>For the important role played by readers' inferences in interpreting very short stories and six-word stories—what is sometimes called gap-filling (Perry and Sternberg)—see Hurley and Trimarco; Irving; and Jhan.

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