

Six-Word Narratives and Hybrid Genres in Digital Contexts: A Response to David Fishelov

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Abstract

This short essay offers a reflection on six-word stories. In response to David Fishelov’s “Parodies of Six-Word Stories: A Comic Literary Metagenre,” this paper aims to complement Fishelov’s study by recontextualizing two of his examples. This reframing of the stories into their original online contexts reveals that they are integral parts of larger discourses. In this light, these *stories* could be considered posts in a thread, or, in terms of discourse analysis, these are conversational turns. It is argued that as texts within larger texts these examples belong to a digital hybrid genre. By categorising these posts in this way, the analysis is better positioned to address the issue mentioned by Fishelov, namely that many of the six-word *stories* found in the original study contained some narrative elements but would not be considered *stories* by most readers.

David Fishelov presents an intriguing example of a metagenre within the genre of six-word stories, which themselves can be seen as a subgenre of flash fiction. The parodies of the well-known six-word story (“For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.”) are rightly described as *metagenre*, which Fishelov defines as “texts that call attention to the conventions of a specific genre or its prototypical members” (Fishelov 36). While the categorization

and discussion of literary parodies are sound, I wish to expand on the study by considering more closely the context of publication of these miniature narratives which have been decontextualised by Fishelov.

As Fishelov notes, the original source of the six-word stories of his study is a website with comments and likes: <https://www.reddit.com/r/sixword-stories/top/?t=all>. For his analysis, Fishelov has extracted these six-word texts from their original context in order to focus on them as a genre and a parodic metagenre. I would argue that the omitted co-text (that is, the surrounding text) provides additional context necessary to understand how these mini-narratives perform social functions as part of larger discourses. That is, like other digital writings, these texts form hybrid genres that follow the generic rules of more than one genre (see Page and Thomas; Trimarco).

Fishelov accurately describes the six-word narrative genre as containing a sequence of actions ending in a punchline. These narratives, however, can also be seen as part of a larger text, acting as the initial posts in an online discussion, where other participants respond with “likes” and/or their own posts. To illustrate the richness of these as part of a hybrid genre found in online discourse, I will consider two examples from Fishelov’s study in what follows.

One of the parodied six-word stories chosen by Fishelov opens the string of a larger discourse as given below. The number in brackets refers to the number of likes each post has received. As a story, the initial post received 344 votes (or likes) at the time of writing this response. Since some of the posts are lengthy and others could still be added, for convenience of this analysis I will not include all the posts. I have also broken down this conversational thread in order to consider different features of this full text.

For sale: This story format. Overused.

For sale: Clever meta post. Pointless. (98)

Double reverse, ironically meta post. “Brilliant.” (19)

Redditors now looking for original posts. (21)

Interestingly, each of these three comments refers to the six-word story as a “post” and not a story, with two of the comments noting the parody by referring to the initial post as a meta-post. The genre of online conversations is clearly being acknowledged by the format and the choice of words, such as *post*.

The extent to which these are stories, narratives, or whether they belong to another genre is also noted in Fishelov’s analysis: “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)” (36). In a note, Fishelov defines narrative as “a represented action that involves ‘a change of fortune’ [...] or a change or evolvment from one situation to a significantly different situation” (52n5). While Fishelov does not differentiate *narrative* from *story*, this nevertheless rightly suggests that, while all stories are narratives, not all narratives are stories. In the example above, the *overused* is a represented action, which by definition suggests change in a situation over time. Although narrative elements are present, the missing narrative elements, such as background, plot and resolution, whether expressed or implied, make it difficult for many readers to consider the example a *story*.

The view about these posts not being *stories* is addressed in the next comment in the thread:

Clever. But not a story. Why is format so important in a six word story? There are only a certain number of format combinations with the brevity of the word limit. Content > format. And your content falls flat, is gimmicky, and albeit ironic, still hypocritical. (15)

This is followed by a few more lengthy comments by the same author about whether most of these are stories, including the following:

[...] Most “stories” in this subreddit are not stories either. They are ideas at best and quite often just sentences and phrases.

[...] There was a beauty to Hemingway's original. It takes time, patience and hundreds of iterations to capture that. While I appreciate the contributions here, I wish contributors put a bit more effort into it.

This thread of comments further illustrates the hybrid genre of online conversation. Short utterances appear as if they were turns in a conversation, alongside a lengthy critical discourse of the type found in written language, that is, without the interruptions of other conversation participants. Characteristic of other online genres, such as chatrooms, this last response is directed at the author of the initial post while at the same time communicating with the larger Reddit audience. We see this in the use of "your" and in how the response refers to other six-word stories in this section of Reddit, including the original story, attributed to Hemingway.

With the exception of the last example, most comments are in six words themselves and are intended to be witty replies. Such posts and the number of likes that they have received draw further attention to the interactive nature of a thread of online communication and the expectation of how readers might react. These social features of online communication and their output of digital texts have been described as involving self-representation and expressions of identity (cf. Page and Thomas; Barton and Lee; Jovanovic). It could be said that these short postings express creativity and wit that are both self-representative and part of the story-writers' group identity. The longer posting could be treated as a critical response that reveals its individual author's self-representation by taking on the role of critic, while positioning themselves outside of the group identity through the criticisms and not following the six-word format.

Another six-word story from Fishelov's article also raises questions about the story genre itself as much as its online context. This story, as Fishelov rightly notes, is not part of the metagenre of parodying six-word short stories. For purposes of illustration, it appears with three of the comments that followed it, again with the number of likes in brackets.

I invented a new word: plagiarism.

I like that it works here, without having some depressing subtext like every other story. (27)

Well whaddaya know, you sure did! (5)

[In response to the above comment] Haha! I plagerized [sic] the wrong person (5)
[Posted by the same person who wrote the original six-word story.]

The initial post or *story* first appeared in another section of Reddit with the label of “Jokes.” Indeed, this post reads as if it were a one-line joke. The only action in this narrative is the invention of a new word, with the punch-line being that the word is about the wrongful borrowing of other people’s words. The action would be meaningless to the narrative if the invention were not of the word *plagiarism*. This example has a narrative element but would not be categorised as a *story*. However, in this case we could claim that the text belongs to the joke genre as well as belonging to the six-word narrative genre and the online conversation genre.

The comments that follow the initial posting refer directly to that posting as if they were turns in a conversation with the writer of the original post responding to another’s post. At the same time, as shown with earlier examples, these are written conversations that make clear references to their online contexts, where other six-word stories have been posted. The first comment to the initial posting is also interesting in terms of providing a brief critique of this narrative in the context of the other six-word postings. The expressions of opinions, humour and overall creativity in these posts could, as pointed out above, be seen in the framework of self-representation and identity.

Page and Thomas note that, “At the start of the twenty-first century, much has changed both in the kinds of narratives that are now available in digital media and in the approaches taken to analyse them” (1). Fishelov has provided us with an analysis of texts within the texts, examining the six-word texts as stories, with a focus on those which are parodies. I have extended Fishelov’s study by acknowledging the online contexts of these texts, revealing that they are part of a hybrid genre, an online discourse

with potentially thousands of participants. This online hybrid genre blends features of spoken interactive conversation with written genres. As they are published online, these six-word narratives belong to another hybrid genre, which might be called *digital six-word narratives*. These are mini narratives that appear as postings, alongside comments and likes, using the affordances of online communication. In this context, they can be treated as *narratives* as opposed to *stories*. As shown in this essay, Fishelov and some of the participants in these online conversations directly and indirectly question the *story* classification themselves.

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