

Six-Word Stories as Autonomous Literary Works in Digital Contexts: An Answer to Paola Trimarco

DAVID FISHELOV

Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 32 (2023): 68-79.

DOI: [10.25623/conn032-fishelov-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn032-fishelov-1)

For further contributions to the debate on “Parodies of Six-Word Stories: A Comic Literary Metagenre,” see <http://www.connotations.de/debate/parodies-of-six-word-stories>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de.

Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by the [Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

Abstract

In my answer to Paola Trimarco’s thoughtful response to my essay on parodies of six-word stories, I will take up two important issues raised by her. Trimarco claims that, while many six-word stories published online may have a (minimal) narrative element, they should not be categorized as stories. To address this issue, I point out several meanings associated with the term *story* and argue that it is useful to adopt a flexible and inclusive approach for its application. To demonstrate the usefulness of an inclusive approach to the definition of a story, I briefly discuss a specific six-word story that, according to Trimarco, should not be categorized as such. The second issue is that of Trimarco’s suggestion to regard six-word stories published online as turns in an ongoing conversation among members of Internet communities, as posts in a dynamic thread of posts and comments, rather than as autonomous literary works. To address this issue, I broaden the perspective and contend that many literary texts, not only online six-word stories, have close relationships with their co-texts (e.g. a sonnet in a volume of sonnets). That online six-word stories may have close relationships with their co-texts (e.g. in the form of comments) should not, however, undermine their status as autonomous literary works, a title that they undoubtedly deserve.

Paola Trimarco’s thoughtful response to my essay on parodies of six-word stories raises two important issues, and I am grateful for the opportunity to address them in this rejoinder. The first issue is that of the distinction between a text with a minimal narrative element and the category of a true

story. The second issue is that of the approach to six-word stories published online as posts in a thread of posts rather than as autonomous literary works.

Regarding the narratological distinction between a (minimal) narrative element and the category of a (true) story, Trimarco argues that, while many online six-word stories may have a narrative element, they should nonetheless not be categorized as stories. Rather, she suggests using a different terminology and calls online six-word stories “*digital six-word narratives*” (16). In my study of six-word stories, I adopted the basic definition of the narrative element as a representation of an action, defining the latter term as “a change or evolvement from one situation to a significantly other situation” (Fishelov, “Poetics” 44n7; Fishelov, “Parodies” 52n5). This definition of action, inspired by Aristotle, was primarily introduced to distinguish between six-word stories with their basic commitment to tell a story and texts that are not committed to that end but, instead, aim at achieving other goals: e.g. to make a general statement, formulate a memorable lesson, or offer a rich metaphor. A narrative element may occur in the latter kinds of texts (e.g. “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise”—*Proverbs* 6:6), but it will be subordinated to other goals (e.g. teaching a moral) rather than to telling a story worth telling.

Before I discuss whether a specific online six-word story with a narrative element can be categorized as a story, let me point out a few meanings associated with the term *story*. Needless to say, I do not offer here a comprehensive narratological discussion but, more precisely, different explications of the term. There may be disagreement among narratologists about the minimal requirement for a text to be considered a story, with some believing that two events connected chronologically are enough, while others argue that chronology alone is not sufficient and we should postulate a causal connection. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has convincingly argued that chronology is usually sufficient because readers often add (assumed) causal connections even when only the chronology is stated. Thus, for example, the joke in the following account of Milton’s life relies on such an addition: “Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, then his wife died, and then he wrote *Paradise Regained*” (Rimmon-Kenan 17).

Admittedly, the definition of a narrative element used in my study of six-word stories—a representation of an action consisting of a change or evolvment from one situation to a significantly other situation—is quite minimal, but it is by no means weaker than a representation of events connected chronologically with an implied causal connection, as described by Rimmon-Kenan. The crucial point is that even a minimal narrative element—whether achieved through the representation of events connected chronologically with an implied causal connection or through the representation of an action—is distinguishable from a representation of a basically static state of affairs. Thus, there is a very important difference between the dynamic, represented action of “Look, the sun is setting in the west” and a descriptive static statement like “The sun is just above us in the sky”; or a statement that describes a repetitive action, perceived also as a static state of affairs: “The sun sets every evening in the west.”

There is, of course, another way to construe a story that goes beyond the above-mentioned ways for creating a minimal narrative element: i.e. to create a developed narrative structure consisting of a problem, a complication, and a resolution. This developed narrative structure usually also offers a rewarding reading experience, associated with effects like anticipation, apprehension, hope, and relief. Theoretically, we can postulate that every story, including six-word stories, should have a developed narrative structure (problem-complication-resolution). Trimarco seems to suggest such a postulation when she argues that, in order to qualify for the category of a story, we need, in addition to a narrative element, “background, plot and resolution” (13). While these three terms are not further defined by Trimarco, it is clear that, if we adopt them as prerequisites, we will set a very high threshold for entering the club of stories: then most, if not all, six-word stories will be banished from the realm of stories. Clearly, the formal restriction of telling a story in only six words poses a serious impediment to attempts to unfold a fully-fledged, developed narrative structure with background, plot, and resolution. Instead, I suggest adopting a more flexible and inclusive approach.

At the heart of this inclusive approach lies the assumption mentioned earlier: namely, that there is an important distinction between the representation of a basically dynamic kind of reality and a basically static kind

of reality. If the former, then it qualifies a story; if the latter, then it should not be considered as a story. Note that this flexible, inclusive approach is by no means all-inclusive; it still leaves an enormous number of texts out. When we, on the one hand, adopt a minimalist definition of the term story, it becomes clear that a text like “a flea sucks the blood of mammals, including humans” cannot, and should not, be qualified as a story because it is a general statement aimed at describing a static characteristic of a specific species. On the other hand, a text like “It [the flea] sucked me first, and now sucks thee, / And in this flea our two bloods mingled be” (John Donne, “The Flea”) should qualify as a story (in addition to being a poem) because it represents a dynamic reality. Furthermore, in addition to telling us about an action in the past (“It sucked me”), Donne’s poem also represents a dynamic element in the speech situation: i.e. things are happening while the speaker is speaking (“and now sucks thee”).

While Trimarco claims that it is “difficult for many readers” to categorize many online six-word stories as stories (13), she does not provide empirical evidence to support her claim. Based on my personal experience of reading, teaching, and analyzing six-word stories, I can concede that there are certain six-word stories that raise the question of whether they should indeed be categorized as such: e.g. “The smallest coffins are the heaviest.”¹ Note that even this text, which is formulated as a general statement, evokes the dynamic scenario of lifting coffins and evaluating the physical and psychological difficulties involved (Fishelov, “Poetics” 37). Aside from such borderline cases, however, most six-word stories seem to be unmistakably stories, at least in the minimal sense of the term.

When we consider the different, minimal, requirements for a text to be considered a story, especially that of a causal connection between two events, we should bear in mind one interesting feature of six-word stories: the fact that not all the events in the story are explicitly stated, a feature that can be described as “the tip of the iceberg principle” (Fishelov, “Poetics” 37-38, and “Parodies” 36, 48, 52n6). In the prototypical exemplum of a six-word story (wrongly) attributed to Hemingway, for example, the fact that the parents have posted the baby shoes “For sale” ad because their baby has died is nowhere stated in the text. Rather, it is assumed by the readers, who try to provide context, a background, and a reason for the published

ad, perceived as the result of a cause-and-effect string of events. This logic is equally evident when other, more mundane explanations are offered for the publication of this ad (e.g. the parents are selling the shoes because they have received two identical pairs as gifts). The fact that a vital part of the story in six-word stories is not present in the text but is, instead, provided by its active readers, enables writers of six-word stories to achieve interesting and rich effects even when the story has only a minimal narrative element.

To illustrate her argument that many six-word stories should not be categorized as stories, Trimarco cites the six-word story "I invented a new word: plagiarism." According to Trimarco, this text "belongs to the joke genre as well as belonging to the six-word narrative genre and to the online conversation genre," but "would not be categorized as a *story*" (15). Before explaining why this text merits the title of a story, let me briefly discuss its categorization by Trimarco as a joke. We can definitely embrace this categorization: the text is funny and has a conspicuous punch-line (or, more accurately, punch-word) structure, which is a clear hallmark of jokes. Such a categorization, however, does not invalidate the possibility of seeing it as a six-word story. When we describe a short story as a comic (rather than, say, tragic) short story, we still see it as a short story; the term "comic" merely reveals what sort of a short story it is. In a similar way, we can categorize six-word stories according to different thematic, rhetorical, or affective qualities, and they will still be perceived as six-word stories. One website of six-word stories² even offers the possibility of browsing through its corpus of works by means of categories like "funny," "sad," and "surprise." Thus, while the above-noted "I invented" six-word story can be categorized as a joke, there is no reason why we should not also describe it as a funny, witty, joke-like six-word story.

I would like to argue that the "I invented" six-word story deserves the title of a story not only because it contains a minimal narrative element but because it illustrates certain elements associated with the developed narrative structure of "background, plot and resolution." When we read the text, we may very well imagine how the speaker was sitting at his desk, holding a notebook and a pen (or perhaps under a tree or in a pub). While the story does not suggest any such specific background, it is plausible that, in the

process of making sense, we can imagine such background information. The specifics of such a background will, of course, depend on the specific imagination of each reader. We can and even are encouraged to imagine that the speaker was quite busy trying to invent a new word, and he was hence confronting a problem or a challenge. After all, the invention of a new word requires conscious mental effort, unlike eating or breathing. After the speaker has searched his or her mind, and maybe also consulted some (perhaps very poor and incomplete) dictionaries, the eureka-like moment comes, which the speaker is so happy and proud to share with us: "I invented a new word: plagiarism." This six-word story can even be described as a miniature version of an adventure or a quest story in which, instead of a physical challenge, the hero faces a mental challenge: namely, the invention of a new word. The resolution of the challenge is, needless to say, an ironic one because the "invented" word is not only part and parcel of the existing dictionary but also refers to the unauthorized borrowing of words, and thus the punchline has an ironic double-edge and exposes the naivete and ignorance of the speaker/writer.

One may argue that the relatively rich reading that I have just offered, full of embellished details, is the fruit of my own wild imagination. True, the added details are not explicitly written in the text, and I have probably overdramatized some details; but there are good reasons to believe that the story not only enables but also encourages the reader to imagine at least some similar details based on a common understanding of what it means to invent a new word (e.g. that the task presents quite a challenge). Moreover, the fact that some details of the above-offered reading are not explicitly stated in the text is not, in and of itself, an argument against its validity. After all, as we have seen, in many cases of six-word stories an important part of the story is not explicitly stated but is, rather, deduced, implied, or hypothesized by its active readers ("the tip of the iceberg principle"). Thus, even if we play down some of my formulations (e.g. delete "a eureka-like moment"), we can still argue that the above-offered reading is anchored in a text that contains not only a minimal narrative element but even some elements of a developed narrative structure: a challenge or a problem and its (ironic) resolution.

In addition to the narratological issue of categorizing texts as stories, Trimarco calls attention to the fact that six-word stories on websites of specific communities on the Internet are “surrounded” by comments and by other six-word stories. She suggests that an online six-word story should be treated as a post or part of a thread of posts rather than as an autonomous literary work. This particular perspective can help address issues not considered by an aesthetically oriented approach to these stories: it can apply to them concepts borrowed from discourse analysis (e.g. the story as a turn in a conversation) and shed light on the fact that these stories-posts function for their writers as “self-representation and expression of identity” (Trimarco 14). We can agree that such a perspective may indeed contribute to the study of six-word stories on the Internet, especially to our understanding of the platform on which they are published and the relationships between the stories and their response comments. Sometimes, for example, the comments that follow stories and the give-and-take among members of the Internet community can help us to better understand these stories (I myself have profited from such comments more than once).

I would nonetheless like to argue that this added perspective does not undermine or weaken the validity of discussing online six-word stories as autonomous literary works. There may even be something delimiting and misleading about treating such a story as merely the initial post in a thread of posts. It should be noted that, when members of the relevant website community comment on an online six-word story—by writing a variation, parody, or offering an interpretative comment—they are in fact treating it as an autonomous literary work. Furthermore, six-word stories posted originally as part of a dynamic thread in the Internet subcommunity of Reddit (from which I initially took my examples and to which Trimarco refers) were later “severed” from their original context and published under the title of the “Top 500 six-word stories (2018).” This was carried out not by an outside academic (like myself) but by a member of the community.³ In collecting and publishing this anthology, members of the online community were doing what every reader of online six-word stories is doing: namely, reading and (hopefully) enjoying a specific six-word story as a relatively autonomous literary work.

When discussing the autonomy of online six-word stories, it can be useful to broaden our perspective and address the issue of the autonomy of other kinds of literary texts. While the question of the autonomy of a literary text is pertinent to online six-word stories, it is also relevant, perhaps with different emphases, to almost every literary text published on the more traditional platforms: Can we “sever” a chapter from a novel and read it as if it were an autonomous unit because it contains a systematic philosophical argument or an elaborated allegory that can be read separately (e.g. “The Great Inquisitor” from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*; “Before the Gate of the Law” from Kafka’s *The Trial*); can we read, understand, and discuss as autonomous literary text a sonnet that is part of “a crown of sonnets” (e.g. Lady Mary Wroth’s “A Crown of Sonnets Dedicated to Love”); can we read a sonnet that is part of a volume of sonnets (e.g. Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* or Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*) as an autonomous text without addressing the neighbouring sonnets in the volume; can we read a short story taken from a volume of short stories without addressing the neighbouring stories, especially when the stories are connected thematically (e.g. Joyce’s *Dubliners*); and can we read and appreciate separately a novel that is part of a trilogy or even of a larger, more ambitious literary project (e.g. an individual novel by Balzac that is part of *The Human Comedy*; an individual novel by Proust that is part of *In Search of Lost Time*)?

All these questions have received in practice, from readers, critics, and editors of anthologies, the answer “yes.” This positive answer highlights the basically pragmatic, not ontological, nature of the issue. In other words, the question is not whether a text (be it a sonnet, a short story, or a six-word story) is “really” autonomous; instead, the question is what we gain and what we lose by reading it as an autonomous literary work and by ignoring, at least to some extent, its relationships with its neighbouring texts. In addition to the pragmatic issue, there may also be a moral dimension involved: do we wrong the author by reading the text of an online six-word story as an autonomous literary work? I would like to argue that, both pragmatically and morally, there are good reasons to read an online six-word story as an autonomous literary work. Regarding the pragmatic aspect, by focusing on the story itself rather than on its relationships with its co-texts, we usually gain an emotional, cognitive, and aesthetic experience,

especially when the story is a good one; and, regarding the moral aspect, by treating the six-word story as an autonomous literary work, we in fact honour the author's creative efforts and poetic talent.

Let us return for a moment to the above series of questions about the relative autonomy of certain literary texts and compare them with the relative autonomy of online six-word stories. An online six-word story does not resemble a sonnet within "a crown of sonnets," where the literary form invites (but, still, does not necessitate) reading the sequence of fifteen semi-autonomous texts as one overarching literary work. Reading an online six-word story as an autonomous literary work also does not resemble the "severing" of a chapter from a novel in which it was originally published. Regarding the issue of relative autonomy, I believe that an online six-word story can be likened, from the above list of examples, to a sonnet in an annotated volume of sonnets or a short story in an annotated volume of thematically connected short stories. Aside from some relatively rare cases, we can read, understand, and enjoy a specific sonnet, short story, or six-word story without necessarily examining its relationship with its co-texts.

Reading a sonnet or a short story in light of its relationships with other sonnets or stories in the volume in which they were originally published may enrich our reading of the specific text, just like with online six-word stories. Sometimes, however, it will be more pertinent and rewarding to read a specific text in relation to texts that are not part of its immediate co-textual and contextual environment. A parody, for example, creates a significant intertextual relationship with the parodied text, but the latter is usually not part of the immediate co-textual environment of the parody and belongs to a writer from the past. Thus, we may gain some insights into parodies of six-word stories by reading the comments that followed them; an even more significant insight, however, will be gained by reading them in light of the six-word story that they are parodying, notably the prototypical Hemingway story, which is usually not part of the specific thread in which the parody was published.

True, there are cases in which there is a very strong connection between neighbouring six-word stories, especially when one is posted as a comment on the other. This is true for the following two examples, taken from a website devoted to six-word stories,⁴ where the second example was posted as

a comment on the first (see Fishelov, "Poetics" 41). The first story reads, "Two lovers. One parachute. No survivor" (Ben Matthews), which was followed by the comment: "You take it, no you. Splat" (Hiatus). This pair of stories illustrates not only the humour of commentators and the fact that they sometimes adopt the format of the original six-word story in their response, but also the asymmetry between an initial six-word story and some of its comments. While the initiating six-word story ("Two lovers") can be read and enjoyed as an autonomous literary work, in order to understand and enjoy the latter ("You take it"), we need to be familiar with the former. Without knowing the former, the latter will remain enigmatic.

Trimarco cites three comments (on page 12 in her essay) that followed the parody "For sale: this story format. Overused" (Fishelov, "Parodies" 45-46), posted on the specific webpage from which I have taken my examples. All three of the comments cited by Trimarco on this specific parody adopt the format of a six-word story, and two of them, if not all three, can be read, at least to some extent, as autonomous literary works, despite the fact that they were posted as comments (e.g. "Redditors now looking for original posts"). Reading them in light of the initiating six-word story can, of course, enrich our understanding and enjoyment, but knowing the initiating story is not a prerequisite for understanding them. This serves to highlight the fact that, in many cases, being familiar with the initiating six-word story is not a strong prerequisite for making sense of the later six-word story posted as a comment. After all, it is reasonable to assume that commentators who adopt the format of a six-word story wish to be appreciated as writers of a witty and memorable story, not merely as writers of a comment. There may be different degrees of autonomy of the comments written as a six-word story, but the above case of "You take it, no you. Splat," which requires its readers to be familiar with the initiating story does not seem to represent the norm. If we add the fact that, almost as a rule, the initiating six-word stories can be read without the "crutches" of their comments, it becomes even more clear that most online six-word stories can be read as autonomous literary works.

As we have seen, the question of relative autonomy does not pertain uniquely to six-word stories published online. Indeed, the general fate of six-word stories published online is not that different from the fate of other

literary works, whether published online or on more traditional platforms: they can be criticized or praised, commented upon, interpreted, emulated, parodied, etc. Indeed, the Internet and the brevity of the form of the six-word story make the give-and-take between authors and their readers, commentators, and critics faster, closer, and more intense. Nonetheless, the principles underlying this give-and-take are, at least partly, not that different from those of the more traditional genres, modes of publication, and literary communities. In short, while Trimarco rightly calls attention to certain characteristics of the Internet as a new platform for the publication of certain literary works, we should not forget the shared aspects of this new platform with the more traditional platforms: sometimes it is the same old lady, merely in a new dress.

In conclusion, by adopting Trimarco's suggestion to examine online six-word stories as posts in an ongoing conversation, we can indeed sometimes enrich our understanding of these stories, and we can definitely learn much about the context of their publication. However, to adopt the suggested perspective without acknowledging the status of online six-word stories as autonomous literary works may lead us to lose sight of their specific individual literary qualities and aesthetic achievements. Personally, I believe that each and every one of them deserves our close reading and attention.⁵

The Hebrew University
Jerusalem

NOTES

¹TheWolfOfWalmart, <http://www.sixwordstories.net/2014/02/the-smallest-coffins-are-the-heaviest/>.

²<http://www.sixwordstories.net/#sidebar>

³https://www.reddit.com/r/sixwordstories/comments/9erwj1/top_500_sixword_stories_2018/

⁴[www.http://sixwordstories.net](http://www.sixwordstories.net)

⁵This research was supported by THE ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (grant No. 1479/19)

WORKS CITED

- Donne, John. "The Flea." *Selected Poems*. Ed. Ilona Bell. London: Penguin, 2006. 30-31.
- Fishelov, David. "Parodies of Six-Word Stories: A Comic Literary Metagenre." *Connotations* 31 (2022): 33-55. <http://www.connotations.de/debate/parodies-of-six-word-stories/>
- Fishelov, David. "The Poetics of Six-Word Stories." *Narrative* 27.1 (January 2019): 30-46.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Methuen, 1983.
- Trimarco, Paola. "Six-Word Narratives and Hybrid Genres in Digital Contexts: A Response to David Fishelov." *Connotations* 32 (2023): 11-16. <https://www.connotations.de/article/six-word-narratives-and-hybrid-genres-in-digital-contexts-a-response-to-david-fishelov/>