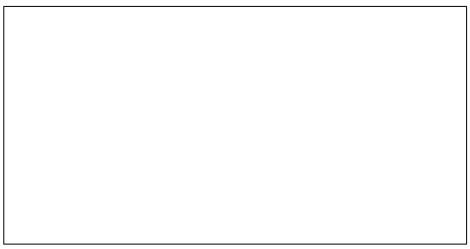

Only Anecdotal: Diane Williams, Loneliness, and Short Story Form

Abstract
Traditionally, the short story has been understood as almost synonymous with loneliness, characterised by theorists and writers like Frank O'Connor as the quintessential 'lonely form.' Contemporary short story writer Diane Williams stands out for her idiosyncratic challenge to the conventions of short story structure, drawing deliberately on the partiality and contingency of the anecdote. Analysing the structure and style of Williams' 2016 collection *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine,* this article explores how a turn to anecdotal structures might shift the short story form's traditional polarity towards loneliness—a particularly urgent question in an increasingly lonely culture.

It almost seems a disservice to describe Diane Williams' literary style merely as distinctive. The characters that inhabit her idiosyncratic, ultra-short short stories, especially 2016's *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine*, address the reader in disarming non-sequiturs, using turns of phrase that challenge the conventions of conversation, and repeating stories organised along lines of lucid but inexplicable logic. One character jumps from their aches and pains to sudden, intensive psychological analysis—"my back started killing me and Tamar asked what else did I want and why?" (19). Another starts to destroy some plants even as she admits that she finds them "cheerful" (26). "I ripped off some leaves and clipped stem ends with my new spouse, from a spray of fluorescent daisies he'd bought for me," she tells us, before deciding to abruptly "assert… something unpleasant just then" (25). Although somewhat polarised, reviews of Williams' collections repeatedly singled out the peculiar way that she structures images and thoughts. Writing for the *New York Times*, Rachel Syme described them as "stories that leave a flashbulb's glow behind the eyes even as they resist sense" (2016), emphasising the estranging effect that this style creates. Williams' stories, she contended, "are meant to unsettle and confound, to push our understanding of the world slightly off kilter."

Even as the narrators' logic challenges the reader, Williams also draws the reader closer in; her characters might use unusual phrases, but they have the ring of authenticity, and use a consistent mode of direct address. This means that the stories follow, much more broadly, a conversational arc. Stephen Poole notes that "each story lasts half a page, one page, maybe three: it is a monologue, or a skewed fable, or an overheard conversation in a café" (2016). This kinship to oral forms of storytelling stands out in the character's exclamations ("But how busy I was!" [Williams 2016: 19]), their disarming personal revelations—"this is not to say I am old. Far from it! Sometimes I just go to any lengths" (130)—and their staccato narration of minor incidents, around which each of these micro-fictions revolves. "A Gray Pottery Head," for instance, turns on the narrator's rapid revelation of an impending death: "that night—some progress to report. Something exciting afoot. She has a quarter hour more to live" (17). As Poole emphasises, "these narrators are speaking very carefully, but in oddly shaped sentences – not the fluent syntax of fiction, but the broken syntax of everyone's actual speech" (2016). The mismatch in emphasis in "A Gray Pottery Head"—the stakes of the woman's death seem much higher than the phrases 'some progress' and 'something exciting' would suggest'—only reinforces the amateurish, improvised, and unpolished character of these narrators' storytelling.

In other words, Williams' stories use the structure and style of the anecdote. Their adherence to this eccentric tradition of storytelling is signalled both by their titles, like "When I was Old and Ugly," and the way such stories open: framing a specific or unusual incident or observation. Indeed, the immersive opening of "When I was Old and Ugly" bears the hallmarks

of the kind of story a friend might tell you, or a comedian might use in a stand-up gig. Abruptly, the narrator recounts to us that, "The creature had come absurdly close to our window. It had lifted its chin—face—specifically towards mine while we are at breakfast in the country" (123). Here we see a briefly sketched location, a focus on odd and idiosyncratic observations, and a style that mimics the rhythms of spoken speech. Not only does this patterning draw on the vernacular roots of the short story form, it also matches up to wider trends in short fiction since the 1980s, where writers have increasingly embraces apparently naïve, colloquial, and episodic stories. It has become commonplace to compare Williams' style to that of her contemporary, Lydia Davis, and both certainly play with extreme uses of voice, diction, and length. But Williams' embrace of the communal sociability of the anecdote runs more clearly against traditional theories of the short story form, which emphasise individuality, singularity, and detachment from wider communities. As Frank O'Connor famously argued in *The Lonely Voice*, this narrowed and insistent focus on single characters in states of isolation or separation has meant that the form is closely connected with a specific emotional register—"an intense awareness of human loneliness" (1962: 16).

Williams' collection is structured around isolation; each brief voice is severed from the others, the characters themselves are disregarded by those around them, "left alone" (40), or else framed as a solitary head, torso, pair of hands. And in their confessions to the reader, they reveal an intense loneliness and need for others, like one narrator's craving for "the love of a dark person who will be my source of prosperity and emotional pleasure" (13). In spite of these recurring images, though, O'Connor's maxim sits uncomfortably with Williams' turn towards the anecdotal. How do we rationalise the sociability of an anecdotal style with speakers and imagery that insistently evoke loneliness and isolation?

In this article, I use Williams' collection to interrogate a broader move towards anecdotal structures in the contemporary short story, exploring how this might shift the form's traditional polarity towards loneliness. This question is given added urgency because, in the early 21st century, stories about loneliness are everywhere—not only in literature (though, as Robert Ferguson reminds us, "solitude is an obsession in American literature" [2013: 2], but in popular discourse at large. From newspaper headlines to government policy, contemporary Anglophone culture is saturated with a public discourse around a rising loneliness epidemic (only amplified by the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic). The UK government has labelled loneliness one of the century's greatest public health challenges, appointing the world's first minister for loneliness to address what they have termed a 'crisis.' But increasingly, psychological and social sciences research is also suggesting that stories might provide some of the answers to the physical and psychological damage of loneliness. Perceived isolation—the narrative that individuals tell about their loneliness—is, "in normal samples … a more important predictor of a variety of adverse health outcomes than is objective social isolation" (Cacioppo et al. 2009: 978) and narrative therapies are showing strong results in helping individuals reimagine solitude. If stories are increasingly seen as a way of treating loneliness, then what role might a return to the sociability of less formal, conversational modes like the anecdote have in offering alternative ways of reframing the experience of being alone?

"Perplexing nonsequiturs and contextless allusions"

The wild array of voices and scenarios in *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine* might, at first glance, seem to resist categorisation. Certainly much of the immediate critical resistance to the collection centred on its at times overwhelming heterogeneity; Houman Barekat found "Williams's narration" to be "so oblique as to appear almost incoherent – a welter of nameless protagonists, perplexing nonsequiturs and contextless allusions" (2016). But beneath this 'welter,' the structure and mechanics of the stories remain remarkably consist across the collection, and illustrate some of the key formal components of the anecdote as a literary model. As Florian Sedlmeier and

MaryAnn Snyder-Körber explain, while we might share loose, colloquial understanding of what qualifies as 'anecdotal,' this "briefest of narrative forms" (2020: 3) has been critically under-served. "If anecdotes engage critical attention at all," they content, "it is for what they pragmatically do rather than how they might aesthetically please" (7). However short they might be, as a literary form, the anecdote can be distinguished from the broader category of flash fiction in its necessary grounding in real experiences. Anecdotes are "purportedly taken from life" (3), and focalised through a specific narrator—in other words, while many literary anecdotes are short enough to fall into the category of flash fiction, not all flash fiction is anecdotal. An anecdote, moreover, is only worth recounting because it disrupts ordinary patterns of behaviour; it is singular, contingent, and, as Paul Fleming notes, "as a discrete isolated narrative, the anecdote doesn't have a chronological connection to any surrounding narration of events" (2011: 74). Taking a broad overview of Williams' collection, it is clear that her narrators are each responding to discrete, personal circumstances—it is precisely this quality that left Barekat feeling so bereft of context and coherence. But even if they represent a rupture from the everyday, the sharp focus of the anecdote also demands a very specific kind of descriptive language, which is why Sedlmeier and Snyder-Körber align the anecdote "very strongly with the detail" (2020: 4).

In the case of Williams' opening story, "Beauty, Love, and Vanity Itself," we are oriented toward a break in an established pattern of behaviour through the observation of personal jewellery. The narrator tells us that, "as usual I'd hung myself with snappy necklaces" (2016: 13)—but we are not given any other context to the events that follow. The implication of the phrase 'as usual' is, of course, that something *un*usual is going to happen. At the same time, the tenor of the opening phrase implies that this detail is something we are expected to know of the narrator. Wearing 'a snappy necklace' is a predictable quality. Another way to read this is as a *characteristic* detail, an observation that reveals something of the kind of person that she is. Such typifying gestures are at the heart of anecdotes—particularly comic ones. But the specific and usual lexical choice, 'snappy,' also reminds us that this story is being focalised through a specific, idiosyncratic speaker. From the first phrase of the collection, then, Williams signals that: her speakers will be particular and amateurish; their stories will contain a surprising incident, representing break in the normal pattern of their lives; in the process of telling these anecdotes, they will offer broader insights into character and typical behaviours.

Critical praise for and frustration with the collection turned not just on the range of voices and incidents, but what Barekat called Williams' 'obliqueness' of style. As the opening to the collection shows, the stories often move from phrase to phrase with jerky, apparently unpolished and unliterary minimal transitions. From a more constructive point of view, this tendency has been hailed as challenging literary conventions—Carmela Ciuraru thought this style made Williams "one of America's most exciting violators of habit" (2016), while Benjamin Woodward argued that "she is more interested in plucking the reader from the familiar, the comfortable, and placing her into a situation where vivid language constructs its own unique experience" (2016). But such 'oblique' or 'vividly unique' styles of narration are not quite as unusual as critical responses might suggest. As Fleming explains, a "laconic, staccato, almost telegraphic style" (2011: 77) is typical of spoken anecdotes. "Vanity Itself" is rife with such abrupt shifts; the first paragraph ends "I anticipated the love of a dark person who will be my source of prosperity and emotional pleasure," while the next paragraph shifts rapidly and without any explanation to, "Mr Morton arrives about 7 p.m. and I said, 'I owe you an explanation'" (Williams 2016: 13). These rapid shifts do more than simply underscore a connection to a spoken tradition; they move the reader through the staccato, pithy details that make anecdotes successful. All the narrator need to do to frame the culminating episode of the story is to use the phrase "Poolside at the Marriott Courtyard" (14). In contrast to the fully fleshed out scenes and characters of professional literary fiction, in the anecdote the barest details suffice.

Such rapid shifts from detail to detail have a secondary effect: they blur the distinctions between individual people and objects, shifting the emphasis onto types and kinds. In "Vanity Itself," this is most obvious in men. The narrator, after all, is searching for a type—her 'dark person,' and the men who appear in the story are so interchangeable she seems to confuse their names: "The real thing did come along. Bob—Tom spent several days in June with me" (14). One of these men even plays up to the narrator's generalisations, mockingly observing that, "you probably don't like the way I drink my soda or how I eat my olives with my fingers" (13). We see a similar interchangeability in "Cinch," only with female friends. One is reduced to "that woman [who] behaved unfavourably toward me" (20), while later the narrator describes the swapping of two essentially replaceable friends: "by the next May, Tamara had departed and Hesper, her replacement, carried a tray of old-time spring tonic for the two of us" (20). What is the effect of this repeated blurring? On the one hand, it clearly shifts the focus of the reader towards the central incident of the anecdote, marking the peripheral details as secondary, even vague. At the same time, the use of types or kinds makes the anecdotal observations more generalised. Even though the central incident may be singular and a break from normal life; even though the narrator may speak from a dramatically singular position, there is still some larger conclusion to be drawn from the story—it has some exemplary value.

This movement outwards, towards a meaning beyond the specifics of the particular episode within that story, is repeated in the way that Williams' narrators frame the central incidents themselves. In "Vanity Itself," for instance, the central incident seems at first glance underwhelming—maybe comic, but hardly revelatory. The narrator recounts watching three women enter the hotel pool before "one woman disappeared. The other two flapped their hands" (14). Rather than springing into action, the lifeguard on duty responds with irritation, remarking to the narrator, "They don't know what the rope is…I mean everybody knows what a rope means." The punchline of the story comes when the narrator tries to clarify the situation, saying, "They are drowning'; the lifeguard's nonplussed response is continued inaction ("you know, I think you're right" [15]). If the story ended here, we might read it as a kind of joke, where humour lies in the lines of misunderstanding. But the partiality of this anecdote calls on the reader's own involvement to reach any conclusion. Were the women drowning? Does the lifeguard eventually intercede and enter the pool?

Williams' stories demand additional readerly work across the (brief) length of their narratives. Because the style is so jarring, and the reader's knowledge so limited, the reader has to work harder to parse the narrative and fill in the gaps in logic left by these amateur storytellers; the direct address, moreover, and sense of dialogue between narrator and reader created by such sharp idiolects further draw the reader into the narrative. But these final incidents also tend to be connected outwards to larger patterns of behaviour, so that they become illustrative and not simply incidental. So, in "Vanity Itself," this possible drowning and its confused interpretations are given a metaphorical turn. The narrator concludes by declaring that the scene "was a hash—nothing to look at—much like my situation—if you're not going to do anything about it" (15). This final turn reshapes the incident into something that approximates the narrator's life. The use of dashes, however, elides the logical steps that would explain this approximation, paralleling the two situations, and inviting the reader to fill in the spaces, making the connection themselves. The call to action is accentuated by the return to direct address; the accusation 'if you're not going to do anything about it,' both imbricates the reader in both the narrator's life, and compels them to make add another layer of significance to the otherwise particular scene.

Illuminating or involving?

At first glance, the general movement of Williams' stories, from the highly individualised outwards to a more abstracted generalisation, matches up to classic theories of the short story form—which characterise short fiction as 'illuminating'—and to the specific structural qualities

that make short fiction particularly well suited to writing about loneliness. The accumulative structure of the novel privileges group belonging, relationship building, and connectedness; by contrast, as Charles May has convincingly argued, "in the short story we are presented with characters in their essential aloneness" (1976: 137). While this routine formal contrast can feel overwrought at times, Mary Louise Pratt has shown that critics' insistent recourse to the qualities of the novel when trying to define the short story is not in itself a sign of laziness, but instead a direct consequence of a tendency in "highly institutionalized forms of discourse, like verbal art," towards "pairs of short and long genres" (1981: 175). Although specialists in the short story like to maintain the idea that it is "an autonomous genre," Pratt makes the useful observation that (in English, at least) the form of the short story is essentially defined by its brevity; given that "the conceptual aspect is that shortness cannot be an intrinsic property of anything, but occurs only relative to something else" (180), whenever writers come to define the short story, they almost inevitably do so in contradistinction to the 'long story,' or novel. This is because the qualities that critics have routinely ascribed to the genre since the essays of Edgar Allan Poe—self-containedness, compression, focus on an individual rather than a group or community, unity of effect—all rely on an implicit contrast with a longer form that emphasises the alternative. From this perspective, it makes sense that the short story should be especially associated with isolation and loneliness, for its minor aesthetics—as Deleuze and Guattari argued of Kafka—mark a deliberate retreat from the sociability and multiplicity associated with the novel.

Yet this formal unity and compressed focus are, almost paradoxically, why short fiction has proved so successful at reimagining loneliness. While its reputation as 'a lonely form' might imply it ought to *accentuate* readers' feelings of loneliness, in James Joyce's seminal adaptation of the term 'epiphany' to literary analysis, the short story's formal coherence is actually a mechanism that allows for change. In this model of reading short fiction, the form turns on a final moment of illumination, that reframes and recasts earlier experiences. This turn backwards gives the form greater capacity to reimagine previously negatively construed feelings, like loneliness, in a positive light. The moment of illumination, moreover, frequently cements connections between characters—as in the final words of 'our Else' in Katherine Mansfield's "The Doll's House," which link her experiences with those of the wealthier Kezia through a literal image of illumination: "I seen the little lamp" (2007: 391). In James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues," it is sound, rather than sight, that provides the ground for the narrator to reimagine his own solitude. Isolated from his brother, and seeing only loneliness around him, the narrator closes the story attending a performance by his brother's jazz band, and as the group reach the crescendo of their performance, he notices the way that a master musician, like his brother, is able to hear "something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason" (1965: 137). Finally, he recognizes that these musicians are able to hear not just their own internal loneliness and isolation, but something greater, almost communal— the roar rising from the void—and translate it into a redemptive experience, for as he concludes, "his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours." As in Mansfield, the logic of Baldwin's story—and of the epiphanic short story writ larger—is that of the *exemplum*. Such stories offer up a model of behaviour that the reader can recognise and follow.

But while the logic of Williams' stories might move towards the generalised, do her narrators offer up exempla for their readers? Indeed, is the anecdotal really equivalent to the exemplary? Surprisingly, given its antiquity, critical work on the form of the anecdote is still thin on the ground. While we might easily recognise this form of storytelling when we hear it; while we might even use the term freely in conversation, as Lionel Gossman explains, it falls into such nebulous territory between oral and written traditions that "scholars cannot even agree whether there is anything definable there, whether the anecdote can properly be considered a particular form or genre, like the novel, the maxim, or the fable" (2003: 147). Certainly, on the surface, the

anecdote seems to follow an exemplary pattern. The grounds for sharing an anecdote seem to dictate that there is something worth sharing in the story. As Malina Stefanovska emphasises, this means that anecdotes tend to close with a final, generalising phrase; she gives an example from a work of history that is "typical of the genre: self contained, short, striking, and even funny, it ends on a witty note and carries with it an implicit conclusion about history in general." (2009: 22). But as the work of Steafanovska and Fleming also makes clear, the contexts in which the anecdotal is invoked, and the style with which an anecdote is told, differ dramatically from the uses of exempla.

After all, anecdotes are familiar because (as Williams' narrators remind us) the anecdote is not a just a formal structure, it is a social practice that is always localised and particularised. Stefanovska reminds us that, traditionally, "telling anecdotes… served as a means of tightening the community and drawing its boundaries," in so far as their "oral circulation… delineated groups of shared interest, channels of communication, and elective affinities" (17). The meaning of an anecdote, then, differs depending on the kinds of social bonds between narrator and audience—or else shapes those bonds. And the outward turn, the generalisation at the end of an anecdote, is also contingent on the context of this larger interaction. The social contingency of the anecdotes marks the greatest formal difference between classic 'epiphanic' stories. In contrast to the minor aesthetics of such short fiction, which resits sociability and instead emphasises authorial control and unity, anecdotal structures move towards a compromise, through narrative decisions that emphasise specificity and partiality. It is these qualities, grounded in the anecdote teller's typically marked and limited narration, that also make the anecdote such poor evidence for wider conclusions. In fact, their partiality undermines any generalisations that the speaker might draw out from the incident they have told. As Fleming explains, anecdotes are, by definition, "the narration of singular events, often based on hearsay and beyond verification" and, as a consequence, "immediately pose the question of evidence" (74). This contingency has led academics, professionals, and even the wider public to be sceptical of the wider value of an anecdote, to the extent that the very term "'anecdotal evidence' has become an insult" (Nunn 2011: 920).

It is true that, on a structural level, the movement of Williams' stories seems to parallel the archetypical short story structure, shifting from discrete events towards a coordinating moment of illumination. As in "Vanity Itself," the final section of these (admittedly very brief) narratives tends to turn towards a broader generalisation, that illuminates the earlier narrative in some way. As Ena Brdjanovic explains, in *Fine. Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine*, the "story isn't in the actions of its characters; it's in that vital something produced by the interplay between plot and subtext, between what happens in a story and what a story is about" (2016). Take the final movement of another story, "Cinch." After describing setting gofer traps, and the breakdown in several friendships, the narrator tells the reader that, "this isn't just a big joke. Pests move in from other areas and damage can occur in a short time from new ones who reinvade the world of nature" (Williams 2016: 21). The narrator invites us to draw together difficult friendships and pest control, to reach a larger, synthesising point about the nature of the world—signalled by the generalised phrasing 'pests move in from other areas.' Another piece, "Gulls," closes with the narrator observing the way her husband "keeps his chin down, giving proper shape to what he is trying to express—his romantic attitude towards life" (24). Here the particulars of the body are extrapolated out to a broader psychology—indeed a whole way of being. Many stories even signal this movement towards a broader coordinating pattern in their opening phrases. "To Revive a Person is No Slight Thing" begins in precisely this way, setting up the specific incidents of the following narrative as illustrative of a larger pattern: "people often wait a long time and then, like me, suddenly, they're back in the news with a changed appearance" (25).

Except these are anecdotes, grounded in the particularity that makes 'anecdotal evidence' so suspect. And Williams takes the specificity of her anecdotes to such an extreme that the reader might struggle to interpret precisely what has happened—let alone how the events might

connect to any broader generalisation about human experience. Indeed, Williams' narrators themselves often don't completely know what has happened to them. Much like the women who may or may not be drowning in "Vanity Itself," the narrator in "Gulls" is unsure about precisely what has happened, and openly questions its significance. We are told that "two gulls flying suffered an in-air collision. One fell. The other briefly stood there—appearing to do next to nothing" (23). The woman watching this is confused, and "didn't think she was supposed to see that"; for some reason, the crash makes her look at people on the ground below her, where "the adults in the street looked to her like children. But who were the children she saw meant to be? (23). Not only are such stories opaque, but as the narrator seems to flag to the reader, they are also so incidental as to hardly seem worthy of narration. Woodward's review put this pithily: "in summary form, a Williams story rarely turns heads." This matches up to the larger tendencies within the form. Although the anecdote tends to move towards generality, as Stefanovska explains, the genre's "exemplary character" is 'not only counterbalanced by its curiosity," but often "invalidated" by its "utmost singularity" (25).

If ambiguity frustrates the stories' capacity to act as exemplary or illuminating episodes, then this frustration is only accentuated by Williams' extreme idiosyncrasy of style. On a sentence-by-sentence level, her narrators couple their highly individualised vocabularies with overly complex or opaque syntax. Consider the end of "A Mere Flask Poured Out":

> There are other methods I use to apply heavy pressure: I ask her where she is going, what does she want, how does she know and why. She should increase her affectionate nature, be successful and happy. Mentally, she must show me she has that certain ability to try. (116)

These final sentences follow a concatenating pattern, but while they seem to be underpinned by some coordinating logic, they are so erratic and heavily compressed that this logic is rendered opaque, if not internally contradictory. Similarly, many of the narrator's generalisations are so broad as to almost be meaningless. The woman described by the narrator of "A Gray Pottery Head" has "been associated with sex and with childbirth," while her "facial features are remarkably symmetrical, expressing vigor and vulnerability" (18). Indeed, in several of the stories' interpretative turns, the narrators themselves signal that multiple interpretations are possible—the narrator in "A Little Bottle of Tears," for instance, tells us that "I thought Daisy usually looked pensive and sad and my wife thought that her scowl meant that she detested us" (122). And in stories so stripped of detail, the narrator's turn towards close observation of seemingly unimportant objects further destabilises these anecdotes' sense of a coherent meaning. The narrator of "Cinch" describes the way one woman "was waving an arm on which slid—up and down—a bracelet of lumpy blue glass. A beautiful beam of light—perhaps it was aqua—was produced by the sun poking through the dangles at her wrist" (20). How is the reader supposed to reconcile this image with the narrator's final comments about pests or the nature of relationships?

In line with the narrators' conversational style and frequent recourse to direct address, this complexity serves to draw the reader into the final movement of the anecdote, imbricating them in the process of interpretation. When as Brdjanovic notes, "the characters in Williams's fiction invest both actions and objects with undue significance" (2016), the reader has no choice but to start making evaluations about credibility, scale, and significance. Moreover, the unusual ordering of the incidents within each anecdote—"these marvelous stories do have a beginning, middle and an end — just not necessarily in that order" (Ciuraru 2016)—means that even the sequence requires active engagement. Poole summarises the critical response to *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine* neatly when he concludes that "the reader is going to have to work out her own line readings" (2016). But as the narrators themselves are also engaged in this interpretation (with whatever degree of success), this call to action does not distance the reader from the narrative—

instead, as with an oral anecdote, it renders any larger meaning communal and socially binding. This formal sociability constitutes the fundamental difference between an anecdote and an exemplum. Where the exemplum relies on a didactic, hierarchical relationship, with a fixed and stable revelation, the anecdote is a living form, where the meaning lies not in the pattern but in the gaps.

Unseating the Given

How does this sociability shift the short story form's relationship with loneliness? The answer lies in the narrative (in)stability of experiences of loneliness. Psychological and sociological studies of loneliness take pains to distinguish between subjects' objective loneliness—as represented by the number of social connections they have—and their *perceived* loneliness. Phillip Morrison and Rebekah Smith explain, in a recent major collection, that "humans are inherently social beings who possess a fundamental need to belong, and when they fail to satisfy this need, loneliness occurs" (2018: 11); as they imply, this failure to meet expectations is part of a process of self-narration, so that "in explaining the causes, lonely people are likely to blame themselves and view the social situations as being beyond their control, in a kind of learned helplessness." John T. Cacioppo et al.'s research has shown the practical consequence of this narrative impulse: "perceived social isolation," or in other words, an individual's own narrative of loneliness, is "in normal samples … a more important predictor of a variety of adverse health outcomes than is objective social isolation" (2009: 978). Clearly then, stories about loneliness are not just common, but powerful; they have a bearing on the way loneliness is experienced and described. To a measurable degree, the stories people tell themselves about their experiences of being alone change the way they feel, to the point that these stories can demonstrably affect their health. reshaping loneliness involves interrogating and reinterpreting experience

As critics repeatedly stress, the complexity, idiosycnracy, and enforced involvement of Williams' stories have the cumulative effect of forcing the reader out of habitual assumptions. In Brdjanovic's terms, "Williams's work resonates because it defamiliarizes — she unseats the given" (2016). True, the typical short story form can give insight into the experience of loneliness. But the formal coherence and unity of effective that characterise the classic short story create a singular, stable mood. This is why writers like O'Connor and critics like May see the short story as a *lonely* form, rather than a *solution* for loneliness. On the other hand, anecdotal structures like Williams' do not passively represent loneliness, but instead force the reader to reinterpret narratives and experiences—and the significance that they hold. The singularity of Williams' characters, moreover, opens up a space for mutual understanding, mapping out new sociabilities. Their resistance to the typical short story structure might in fact makes stories like those in *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine* better at modelling narrative engagement and interpretation. After all, as the complexity of Williams' stories attests, such stories remain 'a hash—nothing to look at… if you're not going to do anything about it.'

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