Language Notes

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4. Sentences (i): Very Short Stories

It’s worth raising with students the question of whether a story can be told in a single sentence. Or, rather, since it obviously can (remembering young children’s narratives strung on ‘and’), whether it can be told well in one sentence. If we assume that a story must have at least three parts – roughly: initial situation → disturbance → resolved situation – then surely the minimum number of sentences must be three. In some cases it might be allowable to punctuate and pace the three main clauses, so that the complete narrative is comprehended in one rhythmical movement, as in Kevin Crossley-Holland’s story ‘Talk About Short’ (the suspense of which comes from the absence of the third part):

He was alone, and in the dark; and when he reached out for the matches, the matches were put into his hand.1

Two questions: Why repeat ‘the matches’ and not use a pronoun? And why is it that the story would be altered for the worse if altered to the following?

He was alone in the dark. He reached out for the matches. The matches were put into his hand.

Taking things further, we might (unless we consider it, as we say nowadays, inappropriate) offer as an example this from an old jest-book:

A good Wife lay in; and her Husband could not hold, but whensoever the mayde came into the cellar to draw a Gossips cuppe, he must have a taste of Her; his wife had some Hint on it and presently turns her away; Neighbours wondering at the sudainesse of it, enquire the cause, the wench reports it was only for drinking a draught of the Best;
the neighbours intercede and mediate for her; hange her Queane, she lyes says the Good Wife, for I have turned the Barrell over and over and over, and Ile take my corporall oath, she hath not left one Droppe in’t.²

What will quickly come up is whether the semi-colons aren’t just cheating, whether they aren’t just a variant on the child’s ‘and’. Are they a guide to reading aloud, so that the voice at the end of each clause is raised to imply that there’s more? If we were modernising the text what would we do with the punctuation?

These two examples are also worth analysis:

a. From *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): ‘A poor fellow went to hang himself, but finding by chance a pot of money, flung away the rope and went merrily home; but he that hid the gold, when he missed it, hanged himself with the rope which the other man had left, in a discontented humour.’

b. From Pope’s *Epistle to Cobham* (1734):

> The frugal Crone, whom praying priests attend,  
> Still tries to save the hallow’d taper’s end,  
> Collects her breath, as ebbing life retires,  
> For one puff more, and in that puff expires.

Another way of telling a story in a single sentence is to use a lot of embedding:

> After Goldilocks, who had come across the three bears’ cottage one fine sunny day when the bears were out for a walk in the woods, had tried all their drinks and liked the baby’s best, and drunk it all, had tried their beds and liked the baby’s so much that she had gone to sleep in it, the bears returned, and, finding what she had done, ejected her forcibly from their abode; whereupon she ran home crying to her mother.

A challenge could be set to a class to produce further versions of well-known stories in single complex sentences. Or students could be invited (again if one’s sense of propriety allows it) to look at a real one, from Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*. In his entry on Sir Philip Sidney we read:

> He married the daughter of Sir Francis Walsingham, Principall Secretary of Estate (I thinke his only child) whom he loved very well: in so much that having received some
shott or wound in the Warres in the Lowe-countreys (where he had command of the Ramikins, I thinke) he would not (contrary to the injunctions of his Physicians and chirurgions) forbear his carnall knowledge of her, which cost him his life; upon which occasion there were some roguish verses made.

What would be lost by the removal of each of the embedded clauses? Which is indispensable, and why?

Clearly stories can be told well in just one sentence, without cheating. But what I really had in mind in my initial question was whether there can be a mini-genre of the one-sentence story of a less complex kind. I first began to think about this, as far as I can remember, when reading in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* I came across sentences like this:

a. Artemidorus the grammarian lost his wits by the unexpected sight of a crocodile.

b. A nun did eat a lettuce without making the sign of the cross, and was instantly possessed.

c. Myrsine, an Attic wench, was murdered of her fellow, because she did excel the rest in beauty.

Aren’t whole situations, narratives, life-stories encapsulated in these? Doesn’t each conjure up a little world? There’s even characterisation, setting, drama, suspense, and a hint of a moral. Stories of this kind can be found in various sources:

a. From Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (1967): ‘Cyrus’ sermons there were so brief (his first Christmas sermon consisted of one sentence) that he won the heart of his turbulent flock.’

b. ‘I have seen a little thin weak Woman so invigorated by a fit of Jealousy, that five Grenadiers could not hold her.’ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (1723)

c. Robert Graves in *Goodbye to all that* (1929) quotes a favourite story of his mother’s: ‘There was a man once, a Frenchman, who died of grief because he could never become a mother.’ (When I looked this up I was surprised to find that my memory had deleted ‘a Frenchman’. How important is it to the story?)

d. Umberto Eco quotes ‘the shortest tale in Western literature’, by Augusto Monterresso: ‘When he/she woke up, the dinosaur was still there.’ Students might meet the challenge and find, or write, a shorter one. (‘I never saw my uncle again.’)
e. Finally: ‘Mehitable later committed more serious damage by setting
the house on fire when shaking the ashes out of her pipe.’

One-sentence poems are worth investigating too.

5. How Fun, What Rubbish

The 1973 _Shorter Oxford Dictionary_ gives no adjectival form of _fun_, but does
record two verb forms: (transitive) to cheat, hoax, cajole; (intransitive) to
make fun of. Moving on fifteen years, we read in the _Longman Guide to
English Usage_ (1988):

Fun is now used informally in both British and American
English as an adjective before nouns: _fun people; a fun party._
This is a pleasant and lively device, but it does not belong in
serious writing.

The date surprised me, as did the description of substantive _fun_ as ‘a
pleasant and lively device’ (?). But now the adjectival form is found
not only in front of nouns and not only in conversation. Recently I heard
on Radio 4 a woman declaring ‘how fun it was’ to do something (cookery-
related, if I remember correctly). A few days later I saw Maggie Gee’s _My
Driver_ described in the _Guardian Review_ as ‘this fun, compassionate novel.’

How long ago is it that we would have said ‘what fun it was’ or ‘how much
fun it was’? And back then, how would we have praised Ms Gee’s novel?
Presumably the critic didn’t mean ‘funny and compassionate’ but
‘enjoyable and compassionate’. But a particular kind of enjoyment is
indicated, the kind that we call fun (noun). Back then, we might have
heard or said (possibly, being English, with a hint of irony) that someone
was ‘a real fun guy’, but this would have been recognised as non-
standard. _Fun_ was, by and large, a thing, that you could have more or less of. And
you could put an adjective in front of the word: great fun, serious fun.
When we said ‘This is fun’, we used to mean something parallel to ‘This is
water’, not to ‘This is green.’ That the construction will (sometimes
– in many cases the noun would need to be preceded by an article) work for
both the adjective and the noun may have enabled the drift from one to
the other as the primary sense of _fun._

The same has happened in the case of _rubbish_. It used to be a noun (and
occasionally a verb, as in ‘to rubbish something’). If used metaphorically
(As in Morecambe and Wise’s ‘What do you think of it so far?’ ‘Rubbish!’)
it was still a _stuff_ that was conceived. The word is very often – usually? –
heard or seen nowadays as an adjective, as in ‘This is a rubbish book.’
Once we would have said ‘This book is rubbish’, but we would have had the noun in mind. Again, that this form of words will work with both noun and adjective may have facilitated the shift in usage. This shift is more recent than that of fun; rubbish receives no entry in the Longman Guide.

Does it matter, at all? In feeling a sense of disapproval am I not just being, well ... snotty? After all, the language changes; it can’t be, as they said in the eighteenth century, ‘ascertained.’ (Swift didn’t like ‘mob’ but already his friend Pope used it in his poems.) The ground for saying seriously that there is something wrong would have to involve a demonstration that there is a real loss of expressive force or of grammatical or logical clarity; that is, that the possibilities of making meaning are reduced or confused. What have we lost, in losing fun as a noun? Is the problem that we tend to use fun where other adjectives might be more accurate? Are we collapsing all enjoyment into fun? I think that would be a serious loss, and in that case the new fun would be a symptom of a real decline in our culture. (What other terms of dis/approbation are current?)

Anyway, ‘fun and ‘rubbish’ are hardly critical terms. Teachers of English should consider how the language pupils and students are really using relates to the critical language they are expected to become competent in. What should teachers do when their pupils and students use fun and rubbish as adjectives in formal discussion or presentations (especially when assessed, as for GCSE) or in essays? Should they say nothing, merely correct them, or give them a brief sketch of this piece of language history, provide examples and invite comment and discussion?

Notes

3. Umberto Eco, *Mouse or rat? Translation as Negotiation* (paperback, 2004), p.3 Eco discusses the sentence at greater length on pp. 160-6, considering what would be involved in ‘translating’ it into film(!).

7. However, in noting a parallel between ‘This is fun’ and ‘This is water’ I’m failing to admit an important difference, that the former is almost invariably an expression of enjoyment or relish, not a mere declarative. Of course, in given circumstances, ostensibly declarative sentences can have any number of performative functions. ‘This is water’ might be a wail of dismay from someone who was expecting vodka.