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EXPLORING THE USE OF SURREALISM IN FLASH FICTION : A DEEP DIVE
INTO TARA CAMPBELL'S "YOU, COMMUTER"

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Abstract. The paper discusses the concept of surrealism expressed in flash fiction, focusing on Tara Campbell's "You, Commuter". Through a concise yet powerful narrative, Campbell blends the ordinary experience of commuting with surreal elements, creating a disorienting journey that mirrors the protagonist's internal turmoil. The article will analyze how Campbell employs minimalist storytelling to portray the sense of lost identity and the breakdown of self-awareness within an urban setting. Ultimately, the article will show Campbell's surrealism in flash fiction as an enhancement of the story by evoking emotions in the readers with its vividness and open-ended ambiguity.

Key words: Tara Campbell, flash fiction, surrealism, identity crisis, alienation, urban life, psychological unraveling, minimalism, disorientation, fragmented narrative, internal conflict.

Surrealism in literature is an artistic movement that aims to bridge reality and the imagination by creating bizarre stories that defy logic and reason. Tara Campbell's "You, Commuter" is an exemplary piece of flash fiction that deftly blends surrealism with the disorienting experience of commuting. Through its brevity and powerful narrative, the story demonstrates themes of alienation, identity, and psychological unraveling. Campbell's use of surrealism—where everyday reality morphs into something unusual and unsettling—deepens the emotional impact, allowing the reader to feel the protagonist's inner turmoil. Surrealism in "You, Commuter" is not just a stylistic choice but a tool to expose the character's fractured understanding of reality. In the beginning, the protagonist is waiting at a bus stop, where nothing seems to be functioning as it should:

"Buses idle at the curb in a row. Dozens of people fume in the drizzle, but all the doors are closed and nothing is moving."

The surreal aspect here is found not only in the frustration of waiting but also in the feeling that time and space have come to a standstill. Buses should be in motion, and



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people should be getting on, yet everything around the protagonist feels frozen, fostering an atmosphere of stillness. The anticipation of movement is broken, reflecting the protagonist's own sense of being stuck or confined in a world that defies the normal flow of life. As the story unfolds, the protagonist witnesses further surreal moments, the most prominent of which is their realization that they are on the wrong bus. This disorientation heightens as they begin to notice changes in their clothing:

“You glance down at your legs and find they are covered in black denim. You open your coat just enough to spot a sliver of blue silk.”

This moment blurs the lines between reality and hallucination. The protagonist's clothes appear to change on their own, possibly symbolizing a disintegration of identity. The physical disorientation shows the mental confusion, as the protagonist struggles to reconstruct their sense of self. The surrealism here is not overtly fantastical but instead, subtle and psychological, mirroring the inner turmoil of the protagonist as they attempt to grasp hold of their own reality. Flash fiction's power lies in its ability to convey deep emotions and themes in a concise manner. Campbell's use of brevity amplifies the surreal atmosphere, presenting fragmented snapshots of the protagonist's experience. In this short format, surrealism is presented with little explanation, compelling the reader to connect with the emotional depth of the text. For example, as the protagonist steps onto the bus, they notice the ways in which the people around them engage (or fail to engage) with one another.

“It's like no one else exists. Like you don't exist.”

This moment reinforces the protagonist's sense of alienation, with the lack of eye contact or engagement reflecting a broader societal disconnection. The surreal nature of this observation—the feeling of being invisible—is amplified by the format of flash fiction, where this emotion is distilled into a single, powerful line. The absence of dialogue or action other than the protagonist's internal thoughts underscores the emotional weight of their isolation. The story does not take the time to explain the reasons behind the protagonist's alienation. Instead, through surreal imagery and fragmented thoughts, Campbell conveys the intensity of their experience. One of the most striking surreal elements in “You, Commuter” is the total lack of meaningful communication. The protagonist observes:

“No one talks to each other here. It's like no one else exists. Like you don't exist.”

This silence is both real and symbolic, as the protagonist's thoughts are the only voice that resonates throughout the story. The lack of communication with others feels surreal, as it strays from the usual social interactions expected in a public setting. The bus, usually bustling with activity and conversation, becomes a realm of solitude. This disconnection reflects the protagonist's emotional turmoil, where the sense of being ignored or invisible transcends the bus journey and permeates their entire life. Furthermore, the protagonist's disconnection is emphasized by the unsettling lack of attention from the bus driver, who simply watches the passengers board without acknowledgment or action. “You, Commuter” illustrates the power of surrealism in flash fiction, where a few short paragraphs can evoke profound emotional responses. Through



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fragmented moments, surreal imagery, and the protagonist's existential crisis, Campbell creates a world where the boundaries between reality and the mind blur. The story's brevity intensifies the surreal elements, leaving the reader with a lingering sense of disorientation and alienation. By using surrealism to explore identity, isolation, and psychological unraveling, Campbell crafts a narrative that resonates far beyond its short length, demonstrating how flash fiction can explore complex emotional landscapes in a powerful and succinct way.

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