

Cognitive Approach to Sinister, Very Short Fiction in *Casa de muñecas*

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Abstract: The smallest piece of fiction involves a surprising amount of cognitive processes from the part of the reader. Many critics consider a *microrrelato*—a “hyperbrief” short story—to be a new genre of literature; others, a subgenre. Entire stories can be told in less than ten words, activating parts of the brain associated with top-down cognitive processing, such as theory of mind and affect. The present work draws on recent research in neuropsychology and social cognition. In a novel approach, I assume a cognitive sciences lens in analyzing the *microrrelatos* in *Casa de muñecas* by Patricia Esteban Erlés. Sinister themes are conveyed through very few words, occasionally accompanied by an image, provoking what Richard Gerrig refers to as “participatory responses.” Theories of conceptual blending of mental spaces, paratextual influence, as well as patterns of thought are applied to the convergence of both image and text, which influences the reader’s participatory response. I conclude that while the text is “hyperbrief,” a reader is still able to be cognitively engaged in the narrative experience.

Keywords: *Casa de muñecas*, cognitive science, conceptual blending, *microrrelato*, participatory response

Cognitive approaches to literary study have frequently cited the importance of the reader being actively engaged with the fictional work’s narration; these approaches are quite often centered around film, novels, theatrical productions, and other works of similar length. Richard Gerrig postulates that the reader must be particularly engaged with the text on a psychological level and that this engagement cannot be broken—the reader must “participate” with the text in order to evoke certain reactions, which he calls participatory responses (p-responses). In this article, I will discuss potential cognitive approaches to analyzing the generation of the reader’s p-responses of the narrative experience after reading just very few words, the hallmark of the *microrrelato*.

Richard Gerrig discusses a reader’s attention in asserting that a text that will elicit a “suspense” response from the reader. He expands on various definitions of suspense, the best of which may be hope and fear paired with uncertainty; he couples this with the emphasis he places on the reader’s lack of knowledge about a situation or its outcome (77). He refers to the response evoked as a participatory response, or p-response, stating that “these responses arise as a consequence of the readers’ active participation” (68). Gerrig makes note that a p-response is non-inferential, but the result of predictions and inferences that

the reader makes while participating in the text. The p-response of reading the *microrrelatos* in *Casa de muñecas* is what is currently under examination: engaging in a “hyperbrief” text requires further cognitive investigation.

In discussing suspense, however, Gerrig claims that the reader’s suspense must be alleviated within the text itself. The situation causing the uncertainty must be resolved in such a way as to dispel the suspense, saying that “suspense is best resolved within the narrative world” (168). This is in response to an experiment concluding that in reading a brief text, one can experience uncertainty and be unsure about the conclusion of said text. However, I argue that it is precisely because of the lack of conclusion within the *microrrelato* that induces the negative emotions in p-response, such as fear or creepiness. The reader is “transported” to the fictional world of the text, per Gerrig, and in doing so, the details of the reader’s world move to the background: “the schematic expectancies become relatively dominant,” taking precedence over the reader’s awareness of the fictionality, and is thus able to experience suspense (Gerrig 174). In a text as brief as the *microrrelatos* studied here, however, these expectancies remain with the reader upon “returning” to the real world and thereby manifest themselves in the p-response.

Before continuing with the analysis, it is important here to provide background for the *Casa de muñecas*: it is a collection of *microrrelatos*, many of which are illustrated by Sara Morante. It is divided into ten sections, each named after a different room in a doll house, and each section’s stories being related to that room. The illustrations created are exclusively in shades of black and magenta because, as the illustrator asserts, “eran los colores que pedía el libro” in order to capture a Victorian, gothic, and vindicated femininity (Garrido). Esteban Erlés also comments that the choice of magenta was because it is “[u]n color que tiene algo de sangriento, que es elegante y que combina a la perfección con el bitono negro y el aire gótico y victoriano del libro” (Victor). The vast majority of the *microrrelatos* have, as the author states, gothic tones: most are sinister, with dark humor scattered throughout the collection, and these elements are present from the very first *microrrelato* in the collection until the last. Curiously, the work is dedicated to Facebook. In an interview, Esteban Erlés discusses having met illustrator Sara Morante via Facebook and credits the social media giant for helping spread her work:

Por mi parte, puedo decirte que el embrión del libro surgió de mi propósito de ir escribiendo y colgando en mi muro un esbozo de texto muy breve al día, acompañado de una fotografía que me lo hubiera sugerido. Una especie de “éckfrasis”, de ejercicio que pusiera en relación la imagen y el texto. Me junté con un corpus numeroso de microcuentos entre los que seleccionamos los cien que nos parecieron mejores y que tenían una unidad temática. Con ese primer borrador fui puliendo los textos y después pasaron a Sara,

quien leyó sin ningún tipo de premisa por mi parte e ilustró aquellos que le atrajeron o inspiraron más. (Víctor)

The word *microrrelato* is often translated to very short fiction, brief fiction, or even short flash fiction; regardless, its brevity is only one of its qualities. According to David Lagmanovich, a *microrrelato* is qualified by three principles: concision, narrativity, and fictionality (Lagmanovich 87). In *Casa de muñecas*, many of the *microrrelatos* are no more than one single sentence; one of the shortest, “Carne fresca,” for example, is only ten words. Being that they are so brief, however, Lagmanovich points out the incontrovertible role of the title as fundamental to the text itself, stating that it has a tangible meaning in the text and therefore must be computed as an element of the text itself (91).

As for narrativity, there exist several definitions of narration. Lagmanovich classifies narrativity as having the internal quality of being able to be critiqued by literary criticism (87), which is in itself quite ambiguous. He further explains that the narrativity of a *microrrelato* is defined by a technique in which writers of microrrelatos

...disminuyen toda descripción hasta convertirla en insinuación; eliminan las digresiones, evitando cualquier tramo – cualquier desvío – que no implique un avance o progreso en la acción. Es un proceso que, observado históricamente, puede resultar alucinante. Si antes llamábamos “narrativa brevísima” a un relato de cuatro o cinco páginas, hoy sólo aplicamos este nombre a una pieza de narrativa de cuatro o cinco párrafos, luego nos centramos en los dos párrafos, en el párrafo único, y en unas cuantas líneas. El caso extremo lo proporcionan aquellos que escriben los textos que llamo “híperbreves”: composiciones de una o dos líneas de extensión. (89)

The author’s own idea of a microrrelato coincides quite well with that of Lagmanovich. In an interview, she states that

El microrrelato es todo un reto para mí. Cuando tienes más espacio para contar, entonces puedes crecer y extenderte en palabras y temática, pero cuando la historia pretendes que sea muy corta, tienes que llevar a cabo un proceso de jibarización, de esencialización de lo que quieres contar. El microrrelato es como la habitación de una casa de muñecas, donde hay de todo lo que encontrarías en una de verdad, pero a escala reducida. (Garrido)

Barbara Tversky, in discussing time and space and its relation with narrative structure, explains that the human brain “configures objects into scenes and actions into events,” leading to a minimalist definition of narrative being “a

representation of at least two events with temporal ordering between them” (Tversky 380). This cognitive definition of narrative couples well with Lagmanovich’s description of narrativity tending towards a minimalist structure.

Mathias Clasen asks another question that we can relate to these particularly sinister *microrrelatos*: what is it about horror stories that attracts a reader? Clasen attempts to answer that question with a biocultural approach, stating that “horror stories do not reflect empirical reality but rather the psychology of our species. The sustained generation and consumption of horror fiction over space and time suggest that a species-typical cognitive architecture for dealing with danger is brought into play by such stories” (222). Evolutionarily, fear is one of many emotions that have developed to eventually lead to our species; fear is quite deeply encoded in the mammalian brain, particularly the amygdala (Aubé et al.). Clasen points out that fear is one of our most primal, ancient emotions and that rats and humans behave much the same way (223).

Clasen also discusses other studies that conclude that the neuronal pathways that induce fear in real life situations, those that evolved over time, are the same ones that activate when engaged in horror fiction. The function, however, is quite different: the reader or viewer of horror fiction is aware that he or she is not in real danger, yet at the same time is able to experience the sensation. Clasen argues that this is yet another advantage of natural selection: people actually enjoy experiencing those emotions as it gives them a primitive learning experience, and evolutionarily, cognitive learning must have a reward system, otherwise it would never be done. He refers to this as “calibrating” our fear adaptations: “The need for calibration is a solution to the problem that human genes do not ‘know’ exactly which dangers their host will encounter during its life span, although they will have a pretty good idea” (227).

This is a more emotion-specific rendition of what Lisa Zunshine postulates in her book *Getting Inside Your Head* (2012). Zunshine claims that a reader is able to employ more theory of mind faculties in fiction than in real life; for that cognitive reason, fiction itself is often more interesting than real life, and it is for that reason that we read fiction to begin with—it gives us a way to “hone” our social cognitive faculties, theory of mind in particular (24). This idea gives merit to Clasen’s claim: theory of mind is related to empathy and social cognition, and as we will see, empathy with characters is involved in experiencing fear (Lehne et al.). It makes sense, then, that horror fiction could tantalize our cognitive faculties.

Not coincidentally, Lagmanovich argues similarly with regard to the reader’s involvement in the text: while a poem, for example, will passively say “Here I am,” a *microrrelato* will invite the reader to dialogue with it, saying “Here I am, tell me what you think of me” (92). He argues that with a *microrrelato* the reader is forced to participate in order to allow a literary comprehension of the text (93). Both Gerrig and Lagmanovich argue that the reader of fiction must be

cognitively engaged with the text and participate by predicting and inferring. In asking a reader to engage in fiction, we are reminded of Lagmanovich's observation that a writer's style, including the length of a text, changes and adapts to contemporary society. Recall that *Casa de muñecas* is dedicated to Facebook; it could be argued, then, that a twenty-first century reader is more accustomed to reading brief texts than readers of previous centuries, a *microrrelato* tempts the reader to engage in very few words before the reader is even given a chance to disengage from the text or lose interest, and thereby successfully elicits a p-response and entices the reader to continue to the next story.

The assumptions by Gerrig and Lagmanovich are not without empirical merit. Ulrike Altmann and colleagues (2014) have discussed the influence of paratextual information, such as the back cover of a book or physical context of the text (like being in a newspaper), on the reader's mind and interpretation of the text. In their research, participants were given brief, original texts and told that certain ones were either fictional or nonfictional. They were unaware that the texts were purely fictional. It is worth noting that these texts were considered "micro-narratives" ranging from forty-one to fifty-seven words, similar to the *microrrelatos* studied here. In fMRI analyses of the participants, very different parts of the brain were activated when a reader was lead to believe that the text was fictional versus nonfictional. Specifically, in reading fiction, there was notable activation in a region that is "involved in working memory, attention, action monitoring and pain perception," (26) among others. The study also correlates brain activity while reading fiction with social and moral reasoning, understanding motives, and running simulations about events that could have happened or may happen yet (27).

Others have also linked reading suspenseful texts with particular brain activation. According to Lehne et al., the reader's suspense is mediated through empathy and sympathy with characters, invoking fear, anger, or care emotions (3). In reading mere segments of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," participants reported the subjective sensation of suspense; these correlated with fMRI analyses of brain activation in areas associated with perception, prediction, anticipation, action, learning, and emotion. Just as the participants in the Altmann et al. study read brief texts, it is of note that the participants in Lehne et al. did not need to read the entire short story in order to report suspenseful sensations. The neuroanalyses in both studies were successfully able to measure these changes in cognitive activity. These all support Gerrig's claim that in reading suspenseful fiction the reader must continually predict and infer about situations; Lehne et al. also discuss the special importance of prediction and inference in reading suspense. The reader of *Casa de muñecas*, therefore, is aware that it is a work of fiction and thus enters the narrative experience with the mind ready for prediction and the emotional experience, just as it would be for a longer work of fiction.

A work of fiction is very cognitively involved, and thus the implications are numerous and varied, many of which are beyond the scope of the present study. Mark Turner explains throughout *The Literary Mind* that just because we call it “fiction,” does not mean it is necessarily “special” from a cognitive point of view; these cognitive processes are part of our constant, daily lives, and a given literary style simply “puts them on display” (preface 1). However, that is not to say that fiction is not highly cognitively involved. Lisa Zunshine, in *Why We Read Fiction* focuses on the novel, stating that the novel exists the way it does specifically because of our cognitive abilities as human beings: “As a sustained representation of numerous interacting minds, the novel feeds the powerful, representation-hungry complex of cognitive adaptations whose very condition of being is a constant social stimulation delivered either by direct interactions with other people or by imaginary approximation of such interactions” (10). I argue here that *microrrelatos*, for their hallmark brevity and thus fundamental difference from novels, are equally cognitive-rich works of fiction that can engage a reader in much the same way as a novel. Four *microrrelatos* from Esteban Erles’s publication will be analyzed in light of these theories of cognitive sciences. These four were chosen specifically for their brevity, being among the briefest in the book, in order to demonstrate that even the smallest of fictional texts can be as cognitively engaging as a larger piece of fiction.

An example of brevity, narrativity and fiction leading a reader to a nightmarish p-response is the aforementioned ten-word story in *Casa de muñecas*, “Carne fresca,” from the section entitled “Cocina”: “Me gusta abrir el frigorífico y que tú estés ahí” (104).

The reader enters the section aware of kitchen-related themes appearing in the stories. Under the title “Carne fresca,” it is natural for a reader to associate fresh meat itself with being in the kitchen, and particularly in a refrigerator. However, the shock comes from the second-person vocative clause, “y que tú estés ahí.” The title’s role insinuates that the “carne fresca” is the narrator’s interlocutor and that this interlocutor is inside of the refrigerator. The title is therefore an indispensable element of the text, just as Lagmanovich asserts. The narrator wastes no time in descriptions, but focuses instead on the two actions connected by the conjunction “and”: the opening of the refrigerator and the physical space of the interlocutor being a consequence of opening the refrigerator. This complies with Tversky’s minimalist description of narration, as there is a temporal ordering of events. Per Tversky, the segmentation of time through events is constructed by objects in space (384). We cognitively segment time into events based on objects, our perspective of the objects, and actions performed by, with, or on said objects. In this *microrrelato*, there are three objects: 1) the narrator, whose agency is realized in opening 2) the refrigerator, which is containing 3) the interlocutor, which (or who?) is actively observed after the specific action of opening a refrigerator. Opening the refrigerator is a physical, temporal process

that moves through space and time; at first, the presence of the “fresh meat” is not revealed, and does not exist until the refrigerator is opened. That the “fresh meat” is there is entirely dependent upon first opening the refrigerator, and therefore exemplifies this minimal idea of narrativity.

Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner discuss “mental spaces” in *The Way We Think* (2002). They define mental spaces as “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk” and that they are “connected to long-term schematic knowledge” (40). These spaces are fluid and are modified as discourse continues to evolve, and the blending of these mental spaces is “highly imaginative but crucial to even the simplest kinds of thoughts” (18). In describing the formation of new ideas or reaching understanding, or “conceptual integration,” the mental spaces are described in a quasi-structuralist manner: different “input spaces,” or mental spaces of more basic ideas, have certain qualities in common; these commonalities are in the “generic space” (41). The “blended space” is where the two separate ideas overlap, producing the new idea or understanding (42).

In the case of “Carne fresca,” there are several mental spaces with a variety of overlaps. The title provides the “fresh meat” input, bringing to mind all things associated with fresh meat. The interlocutor is in another mental space altogether, and we know that the interlocutor “is there,” possibly implying inside the refrigerator. The two input spaces overlap in the blended space with “carne” referring to “meat” as well as “flesh,” and the fact that the interlocutor “is there” (after opening the refrigerator) and fresh meat is often kept within a refrigerator. The reader may then generate an output space in which the interlocutor is somehow inside the refrigerator and that the first-person narrator views the interlocutor as “fresh meat,” implying that the narrator may consume the interlocutor, begging the morbid question: are the narrator and the interlocutor both human?

The next *microrrelato* is in the section “Dormitorio infantil,” titled “La niña sin madre.” From the title alone, explicitly referring to night terrors and alluding to the already-established dark themes present throughout the book, the reader’s schema are activated. This underlines Lagmanovich’s point once again that the title of the *microrrelato* is fundamental to its comprehension. While this particular *microrrelato* is longer than “Carne fresca,” it is still very brief and representative. The *microrrelato* is as follows:

La niña sin madre solía rezar por las noches, enterrada entre las sábanas frías, castigada a dormir bajo el crucifijo que habían arrancado de su ataúd, justo antes de sellar el nicho. *Mamita, yo te quiero, pero por favor, no te me aparezcas.*
(43)

The narrativity of this *microrrelato* is notably more obvious than in “Carne fresca” given the explicit subjects, verbs, and series of events: a tomb was sealed at some point, and afterwards a girl “solía rezar.” However, there is much more grammatical ambiguity in this *microrrelato* than the first, expanding the range of possible interpretations and understandings.

“La niña sin madre” would be understood in the context of this book as a girl whose mother has died, but it is the girl who is “enterrada” in her cold sheets, alluding to the possibility of the girl being the one who has died. She is being “punished” to sleep below the crucifix that was taken from her (the girl’s, or the mother’s?) coffin before her (again, who’s?) tomb was sealed. The girl prayed that her mother would not show herself to the girl—but which of the two are dead? It can be easy to imagine that the girl is alive, sleeping in her bedroom, punished (for an unexplained reason) to sleep under her dead mother’s crucifix; similarly, the girl could be the one in the tomb, “sleeping” under her crucifix, begging her living mother to not visit her grave. The reader must also ask: why did the girl pray this? The imperfect tense of the action “solía rezar” implies that it occurred repeatedly in the past, but not necessarily indicative of whether or not this action currently occurs in the present.

These two possible interpretations are certainly not limiting nor comprehensive. Regardless, arriving at these two understandings involves the same mental processes. For the sake of simplicity and to avoid redundancy, I will assume the first interpretation: the girl is alive and her mother has died. In one mental space resides the girl. In another, the mother, who has died. The shared space contains the relationship between the dead mother and her living daughter. The girl’s prayer, that her mother would not show herself, is in the blended space producing the ghost of the dead mother.

Curiously, many of the *microrrelatos* in *Casa de muñecas* are not isolated, but rather accompanied by illustrations by Sara Morante. These illustrations do not simply complement the text, but often amplify or concretize meaning in the brief textual experience. It has been postulated that combining at least two senses may enhance neurophysiological responses (Stafford and Webb). In her analysis of multimodal literature, Allison Gibbons argues that while many might claim that visual perception of an image and of a text are the same sense (visual), she cites numerous studies that argue that text perception and image perception involve different neural pathways (40). Gibbons analyzes a variety of text and image relations and their formation of a narrative, arguing that “word and image act in synchronicity, engaged in the production of a shared textual meaning” and that “multimodal novels may create more intense narrative experiences” (41). While her focus is on notably larger works of fiction, I would argue not only that the same holds true for *microrrelatos*, but that they play a noticeably more vital role in the narrative experience given the lack of textual information. If, as Lagmanovich says, the title is fundamental for a *microrrelato* as a narrative

element, then with Gibbs's assumption we could also say that, when present, the image accompanying a *microrrelato* is at least equally fundamental, if not more.

Dunning and Hajcak have empirically concluded that unpleasant images, such as those relating to trauma, hold a viewer's attention longer than more neutral images, postulating that it requires more cognitive processing for the viewer to comprehend the image (28). Specifically, drawing a viewer's attention to the unpleasant part of an image requires more cognitive processing as it is more emotionally charged than neutral parts of the image (31). Given this, in light of Gibbons's claim that images can enhance a textual narrative experience, we might say that if the image is "unpleasant," it may give a darker meaning to the text itself by working in conjunction with text, particularly very brief text.

An excellent example of this narrative-enhancing pairing is "El columpio" from the section entitled "Exteriores": "Me acuerdo de cuando confundimos la muerte con un columpio" (167). Isolated, this text is left for the reader to decipher. Pertaining to the section whose *microrrelatos* take place or are related to areas outside the dollhouse, "a swing" may be naturally assumed to be the common playground swing. Richard Anderson would argue that the reader's schema may not be properly activated: for example, in reading the sentence "the notes were sour because the seam was split," Anderson argues that many readers will get the feeling, although the sentence is grammatically correct, that it does not "make sense" (594). In being later provided with the word "bagpipe," however, the reader is able to make sense of the sentence as the words in conjunction activate the proper schema for understanding (595).

In the case of this *microrrelato*, which is in fact one single sentence, the proper schema must also be activated. In turning the page from 165 to 166, the reader is greeted first by a large image occupying the majority of page 166 in the book's hallmark colors of black and magenta. This image is a somewhat nightmarish lone black tree's silhouette on a black ground that seems to fade into rectilinear geometric arrangements, perhaps the tree's roots. In contrasting magenta, the only example of color in this image, a hangman's noose is depicted hanging from the tree. The reader sees the image of the tree and noose on the left, and then reads on the right about confusing death and a swing. Per conclusions made by Dunning and Hajcak, the reader's eyes are probably focused on the magenta noose contrasting against the black tree, the relatively unpleasant and visually striking part of the image, and therefore the reader recognizes and processes the noose. The reader is then cognitively primed for the *microrrelato*. Given the image of a noose, then, the reader understands the reference to a swing being the noose itself, and the sinister p-response is achieved.

The enhanced narrative experience by wedding the image with the text may be more than a simple matter of schema activation, however. Here, we can also turn to conceptual integration as an explanation in terms of mental spaces. This may account for the convergence of image and minimal text in the narrative

experience of *microrrelatos*. In one mental space, the reader understands the image linked with his or her schema: noose, death, outside, hanging, suicide, execution, and more. In another mental space, the text provides a variety of schema-linked concepts: swing, playground, slide, childhood. In the generic space, the term “swing” is something the two concepts have in common: a body swings from a noose and child’s swing. Therefore, in the blended space, one can imagine a child viewing a noose as a rope swing of some kind and the enhanced narrative experience is produced involving the reader’s p-response to the macabre.¹

The fourth and final example I wish to examine here is relatively long in comparison to the previous two texts, but still a very brief fictional, narrative text, consisting of 148 words. It is entitled “Tres gatos negros” in the section “Cuarto de juguetes”:

A la loca la seguían siempre tres gatos negros como las moras. Cuando nos la tropezábamos en plaza, mi madre hacía la señal de la cruz con disimulo y yo me daba la vuelta para mirarla. Ella solía caminar sin zapatos, con el filo de un camisón blanco asomando por debajo del abrigo que olía a sangre. Un día se le quemó la casa con ella dentro. La vimos bailar de habitación en habitación, hecha un manojo de llamas. A lo que llegaron los bomberos no quedaban ni los huesos. Yo pregunté por los gatos, sus tres gatos negros. ¿Qué gatos? La loca vivió siempre sola, ni sombra tenía, me interrumpió mi madre. Al parecer, ella no los vio pasear por el pueblo, como si fueran sus dueños. Tampoco los ve ahora, tumbados sobre el edredón de mi cama, tentándome para que salga de noche a caminar descalza. (39)

Before arriving to this *microrrelato*, as we have seen, the reader’s mind is already primed for the emotional and cognitive consequences of reading fiction. In particular, given the macabre or sinister themes of previous stories, upon reaching this *microrrelato* the reader’s schema for such things has been activated. The title alone would provoke concepts of evil, witchcraft, darkness and more. The grotesque image of the woman burning alive being specifically described as “dancing” from room to room leaves an unsettling feeling, building the reader’s suspense by playing into cognitive uncertainty: why was she crazy? Why did her coat smell like blood? Why did her house catch fire to begin with?

Even the narrator’s uncertainty had been leading to her own suspense, being curious enough to turn around and look at the crazy lady with her three black cats, then later asking about the cats. The uneasy feeling builds as the reader learns, along with the narrator, that the mother has never seen the cats. The

¹ Research in multimodal narrative experiences, including text and image, are vast and the author is continuing investigations in this field. See also Gibbons, Alison. *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012.

reader puts the information into mental spaces: the narrator sees the cats in the first input space, and the mother *not* seeing cats in the second input space. In the generic space, the crazy woman was barefoot in the square. From the blended space emerges the idea that only the girl can see the cats, that they are invisible to some people. Uncertainty builds as the reader subconsciously asks why the mother is unable to see the cats, but the girl can.

Finally, the narrator switches from speaking in the past tense to the present tense: the cats are currently on the narrator's bed, tempting her to do precisely what she witnessed the crazy woman doing before the fire. Again, we have a new blended space by combining the input space of the past—the woman walking barefoot with the cats—and the present—the narrator being tempted, not asked or forced, but tempted to walk barefoot at night. In the generic space exists the idea of walking barefoot and three black cats. From the blended space then emerges the sinister black cats that must have “tempted” the crazy woman (who may not have originally been crazy) to leave the house barefoot before she finally did, and now they are tempting the narrator. It would not be a far stretch either to say that the black cats somehow lead to the fire that completely consumed the woman, and in doing so, we know that the narrator is in danger. The suspense, however, is not resolved in the text. It is in fact the last sentence of the text that leads to the most suspenseful blended space, and its irresolution is the factor that reaffirms the negative emotions, such as fear, in the reader's p-response.

The smallest amount of narrative fiction involves a surprising amount of cognitive processes from the part of the reader. In “Carne fresca,” “La niña sin madre,” y “Tres gatos negros,” the reader relies solely on textual input, yet undergoes complex predicting, inferring, and juggling of different minds: narrator and interlocutor; girl and mother; and girl, mother, lady and cats, respectively. The same is true of “El columpio,” but with the added input of the macabre image of a tree. In the shortest two, “Carne fresca” and “El columpio,” the narrative experience actually depends a great deal on the title, as Lagmanovich has argued. Title, text, and image, when present, work together in a highly-involved cognitive undertaking in order to produce a narrative experience.

The highly imaginative processes used in blending mental spaces is surprisingly necessary and common even for the smallest of thoughts, as Fauconnier and Turner point out; fiction is a way to put these processes on display to be used as a sort of “playground” for our cognition. The reader enjoys these imaginative processes in reading even small pieces of fiction, as small as a few words, yet is able to reach complex conclusions. In reflecting on the engagement of the reader for these “hyperbrief” literary pieces, Lagmanovich reminds us that current readers are less willing to spend time on reading literature given a faster, busier lifestyle. However, while the text is very brief, a reader is still able to be quite engaged in the narrative experience, and in the specific case of these dark,

sinister *microrrelatos*, perhaps enjoys the unresolved feelings suspense created by so few characters.

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