

The Short Story: Editor's Critique

Client Reference: EC00087

Name: [REDACTED]

Short story: When We Speak of Dreams

Date: 07/04/15

This critique will take two approaches:

- 1) Outline general impressions after a single reading – the sort of things your readers will be feeling and thinking after finishing your story.
- 2) Provide more detailed feedback after several readings – giving the text the sort of attention you should expect from competition judges, literary agents, and critics.

General Impressions

This is an excellent story with a powerful ending. The plot moves at a good pace and the details are both striking and revealing.

The major flaw lies with the digression about the couple's cat. This adds very little: consider cutting.

The dialogue is pleasingly spare, but beware becoming too obscure. The voice of Benjamin is most effective and affecting – it's clear he's in control of the situation and provides a refreshing juxtaposition with Daisy.

Your portrayal of Daisy's incomprehension and loss is impressively relatable, though it would be worth pushing this character further – currently she could be accused of being overly two-dimensional.

The revelation about their child is unexpected without appearing to slip into the 'trick' structure. This twist is one of the story's strongest features and gives the story excellent shape.

Detailed Feedback

The opening and ending of this work is extremely strong. Even the title is well-worded and alluring. The first paragraph captures the obsessive energy of Benjamin with striking detail: the worn posters on the wall, the coffee mugs filled with cigarette butts, the books half read and dog-eared. It's just enough to

capture the feel of a creative, self-indulgent soul – he’s playing a part, as much as he is one (the film *Withnail and I* came to mind).

The contrast with his wife, Daisy, is amusing and immediately provides the all-important confrontation that is so necessary to fiction. Even this character’s name – a cute, bright flower – juxtaposes the dark squalor of her husband. I would scrap the detail about her wearing a ‘floral dress’ – given her name, it’s contrived.

The dialogue is very snappy and one of the strengths of the piece. As stated earlier, try not to be too obscure. Read Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants’ for an example of a story that ingeniously uses the simple word ‘it’ to refer to multiple things; pared writing that reveals just enough to understand what’s going on.

In many ways this short story had the feel of a screenplay or theatre script and while not a negative feature, I suggest interspersing the occasional detail and description between the speeches; Richard Yates is a master of domestic scenes and is able to write interruptions, pauses, and sharp comebacks, all with a painful verisimilitude.

The line, ‘wanking onto canvas’ was well-placed, though just a caution over becoming *too* vulgar; some readers/judges/critics believe anything goes, but others have more reserved tastes.

There are a couple of weaker paragraphs. Namely the one beginning, ‘Benjamin raised the paintbrush and dipped it into the pot’ and also, ‘The door squeaked open and in walked Chips, their ginger cat’. They slow the drama down. Some of the sentences are too long and the drama too stilted. Although the movement towards reconciliation is important, you should work at maintaining the urgency so quickly established at the beginning.

Comb through the text and slim down some of lines – you could probably cut a good 10%.

I’ve provided a few questions which would be worth thinking about and will lend more focus to your piece:

1. How did Daisy and Benjamin get into their predicament?
2. Why did Daisy marry Benjamin?
3. What is it that she sees in her husband?
4. What is Benjamin trying to do with his art?
5. How successful is he as an artist?
6. What do both parents feel about their son?

Considering these questions will help bridge some of the uncertainties and fill in the small plot/character holes that surface through a second or third reading.

Generally, the narrative is consistent, the tone strong (particularly Benjamin), and the dialogue sharp. The beginning and ending are particularly impressive. If you take the time to work on the middle section, you should have a story that could do very well.