

## Evaluation

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Editor:

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Work: “[REDACTED],” short story, 16 pages

“[REDACTED]” is an evocative story evocatively told. You bring to life the rotten smell of present-day British colonialism, the last few holdouts lording it over the brown-skinned locals, unlike everyone else oblivious that their way of life is a stinking corpse. You start off well, establishing with a few deft strokes the exotic (to us, maybe not to you) setting and the mystery of [REDACTED]. You do a great job with [REDACTED] himself, first painting him through the eyes of the Hanafords as a pathetic fallen husk of a man, and then portraying him in person as a rejuvenated person—in control, wise, and self-aware.

But I don’t think “[REDACTED]” fulfills its potential. I found the story disappointing in that you introduce three interwoven stories, and only develop one, thus leaving the impression at the end that the story is less than it at first seemed to be.

You set up the Hanafords—the first people we meet, and whom we see more of in fact than █████—for a comeuppance or revelation of some kind. They sit up in their box like smug vultures—and at the end there they still are, unchanged, a missed opportunity to give your story a whole new level of plot and meaning. For example, perhaps it could come out—even just as a hint—that they are miserably unhappy together but are too attached to their gilded cage to escape. Perhaps Rosie, under her husband’s nose, bangs the Malay ball boy at the club or something; or Dex might simply catch an exchange of glances and/or money between Rosie and the handsome young waiter. And to weave this development in, it should somehow come to light as a result of █████’s presence.

Dex, too, has a story—not his past story, a fairly mundane one at this point of a failed marriage, but a present one—which I thought you introduced with a skillful twist until its lack of development made me wonder if it was inadvertent. At the start he declares himself an American, a journalist, and something of an outsider, thus establishing his credentials as an observer at least somewhat independent of the Hanafords and their ilk. His apparent friendship for █████, strong enough to transcend the fall from grace, demonstrated by his seeking █████ out in the bar, makes Dex an even more sympathetic character. And then, suddenly on p. 8, he’s lying to █████ and trying to catch him out in a lie. (His rationalization of it as politeness on p. 9 makes Dex seem ever more the weasel.) Now you could take out Dex’s lies and turn him into the frank Yank, but then you’d simply have removed the third plot strand rather than weaving it in strongly. What might lie underneath Dex’s surface that accounts for his initially shoddy treatment of █████ and would somehow come to light and be changed? (I could even see Dex deciding to look for Uli at the end.)

I want to stress that I'm not simply riffing on your story and telling you how I'd rewrite it if it were mine. A short story usually satisfies the reader with a turn, a twist at the end, either a revelation that gives us a whole new insight into a state of affairs, or an actual change in it. You do this nicely with [REDACTED], but not with your two other theaters of action, which beg for it. The result is something of a letdown.

I'm not saying a short story needs a three-strand plot; most don't have one. But like it or not, you've introduced three. To give Dex and the Hanafords no other duties than to serve as media for [REDACTED]'s story turns them into little more than deadwood—deadwood the reader spends a lot of time with. And it would only take a few more sentences (combined with a couple of really bright ideas) and then some retracing of steps to plant the seeds, to turn these characters into real players and immensely enhance your story.

So much for structure. Your style is almost always fluid and vivid. I can only make a few suggestions, some specific, some general.

Most importantly, you indulge in repetition a little too much—Uli's age, for example, the story of how she and [REDACTED] met, that she was a chambermaid, or the details of his or Dex's life. Just plain repetition saps power from your story as the reader takes a moment to remind you that we already know this or that because you told us earlier.

Your story has a little twist on this though, which you could work up into a leitmotif. The heart of the telling is that Dex gets one version of [REDACTED]'s upheaval from the Hanafords and a slightly different one from [REDACTED] himself—but oh what a difference.

A recounting of Dex's own marriage woes to the Hanafords, for instance, might similarly contrast to his confession to [REDACTED].

You'd strengthen your story to delete all useless repetition, and to make sure that every needful repetition differs from its original in some key, telling way. For example, Dex's "She came in the room?" has little impact on the reader because we already know Uli was a chambermaid; if, on the other hand, we'd heard she was a "waitress or something," his line would work very well. The reader would quickly catch on and wait with delighted anticipation for the little differences between what was said in the Hanaford's box and what Dex and [REDACTED] impart to each other.

Now to the smaller details. Dex's description of himself as "lanky, flat-speaking" seems a bit vain and out of character—not that he *is* those things but that he'd *say* them about himself. If you really think these are important details, let someone else say them about him.

P. 4 gets a bit confusing in that it seems to say that [REDACTED] lost his job *before* he took up with Uli, which contradicts all other accounts.

Your dialogue mechanics, generally quite good, aren't always as smooth as they might be. One offender is the occasional unnecessary speaker attribution, as here and there in the conversation between Dex and [REDACTED] where we almost always know who's speaking without having to be told. Also, you sometimes place your speaker attribution at the end of a multi-sentence passage of dialogue, where it's too late to do it's job, as on p. 5, where Hanny describes Uli.

Little errors in spelling and punctuation may seem too trifling to mention, but they can accumulate to tarnish the writer's image, even if subliminally. Here's a list of some of yours I ran across:

- P. 3, “ubu”—should that be Ubu (capitalized) or something else?
- Ages as adjectives get hyphenated: fifteen-year-old, eighty-year-old.
- Kuala Lumpur (instead of Lumper)
- P. 6, “town and country” would be less of a syntactical stumbling block if hyphenated to clearly form a single modifier: town-and-country.
- I like “turban-doffed” except for one small problem—“doff” means to take off, and I’ve never seen a Sikh doff his turban in public.
- Blonde (with an e at the end) is a feminine (and to some, a sexist) spelling, not applicable to [REDACTED].
- “Anymore” on p. 9, in this meaning, should be “any more” (two words).
- Loudmouth is one word.
- “Close-up” is a photographic term that means something very different than “close up,” which is what I think you wanted on p. 15.

I hope this helps. I'd be more than happy to read your next draft. If you want some more detailed instruction on plotting, dialogue mechanics, or any of the other subjects I brought up, just ask. Meanwhile, if you have any questions about this evaluation or would like to discuss any of it, please don't hesitate to call or email.

Good luck with your writing.

Peter Gelfan