

Critique: *Available Light*

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## **Critique summary**

Dear [REDACTED],

Thank you so much for trusting me with this draft of *Available Light*. I feel highly privileged to have been able to read the draft and found in it many unique and powerful elements.

Starting out, I'll comment on the premise of the story, which I found intriguing and original. I'll also note how impressed I was with your dialogue, action scenes, and fleshed-out characters as an emerging writer. The main body of the critique will respond to your question about how to

reduce the length of the draft, centering on the idea that the current execution of the story may be more like a novel outline than a "real" short story. I'll cover the differences between the two and give a few suggestions of how you might move towards a more short-story-like structure in future drafts, which may give the piece more immersivity with the added bonus of a lower word count.

Beyond these ideas, I'll comment on some linguistic matters such as the interaction of high and low registers in the prose, the word "Ma'asonite", and the title, as well as some formatting details. I'll finish with a summary of recommendations and a few writing exercises to inspire the imagination for future drafts.

I am honored to be a part of the development of *Available Light*, and hope that my comments will be helpful in future iterations of the drafting process.

## **Content and structure**

*Strength: Compelling premise and opening scene*

I was truly intrigued by the story's premise: A King and Queen must hide their son's magical nature. The format felt pleasantly familiar (with a magical couple trying to prevent their child's inevitable future, like in *Sleeping Beauty*), but also new and exciting. The idea of using the artifacts to suppress the boy's magic was very interesting and filled me with suspense. As in *Sleeping Beauty*, the parents' plan must eventually fail... but how? I couldn't wait to find out what would happen.

*Author statement: This was my first attempt to write engaging dialogue and action scenes... Another goal i was aiming for was well fleshed out 3D characters*

You did very well for your first time! I felt that the characters were fleshed-out and I appreciated the attention paid to the execution of both dialogue and action. These are valuable skills you will need going forward as you develop your craft and experiment with different formats.

*Author question: If you see a way to get it to 6k words im all ears... i cant see what else i can take out without detracting from the story's plot and making it unclear or bleaching out my characters*

Certainly. I can offer some concrete recommendations in this area.

The main thing I kept thinking as I read your draft was that it felt more like a novel outline than a short story.

Liminalpages.com summarizes the difference between novels and short stories thus:

- A novel is a journey – not only for the characters, but for the writer and the reader.
- A short story is an intense experience – something to linger over and savour.

The article goes on to explain that the novel can cover many plots, themes, characters, and events in depth, whereas a short story mainly focuses on one main character, one main plot point, and a more limited/focused spectrum of themes.

I found that this draft of *Available Light* takes more of a novel-like approach to composition, spanning many plot points and trying to treat several main characters with equal depth.

I can see how that happened if your goal was to sharpen your skills with different kinds of characters and scenes! However, though that is always good practice, not all of these different elements will belong in the final draft of a short story.

So, let me get more specific about how these ideas relate to *Available Light*.

In both short stories and novels, a lot of the nature of the complete work is determined by its premise: The initial conditions set out for the characters, world, and reader. For example, the premise of *The Little Mermaid* is that Ariel longs to walk on land, but it seems impossible. From this premise emerges the entire rest of the story, including the resolution at the end.

Carrying out the potential of the premise is important for both novels and short stories, but of the two, the short story tends to stick much more closely to the premise and explore it in-depth. In turn, longer-form works have more room to explore related concepts and events in the middle before returning to the premise as a source of resolution at the end.

Going back to the example of *The Little Mermaid*, the original short story version by Hans Christian Anderson has far fewer plot points and characters than the movie version does. The power of the movie comes from the range of interesting and compelling situations it can show to the reader, which are all still connected (but some more loosely) to the premise. Meanwhile, the power of the short story version comes from the close adherence to the premise, only one main character (the mermaid), and a deep exploration of just a few themes.

If we apply this idea to the current draft of *Available Light*, we can start to see that its structural approach is currently more like a novel than a short story. The premise (a King and Queen must hide their son's magical nature) is followed by a large range of characters and events, instead of focusing closely on just one main character and event. A more short-story-like future draft might find interesting ways to explore the premise more fully, capitalizing on the strong, intriguing premise I admired so much at the beginning.

When I started the story, I couldn't wait to find out what would happen with the artifacts, how the parents' plan would fail, and what the consequences would be. But as soon as things began to get more complicated, with the Ma'asonites and the sorceress, for example, I found myself wondering what it all had to do with the premise – a question I likely would not have had if I were reading the novel version.

As a short story, this piece would only be one or two major plot points. So instead of having the longer scene with the diggers, Lenadrin's escape, Lanoa and Guill's romantic scene by the lake, the appearance of the Ma'asonites, the showdown with the sorceress, and the showdown with Denet, only one of those things would happen and be explored more in-depth. Alternatively, a different plot point could be selected (or created from scratch) that would maximize the potential of the premise.

Similarly, in a more short-story-like execution, the piece might focus on just one main character and their experience: The King, the Queen, or the Prince. The chosen character would have interiority for the reader (we would know their thoughts and feelings) whereas the secondary characters like Tanbi, Denet, Lanoa, and the diggers would not have interiority or significant background. Instead of being 3D characters for their own sake, they would exist to support the development of the main character.

A few things in particular struck me as "extra", or in other words too far outside the premise, in the current draft if it's meant to stay as a short story (as opposed to a novel). Now, I want to preface these observations by saying that I know there was a good reason you included each of these things. I'm not saying they are "bad" ideas generally, far from it! My only goal is to suggest that they may fit better into a novel rather than a story.

- Interiority/background for Tanbi in Chapter 2: This may be adding length, and since Tanbi is not a main character, this extra embellishment may not be necessary in a short story (though it would be a good in a novel version).
- Interiority/background for Denet on pages 4-5. As a supporting character, we might not need to be inside his head in the story version.

- The focus on the experience of the diggers in Chapter 4: They are not main characters, so getting into their heads to such an extent might not be necessary for the short story version. Could the fundamental detail that one of the diggers escapes with his knowledge be communicated in some other way?
- The Ma'asonites, the sorceress, and Denet: All three of these elements may possibly be too far outside the premise to belong in the short story version. Perhaps one of them (Ma'asonites or Denet?) could exist as the antagonist in the short story. But if all three of them are to appear, a novel might be a more appropriate venue.
- The premise of the story and opening chapters feel like a fairytale, but starting around Chapter 8 the story transforms into the fantasy/action genre. Novels can blend these kinds of genre elements easily, but generally, stories are expected to have more genre/tone consistency from beginning to end.

If you would like to read more about the structural differences between short stories and novels, I recommend reading the rest of the Liminalpages.com article here:

<https://www.liminalpages.com/the-difference-between-short-story-and-novel-writing>.

It's well worth the time for someone who plans to continue to write short stories, or novels, or both.

The Writing Cooperative also has a good article on short stories vs novels. One quote I especially liked was, "While you have all the liberty in the world to explore the full three-act structure in a novel, you only have enough space to write just a segment of the three-act structure in a short story." You can read the whole thing here:

<https://writingcooperative.com/no-short-stories-are-not-novels-this-is-how-to-write-a-short-story-58ea015f912d>

From the success you have already had with fleshing out your characters, action scenes, and dialogs, I am full of optimism for your future drafts. All it will take is getting a bit more intentional about the short story structure in order to focus deeply on the elements at the story's core.

I'm also wondering whether you plan to turn the existing draft into a novel, or even a whole series! It reads a lot like a book outline. I'd be interested in receiving progress updates if you ended up going in that direction.

## Language

*To consider: Higher and lower registers clashing?*

In terms of language, one thing I wondered about in the current draft was register consistency. For most of the draft, the register is the middle-high diction typical of fairytale/fantasy stories. However, at certain points, low-register, slangy elements come in which stand out against the high-register backdrop (for example on page 1, “The Queen is okay, Your Highness”; or on page 4, “Holy frick how do we keep him from the sun?!”). At these points, immersivity was somewhat broken for me due to the abrupt change in register.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to the use of low/modern/slangy register in fairytale/fantasy stories! It can be great if used strategically. But in this draft, I wasn't always sure if it was done with intention or by accident.

In future drafts of the story, it might be fruitful to consider how the low register moments can be made to feel more intentional. One possibility might be simply to include more of them, and/or to tone down the height of the register in other spots so the contrast isn't as extreme.

*To consider: The word "Ma'asonite"*

While reading, I had a nagging thought that I had seen the word "Ma'asonite" before. Then a few hours later I remembered where: Masonite is a treated, multi-purpose wood material.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masonite>

To be honest, it was hard to take the Ma'asonites as seriously after I remembered about Masonite the material. I think Masonite is pretty common, so a proportion of readers might be distracted by it like I was. In future drafts, it might be worthwhile to consider changing the name of the group to something that would not run the risk of reminding readers of a product in our modern world.

*To consider: Title*

When I first read the title of *Available Light*, I was anticipating a contemporary fiction story, possibly urban, with literary fiction/existential undertones. Even after I got a good way through the book and knew for sure that it was nothing of the kind, the feeling generated by my initial impression of the title lingered distractingly. The word "available" has a strong contemporary feeling to me, calling to mind real life topics rather than a world of fantasy, and those perceptions are hard to shake.

*Available Light* is a perfectly serviceable title, but still, I couldn't help but wonder whether there might be a more suitable candidate lurking within the text that could evoke the fairytale/fantasy feeling at the manuscript's heart.

## **Layout and technical elements**

The story's layout is fairly good for this stage of drafting. The font is clear and easy to read, and spacing and page numbers are consistent.

There are a few suggestions I could make, however. One might be to indent every paragraph for a more professional look. Another might be to consider using not Chapters to divide sections of the story, but rather dividers (either using longer spaces between sections or a visual mark, such as " \* \* \* "). That would signal "short story" rather than "short novella" or "novel outline".

These formatting tweaks would help agents, editors, and publishers feel more connected to the manuscript the moment they see it. Before submitting this to any journals, it might be beneficial to review the short story formatting guidelines here:

<https://www.scribophile.com/academy/how-to-format-a-short-story-manuscript>

I also noticed some little punctuation flubs here and there, especially with commas. I've marked a few of them in-line on the story draft attached to this critique so you can keep an eye out for them in future drafts.

*To consider: Splitting up long paragraphs, particularly when action is involved*

The biggest recommendation I can make, formatting-wise, is to be mindful of when paragraphs would benefit by being split up into smaller ones.

I admired you for making a point to practice character building, dialogue, and action scenes in the book. The action scenes were strong, especially towards the end. To increase the effectiveness of the writing even further, it may be useful to consider whether long paragraphs might sometimes cause the action to drag.

One example would be the very long paragraph from page 23 to 24. A huge amount of detail is given in this paragraph to the point where it becomes fatiguing to look at. As I neared the middle of the paragraph, I kept losing my place. The action itself is exciting, but formatting-wise, these are not the optimum conditions for a reader to enjoy what is going on.

To allow the action to proceed rapidly and the reader to feel immersed, it might be a good idea to separate some of the longer action paragraphs into shorter ones in future drafts. This would give the reader's eye a brief rest so they could parse the exciting moment they've just witnessed before moving onto the next.

In the in-line comments, I've marked some of the longer paragraphs that might possibly benefit from being split up. Before you make decisions, it might be useful to read these two articles about when and why to split paragraphs:

<https://sandragerth.com/structure-paragraphs/>

<https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/how-to-use-paragraph-breaks/>

## **Recommendations**

The main assets of the current manuscript are the compelling premise as well as the admirable efforts made to fully realize dialogue, action, and characterizations. However, as discussed, the scope of the current draft may go beyond what is appropriate for a short story, making it feel more like a novel outline. Going forward, it could possibly be beneficial to study up on the structural differences between short stories and novels and to then make decisions on how to restructure the story with a closer focus on one main character, plot event, and smaller body of themes. Some examination might also be given to linguistic matters like the interactions between higher and lower registers, the word "Ma'asonite", and the story's title. Finally, the story's formatting could be tightened up before submissions, including breaking up longer action paragraphs into smaller ones to maximize immersivity.

## **Exercises**

1. Journal on the story's main ideas. If you could only choose one major plot point, what would it be? If you could only choose one main character for interiority and background, who would they be? Why?
2. Read the articles linked above about breaking up long paragraphs into smaller ones. Then locate and break up the long paragraphs on pages 16, 17, and 23-24 of the current draft. What changes do the paragraph breaks make in the flow of action and readability?
3. Set a timer for 5 minutes. On an 8.5x11 sheet of paper, write down as many central images, themes, and phrases from the book as you possibly can. Do not stop to reread what has been written - the point is to generate as much material as possible. Set the list



aside for 24 hours, then look again. Do any of these images, themes, and phrases point the way forward on a new title? This exercise can be repeated if necessary.