

Critique of *A Great Thinker* by ____

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Critique Summary

Content and structure

- Strength: Well-written prose with a conflict and a resolution.
- Strength: story about family relationship with a hole in it that has believable characters.
- Strength: irony and humor used throughout.
- Strength: contains surprises, contrasts, and symbols
- To consider: opening descriptions too long
- To consider: more scenes, less exposition, and flash forwards.
- To consider: Develop--what does Jason want? Why is Brian so angry? What does the dad want besides to think about things?
- To consider: deepening the relationships and conflicts in the family and developing the reasons the mother left her husband and children. How do they feel about that? How does that play into the dynamic between the sons and dad?

Language

- Strength: great description and dialogue

- To consider: clarifying and developing scenes as opposed to summaries of behaviors and actions
- To consider: Do more with the symbol of the hole, being deep and dark, containing and erasing

Critique Summary

Dear ____:

Thank you for sending in “A Great Thinker.” It is a compelling and well-written story that captures the manifestation of a family’s conflict through a deep hole the dad has dug (himself into). He claims he needs a place to think there, but as he says later, you “can do that anywhere.” Therefore, the story should mine the meanings of the hole--with depth and exploration which will add emotional resonance. The strength is that such a topic shows vulnerability and conflict between a father and his sons, so relatable.

I will suggest considerations for revising the structure and content of the piece if you decide to rewrite. I will be asking you questions and providing some scene-building exercises that I think will be helpful.

- To consider: opening descriptions are long

The opening three paragraphs work well in part because the set up suggests that the dad, as observed by Jason “is in the act of doing wrong” (1). A reader may think that the dad is going to bury a body; this indirection makes

it all the more interesting that the dad wants a deep hole in which to “think” which is a provocative idea. However, what are the most important details for the reader to know in the opening? Does it matter how long it took to dig the hole, and that the dirt became darker? Does it matter what the workers are wearing? Cut whatever is not necessary to increase the tension, move the story and introduce conflict. What does matter is that Jason is afraid to come outside. He has to sneak his peeks. That the dad does not share feelings with his kids and that he needs to isolate himself to “think.”

- To consider: Not telling us in advance that the mom will leave

In this story, there is a lot of telling and flashing forward. For me, too much. Consider a scene where it’s revealed why the mom is leaving, and in that scene, you could also establish the difference between Jason and Brian. Set up scenes that contrast the brothers, rather than telling us that one is angry and one is happy. Also consider having them go against type. Sometimes let Brian be happy and Jason be angry. Try to consider what might have contributed to Brian’s drinking problem before it manifests.

- To consider: Why hadn’t Jason looked his dad in the eyes before? (p. 3)

What showed me he could be afraid of his dad, or that his dad had a temper was that Jason watches his dad in the hole through a mirror, and on page 4, I felt the dad’s passive aggression when he threatens to “kill” Brian if he curses in front of his mother (not sure why that evokes such hostility). That felt extreme. So, if the dad has a temper, establish that earlier. Did he ever hit the boys? Or his wife? Did he feel that women need protection? Does he have nostalgic memories about his wife and when the boys were little?

- To consider: do more with the symbol of the hole. Rather than list many topics the dad thinks about, develop a scene around one of the ideas, like you did with “roots.”

When Brian pees in the hole, that makes sense and how the hole “soaks” it in along with everything else like isolation, estrangement, anger, thinking. I felt you could do more with symbolism. Same with another topic the dad mentions—develop one of them and see where it can resonate like roots did—it was kind of surprising that before, Jason did not know about his grandmother’s Russian background. That the family had not discussed it.

- To consider: How to advance the story without jumping ahead to college and beyond. Fill in the holes you leave with more scenes. How does the dad parent alone? Do Jason and Brian miss their mother? Do the boys become self-sufficient? Develop Brian’s feelings about dad beyond calling him “weird.” Make sure that each scene advances the story. You may want to free write in a notebook, by asking yourself questions like “why is Brian so embarrassed by his dad?” “What do Jason and Brian like to do together?” You might get material you can use.
- To consider: other possible endings

Maybe the narrator wants to keep the hole. Maybe they bury their dad there. More is needed to show the family’s dynamic and there should be a somewhat unpredictable yet emotionally resonant ending.

Here are some questions for you to answer that I think will help with a revision if you think about writing more scenes and cutting less important details.

Seven Questions for Writing Scenes with Intention

There are so many ways to think about SCENE STRUCTURE.

But one way to ensure that your scenes develop organically from your protagonist's needs and desires, rather than episodically as a result of circumstances befalling him/her, is to consider seven basic questions:

1. What is your viewpoint character's **intention** upon entering/embarking upon the scene?
2. What drives your character (**motivation**) and why does it matter (**stakes**)?
3. What character or force is present to **interfere** with that intention?
4. What does the **opposition** character or force **intend** for that moment?
5. In what **overt** ways is the viewpoint character's intention made clear to the reader?
6. In what ways is your viewpoint character made to **adapt/change strategies** during the scene?
7. Does your viewpoint character **succeed or fail**? What are the repercussions for the rest of the story?

I enjoyed reading "A Great Thinker." Thanks for sending it in and best of luck with it.

CJF