

Critique: "The N Word"

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Critiquer: Annie Mydla

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Dear [REDACTED],

Thank you so much for allowing me to offer my thoughts on "The N Word". I was impressed by the sophistication of the composition of this story. It deploys a series of reversals to keep the reader intrigued, emotionally off-balance, and learning about the internal, interpersonal, and social damage caused by racism. Style-wise, the story is focused, fast-paced, and stylistically immersive. I certainly think it has publication potential.

In this critique, I'll first respond to the theme and plot points I found so well-conceived and well-handled, then move to a few suggestions about where the current flow of events could be reinforced for maximum reader immersion.

In particular, I would like to complement the overall structure of the piece. In less than 2.5k words, it covers several linked, but distinct, stages of action and ideas, each initiated by a plot twist. This is incredibly difficult to achieve, yet you make it look easy and natural. Once I realized what was going on, I wanted to stand up and cheer. I made a list of the stages as I understood and my reactions to each twist, and will share them here:

1. Ms. Hall receives an unwelcome phone call from an unpleasant caller
2. Twist one: Mr. James makes unforgivable racist remarks, including using the N word
 - a. My assumptions at this point:
 - i. James is white
 - ii. Clarissa and Glenda don't know about James's behavior
3. James pressures Ms. Hall to agree with his racist remarks; she feels pressured, and uneasily tempted, to say she that she too is white
4. Ms. Hall argues within herself about what to do, questioning her own motives. Then she says she is white

5. James says that he knew Ms. Hall was white from the way she speaks
6. Foreshadowing: James says he is "a great defender" of Ms. Hall's race. This sounds odd in the moment and makes sense later
7. Glenda questions why Ms. Hall said she is white
8. Twist two: Glenda and Clarissa already know about James's behavior
 - a. My reaction at this point:
 - i. Clarissa and Glenda already have the power of awareness. The situation is deeper than I expected
9. Ms. Hall tells Glenda and Clarissa exactly what James said
10. Twist three: Ms. Hall learns James is black
 - a. My reaction at this point:
 - i. Again, the situation is deeper than I expected. It also now sounds like there are likely other factors at play here (Sexism? Colorism? Internalized racism on the part of James? Other?)
11. Ms. Hall, Glenda, and Clarissa have some friction between them as they try to gauge each other's motives, priorities, and reactions
12. Clarissa's speech on page 7 plants a new seed of solidarity between the women that grows until the end of the story
13. Twist four: Glenda resolves to file a harassment suit against James
 - a. My reaction at this point:
 - i. Bitter at the situation but supportive of the women. I had come to realize at this point that James, though black, was a conduit for systemic racism (and possibly sexism, colorism, or other). However, it was hard for me to separate his personal responsibility for the abuse of the women from the idea that he also was the victim of the structural racism he is trapped in. I knew that punishing him would not eliminate the systemic problems that created the situation. At the same time I supported the women for resolving to take action against this intersectional abuse and making sure that they and others would be safe from that particular source in the future. I also felt afraid for them and wondered whether, as women and black,

they would be believed or whether they might possibly be punished for speaking up. I hoped the best for them

14. Twist five: Ms. Hall reaches an inner resolution to adhere more to self-definition than the common social definition of the N word

a. My reaction at this point:

- i. I was thrilled and relieved at this because I believe that solidarity with oneself is the first step to solidarity with others. Over the course of the story, I had witnessed Ms. Hall's ambivalence and blame towards herself and felt afraid for her. This gesture of self-support showed me she had grown in a major way. I felt inspired by her realization and resolution. very effective resolution to the story - Bravo

Beyond the focus, flow, and effective use of twists in your plot generally, I deeply admired the story's social message, or rather demonstration, of the all-too-real social dynamics around racism and oppression:

1. Systemic racism disrupting solidarity with the self. Ms. Hall doubts and blames herself for her reactions to the interpersonal and structural racism she has encountered, when it is totally natural for a human to be stressed and confused in these situations and feeling like there is "no right response" (because there's not). She is in an impossible situation and, because she is a thoughtful and mature person, she suffers greatly from the strain of it.

2. Systemic racism disrupting solidarity with others, even people who are ostensibly "in the same boat". The interpersonal and structural racism within the story prevents the three women from immediately reaching an understanding, as they must navigate their own learned reactions and coping mechanisms (including mistrust, questioning each other's and in Ms. Hall's case her own motives, distancing themselves from the situation) before being able to come together in solidarity at the end.

On both the personal and interpersonal level, "The N Word" allowed me to clearly see and feel the mental and social harm caused by interpersonal and structural racism as it unfolds step by step in one particular situation. I felt truly awed after reading because I know the skill and insight it takes to execute such a complex argument in an immersive narrative form. It was instructive, but also so literary and filled with heart. Amazing work.

While reading, there were a few spots where I felt I would have benefited as a reader from more explanation and context. Before I describe them, though, I would like to acknowledge that because I am white, I may be missing some of the more subtle points of the interactions between

Ms. Hall, Glenda, and Carissa which black readers may pick up on or even take for granted from their own experience. If the three points I describe below seem to you to be self-explanatory, I can only apologize for my own ignorance.

That said, I did consider that I as a reader would have benefited from just a sentence or two of more context and/or foreshadowing with the following three points:

1. In the current draft, James never asks Ms. Hall straight out if she is white. The pressure she feels to unambiguously state she is white might be better supported if he does ask her in so many words. I personally was a bit confused about why she felt so pressured to respond to James's racist remarks by saying "I am white" rather than a more non-committal, "yeah" or "mhmm"
2. On page 5, we learn that Ms. Hall does not trust Glenda and Clarissa completely. At the moment, it is up to the reader to imagine why. It might be helpful to have a sentence or two explaining why (is it because James told Ms. Hall not to trust them, for example? Does Ms. Hall possibly have internalized racism telling her not to trust other people who are black?)
3. On page 6, Clarissa explains that James says nasty things about her and Glenda and that he thinks that his color gives him a pass. I wondered why he felt the need to say things about the women at all. Is this an example of sexism and patriarchy, or perhaps colorism, intersecting with racism? Is James just a very nasty individual generally? Perhaps he says nasty things about his black coworkers out of a survival instinct that tells him he needs to put down other black people to get ahead in a white world (unfair and tragic but all too real in our racist society)? Just a bit more context might help readers feel more stable in their understanding here.

I'd like to add another caveat to all three points: In your current draft, there is such a good balance between the personal and social, the "issues" and the narrative, that I would be wary of offering too much explicit "explanation". However, if there is a way to hint at the deeper layer without being too explicit (for example, the way James being black is foreshadowed by him saying "I am a great supporter of your race" earlier on), it might help support the three situations outlined above.

Before closing, I also wish to applaud the decision to set the story in a library around the time of a Census. This is a highly evocative setting with strong personal and social connotations. First of all, a library is a place where people expand their minds, but where they also are expected to be silent. Second of all, a Census is an event in which people come together to be evaluated on the basis of their personal identity, including race and sex. Both of these conceptual backdrops are excellent choices for a story in which people ostensibly "on the same side" find themselves at

odds with each other in an impossible situation, having to navigate communication when it is disrupted by their oppressive system in which we live.

Moreover, the fact that Ms. Hall, Glenda, and Clarissa are all figures (to varying degrees) of authority and administration in the library and Census shows that even people with some personal power, who are in many ways structural as well as personal members of society, suffer internally with these impossible situations of racism. To me, this was a complex social, personal, and interpersonal conflict that added a great deal of psychological sophistication to the story.

It seems to me this story is nearly ready for submissions. When you do start to send it around, I would suggest adding page numbers and generally keeping these formatting guidelines in mind: <https://www.scribophile.com/academy/how-to-format-a-short-story-manuscript>

I truly thank you for writing this short story. It is realistic, immersive, literary, relatable, and socially important - a difficult mix to achieve. I sincerely wish you the best with your editing and submissions process.

Annie Mydla
Winning Writers