

Assessment

Andrea,

I read the story through a few times. There certainly is a lot going on here. With all the plotlines and back story, it is like a mini Gothic. Here is a synopsis of what I think is happening in the story:

The Narrator (Clement / Hal) is called back to judge the Westminster Dog Show, five years after he was fired for refusing to give a prize to a dog just because it was owned by royalty. Cynthia, an executive with the show, explains he has been brought back on an emergency basis because a judge (Clement's ex-wife, Edith, who left him abruptly) had awarded a top prize in a category to an ugly dog.

Shortly after he arrives at the show, Clement is accosted by a giant ugly dog and his owners, Harvey (who is badly burned) and Haimi Hunt. Gradually, he learns from the couple that they are on some sort of supernatural mission in which the dog is tasked with "killing" a "shadow."

This particular shadow is threatening Edith.

The Hunts tell Clement that their dog, Irving, must win the dog show because he's dying and needs to procreate, but the dog that he needs to breed with is a show winner and its owner will only allow the union if Irving is a winner as well.

Clement speaks to Edith for the first time after they divorced ten years earlier. He vows to protect her from the menace she faces. As the story ends, Clement and the Hunts are dropping a puppy off at a rundown trailer park where Edith is hiding out.

If that summary is close to what you were going for, then you are on a solid footing, but if I seem to be on the wrong path somewhere, you might want to take a look.

Overall, I found the story compelling to read, with a lot of inventive details. I've indicated in my comments a few details that I was unsure of a few suggestions of how you might enhance the story. As I said, I said there's a lot going on, but the story moves along very well. So, from the standpoint of your teacher and your class, I am confident that they should find this story a solid well-constructed effort that the writer put a good deal of imagination and effort into creating.

If you are looking to try to publish this story and to write more, I would say your choice of writing in the fantasy/supernatural vein limits you somewhat as to where you publish this story, in that the fiction world has become very fragmented into genre and non-genre writing, but I would encourage you to do a little research and see if there are magazines out there that are looking for submissions.

I would also encourage you to try your hand at realistic stories and see what you come up with.

Overall, I found the story densely plotted, consistent in tone, written in effective and active prose, and peopled with interesting, clearly defined characters, so therefore I would say it succeeds on its own terms.

There were aspects I didn't fully understand, but I assumed that most of the opacity was intentional, given that nature of the story, which is why I wrote out the summary of what I understood to be the underlying mystery, with the understanding that if I was off base as to what was going on, you would want to go back and add clarity to areas in which there was misunderstanding.

In terms of other opportunities to improve the story, here are some additional suggestions.

—Whenever you have a unique setting, you should make the most of it, so definitely any additional details that you can add about the Westminster Dog Show, without seeming gratuitous, would be beneficial.

(The details about the London Dog Massacre and the sinking of the pleasure boat are good examples of the kind of background that adds depth and texture.)

—If there is more you can reveal about Harvey came to be burned in such a way as to have markings that foretell the future and what those markings might look like, that would be clarifying. Are they there for Harvey to read or others, and if they were meant for others, such as Clement, how would a stranger decipher what they mean?

—Similarly, the nature of the “shadow” peril was not at all clear to me. Does it menace only the women of Edith's lineage? The mention of additional puppies at the end suggests there are other victims. What motivated Harvey and Haimi to take on this quest? How is it that the Eppinger dogs “kill” these shadows, and why was Irving unable to do so when they together at the dog show? It seemed that Edith's death was imminent, and yet we're told at the end that the puppy must grow up before he can kill the menace.

These are questions that the answers to which you may wish to keep hidden; however, they point out that in supernatural writing, the *natural* always has to be reconciled with the *super*. Please let me know if this feedback is more in line with what you are looking for and if you have any additional questions.

Best of luck.

Ian Morris