

Publishability Index for The Grave Digger of Ibarra

by Tunji Oke

Staff Feedback (Updated Mar 17, 2023)

NOTES / RECOMMENDATIONS:

Hi Tunji, and thanks for the opportunity to provide feedback for "The Grave Digger of Ibarra". I have broken my comments down by the key elements described in our Publishability Index. Please let me know if you have any questions, once you've read it.

Character

The character of Morganez is very well developed. We have a strong backstory for him, a thorough examination of his personality and emotional life, and a sense of his profound loss and loneliness. I would, however, like to see a bit more physical description. What does he look like? How old is he? How does he carry himself? What physical quirks or attributions are most pronounced? Flashing brown eyes? A slight limp? A soldier's bearing? The smell of French cologne?

Other characters are more difficult to fully develop except through Morganez's experience of them, as the story is told from his perspective. However, much can be relayed through physical description, actions, dialogue, and Morganez's knowledge of their history. You begin to do some of this with Patience and Innocence, between dialogue at the dinner table, and the epitaph on the headstone, but I'd like to see more. And I would definitely like more development of Prudencia, as she is pivotal to Morganez's experience. Why does she succumb to him? Care for him? Push him away from hell and toward redemption? To me, this is important stuff, and I think it will be to your readers, as well.

Still other characters should be brought more into the forefront or removed from the story. I would like to see the coach driver named as well as providing a singular reference for the medical personnel, such as calling them medics, and nothing else. Otherwise, it gets confusing. Also, the descriptions of other background characters provide an opportunity to add flavor to the setting through descriptions of physical condition, attire, and interpersonal dynamics.

World

You do much to describe the physical world, but I think you can do even more. Sometimes the river, and the different worlds that exist on either side, get a bit confusing. It might be interesting to provide even more in the way of contrast between the two sides of the river, to provide a clearer road map for readers, as well as more symbolic resonance. You begin to do that but you can go further, selectively. I would also like to see more detailed descriptions of some of the buildings, as they have a generic feel that adds nothing. Every building tells a story! You do a marvelous job of describing the park, however. The squashed pyramids is a fabulous image, as is the description of the children at the fountain. Additionally, I would suggest you consider all five senses in your descriptions, and use whatever is most salient in certain scenes. Maybe it is the pungent smell of sweat in an enclosed space, or the warm curl of steam from Prudencia's chamomile tea on the convalescing Morganez's cheek. What colors predominate? What is the light like? (You make some references, which are great! Light is one of the most visceral aspects of mood, so carry on!) What sounds provide a clue as to place, or make Morganez shudder with fear? Sight, smell, taste, feel and sound. You don't have to do everything, all the time, but the storyworld should feel complete, and replete, with these elements. It helps to put the reader into the story. Done very well, the reader not only feels a part of the story but can navigate the world in their imaginations. That's the kind of story no one wants to put down, or finish.

You also do a very good job of describing the culture of Morganez's world. We get a real sense of social mores, casual cruelties, and simple pleasures. The way you do it

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his helps to underline the themes of the story, and this is an essential step in making it cohesive.

Conflict

Conflict is tied closely to theme and plot, but having said that, I'm not sure what the main conflict is. The inciting incident, or the beginning of the action, is when Morganez is bitten by a snake. So the immediate conflict is survival of the bite. Morganez goes through various trials, such as the ambulance, the visit to hell, etc., the choice of remaining in hell or seeking hard-earned redemption; but, if and how the conflict is resolved remain uncertain. The important thing to keep in mind for now is that there must be discernible motivations for all actions, and obstacles that impede Morganez's goals - regardless of his mental state. To really develop a great conflict, you will want to make sure that friction in the story steadily intensifies the stakes, and that conflicts feel not just believable, but unavoidable. Inexorable, even! Much of this is done through careful plotting, which I will discuss later in this report.

Theme

You have developed strong, relevant, overarching themes that emerge organically through the story: ones of greed, forgiveness and redemption, and these weave together with strands of conflict and plot very nicely. I think, once the plotting is clarified a bit more, and each aspect of the story tweaked, your themes will really resonant and leave a strong impression with readers.

Plot

You use an interesting plot device in the story, as you move from Morganez's journey to the edge of death in the first section, to a place of possible redemption at the graves of his daughter and wife in the second, and then finally to the backstory that reveals Morganez's personal history as well as his personal hell, at the end of the story. This is a daring choice, and will work, with some changes. You will need to really distill and clarify conflicts and language throughout the piece to advance the narrative, compound tensions, provide an emotional peak (which you largely do), and tie up all the loose ends. You also need to give the reader places to pause and breathe. Part of this might be a combination of distinct scenes, some more fraught, and some calmer. However, the key will be to provide a logical progression of events - with clarifying transitions - that will guide the reader through the story, even (and especially!) if the story is told in an unorthodox way. Explain the challenges that led to the "grave" choices he has made, clearly, as well as the consequences of those choices. Further, pull certain elements through from beginning to end, such as the snake bite. It disappears midway!

Language

There is some beautiful language in the story! For example, " My judgment of what was real and what was spurious became blurred and I lost the concept of who I was, where I had been, or what I had been doing. " ; "The weak afternoon sun shone brightly through one of the large windows and cast amber beams that encircled her in an oval glow like a fairy, or an angel."; "The expansive quad was divided diagonally into four massive triangular-shaped grass sculptures, like flattened fallen pyramids, by brick-paved paths that converged at the center where sat a large thirsty fountain."; and, "Just as the swelling tide deposited shells on its rush to the shore, the upswing of the children towards me brought along hints of my past; and, like the ebbing tide taking back some shells, the backswing of the children, away from view washed away some of my new memories leaving only necessary remnants." These passages really sing and imprint themselves on the reader. Well done!

There are, however, a number of language iss

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ues in the story, but I don't want you to be discouraged. These are the easiest problems to clear up with careful line editing. That can be done when everything else in the story is set. Don't worry about them until then.

A few of the most obvious problems I see are as follows:

Repetition: you often say the same thing in two different ways, in the same sentence. This is not necessary, and hurts the immediacy of the prose. Be confident that you are making your intentions clear the first time around, and be on the lookout for this.

Overly long sentences: sentences should vary in length, but sometimes they are simply too long, and/or you bury the important part of the sentence at the end. I like to suggest front-loading sentences, for the most part, with action, and putting description toward the end. Also, there are several places that you should simply make two sentences out of one. When sentences are too long you require the reader too hold too much information in their heads, which hinders flow and a sense of immediacy. When that's the case you run the risk of taking readers out of the action, or just plan boring them!

Tenses: You sometimes use past tense when past participle would be more appropriate. Again, this is an easy fix with line editing at the end of the process, yet it's something to be aware of. If you are telling the story in past tense, then referring to things that happen before the story, you need a way to separate out those actions through tense.

Overuse of gerunds: Gerunds are the "ing" form of a verb and are frequently overused. Try to avoid them when possible. It will not always be possible or even appropriate, but you will find that when you use a verb without an ing ending, it makes for cleaner writing. Gerunds are best used after prepositions of place or time (Tunji is concerned about using gerunds in his work.) or to replace the subject or object of a sentence (Editing is Tunji's favorite pastime.)

Punctuation: Sometimes your sentences run on for lack of proper punctuation. Remember that punctuation is essential to the success of a story: sometimes as a pause for the reader; sometimes as an indicator of two separate thoughts, and at other times, for dramatic tension. Consider punctuation an opportunity to raise the level of your prose and guide the reader.

Paragraph breaks: Similarly to punctuation, paragraph breaks separate ideas and direct the reader. Sometimes, the most impact can be seen from a single sentence as a paragraph. At other times, you will want to create a meandering sensibility with your prose and longer paragraphs will be most effective. But make sure to consider how best to use them to create the mood, tone and direction in your story.

Word usage: Be careful not to use words that clash with the era you are writing about. For example, OK is not mid nineteenth century usage. Also, try not to use throw away words like "got". There are so many other ways to say the same thing, but with more precision and to more interesting effect. If you are unsure if a word is appropriate to a period, search an etymological dictionary online.

Cohesion: In some ways the story is very cohesive, and in others, not so much. For example, the characters and world of the story enrich each other and there is a solid, mutually reinforcing relationship between conflict and theme. However, the progression of events is unconventional, as I mentioned before, and this leads to confusion and sometimes causes some inertia. You need to find a way for events to unfold that feels inevitable to the reader. Much of that will occur naturally when you tighten the story and provided the reader with more clarifying t

SUMMARY:

	DIMENSION	NOT YET	GOOD	GREAT
CHARACTER	Description			✓
	Backstory			✓
	Consistency			✓
WORLD	Physicality		✓	
	Culture		✓	
	Continuity	✓		
CONFLICT	Goal-Stake		✓	
	Opposition			✓
THEME	Clarity		✓	
	Relevance		✓	
PLOT	Inciting			✓
	Rising		✓	
	Climax		✓	
	Falling	✓		
	Resolution		✓	
COHESION	Environment		✓	
	Dynamics		✓	
	Integration	✓		
	Validity	✓		
	Resonance		✓	
LANGUAGE	Expression	✓		
	Voice		✓	
	Mechanics	✓		