

THE WORKSHOP

– TITLE –

The synopsis does a great job establishing Melinda’s and Joaquin’s characters. We get a strong sense of their fractured relationship and the circumstances that drove them to uproot their lives and relocate to the East Coast. It’s a solid way to establish the story, but as the plot goes on, the narrative becomes less character-focused, favoring familiar genre tropes rather than the conflicts—and that deeply original vibe—the first act did so well.

With a genre as well-trodden as haunted house stories (which date all the way back to ancient Greece!), it’s important to find a hook, a unique angle that differentiates your story from similar narratives. For *Paranormal Activity*, the hook was its style: a found-footage film that showed a haunting in real-time. With *The Conjuring*, the filmmakers played up the fact it was “based on a true story” (however loosely) that inspired *The Amityville Horror*. *Poltergeist III* switched things up by changing the haunted locale to a Chicago high-rise, and other films like *The Babadook* have used horror films as a metaphor for mental health and depression.

We’re not quite seeing that hook yet with this one. After Melinda and Joaquin move to their new home, the synopsis hits a lot of well-worn beats: random objects levitating, mysterious noises, sudden changes in temperature, a creepy neighbor with vague warnings, a quirky psychic, a Ouija board scene to commune with the spirits, a murderous ghost, etc. By the end of act three, we learn that the poltergeist symbolizes her unhappiness with her marriage and that salvaging the relationship is the only way to stop the haunting, which could be a nice variation on the plot, but everything that comes before that moment is too predictable, plot-wise. Nothing about the haunting felt specific to Melinda and Joaquin’s relationship, so the reveal feels like an afterthought.

I do think you have an opportunity to move this into a more unique and fresher direction. Take a look at the characters and really mine their relationship for conflict. Explore what makes them afraid and use that as ammunition when the haunting escalates (these fears could be the basic things like claustrophobia and arachnophobia, or even more esoteric concepts like rejection and loneliness). The poltergeist could even be a bigger antagonistic force against their marriage and use psychological warfare, bringing up reminders of their past sins to drive a wedge between them, sort of like a paranormal version of *The War of the Roses* or *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Perhaps the spirit even feeds off their mutual unhappiness and becomes stronger as Melinda and Joaquin drift further apart. (That last point might be the writer’s intention given the nature of the haunting, but things escalate so quickly in the synopsis that it doesn’t come across that way.) But these are just suggestions, and you might find a different angle that interests you or that’s more applicable to the themes you’re engraining throughout. Regardless, there simply needs to be a stronger hook.

I have some minor concerns with the plot, such as why Melinda and Joaquin decide to stay in the house. Even if money is an issue (which doesn’t seem to be the case here), why not just move into his mother’s house when the haunting gets worse? After all, she lives in the same town. And

why does it take so long before they seek help? I know those investigation sequences have become cliché in horror movies, but it would have been nice to see Melinda or Joaquin make some attempt to figure out what's happening with their house. As it is now, the haunting gets bad, and they randomly show up at the psychic's business in the next scene. How did they find him?

But some of those smaller details might change as you re-outline your story, so can backburner that. For now, don't worry so much about the plot. Focus on the characters and their relationships, and build from there. As mentioned, the narrative's foundation is strong. Moving forward, lean into the characters and the other elements that make your story stand out. For a very crowded genre of haunted house scripts and films, you really need that element signaling this is something we haven't see so much of before.

