

chapter 4



Writing About Setting: The Background of Place, Objects, and Culture in Literature

Like all human beings, literary characters do not exist in isolation. Just as they become human by interacting with other characters, they gain identity because of their possessions, their jobs, their homes, and their cultural and political allegiances. Plays, stories, and narrative poems must therefore necessarily include descriptions of objects, places, and backgrounds—the **setting**.

WHAT IS SETTING?

Setting is a work's natural, manufactured, political, cultural, and temporal environment, including everything that characters know and own. Characters may be either helped or hurt by their surroundings, and they may fight about possessions and goals. Further, as characters speak with each other, they reveal the degree to which they share the customs and ideas of their times.

Learn the Three Basic Types of Settings

1. NATURE AND THE OUTDOORS ARE IMPORTANT LOCATIONS FOR MANY WORKS. The natural world is an obvious location for the action of many stories, plays, and narrative poems. It is therefore important to note

natural surroundings (hills, shorelines, valleys, mountains, meadows, fields, trees, lakes, streams); living creatures (birds, dogs, horses, snakes); and also the times, seasons, and conditions in which things happen (day or night, summer or winter, sunlight or darkness, wind or stillness, rain or snow, day or night, fogginess or clarity, heat or cold, dryness or humidity, storminess or calmness)—any or all of which may influence character and action.

2. OBJECTS OF HUMAN MANUFACTURE AND CONSTRUCTION ARE VITALLY IMPORTANT IN MANY WORKS. To reveal or highlight qualities of character, and also to make narratives lifelike, authors include many details about objects of human manufacture and construction. Houses, both interiors and exteriors, are common, as are possessions, such as walking sticks, kitchen tables, park benches, distant lights, necklaces, hair ribbons, and rocking chairs. In Maupassant's "The Necklace," the loss of a comfortable home brings out the best in a character by causing her to adjust to her economic reversal. The lugubrious vaults in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" reveal the similarly lugubrious and sinister nature of Poe's narrator.

Objects also enter directly into literary action and character. A broken birdcage reveals the pathetic husband-wife relationship in *Trifles*; a letter from abroad brings about the speaker's concluding indignation in "Patterns"; a telegram occasions the unfortunate circumstances in "The Story of an Hour"; gunnery practice at sea occasions the speaker's monologue in Hardy's poem "Channel Firing."

3. CULTURAL CONDITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS FIGURE SIGNIFICANTLY IN WHAT CHARACTERS DO AND SAY. Just as physical setting influences characters, so do historical and cultural conditions and assumptions. O'Connor's "First Confession" assumes that readers will understand the role of the Catholic Church in early-twentieth-century life. In "Dover Beach," the speaker assumes an understanding of the religious skepticism that developed in the nineteenth century. In Chekhov's *The Bear*, the action takes place on a relatively isolated nineteenth-century Russian estate, and the characters therefore see life in ways that are vastly different from our own. The broad cultural setting of Layton's poem "Rhine Boat Trip" brings out the contrast between the beauty of German scenery and mythology, on the one hand, and the ugliness and insane depravity of German atrocities in World War II, on the other.

THE USES THAT WRITERS MAKE OF SETTING

Just as painters render ideas through the use of backgrounds and objects, authors manipulate setting to render ideas. Such a use of setting is seen in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," where major topographical fea-

tures include many obstacles and ill-defined woodland paths. Although such difficulties are normal granted the location, time, and circumstances of the story, they succeed in conveying the idea that life is difficult and uncertain. Similarly, in Glaspell's *Trifles*, the fixtures and utensils in the kitchen of the Wright farm indicate the bleakness and oppressiveness of midwestern homesteads early in the twentieth century.

Setting Is Important in Many Ways

To study the setting in a narrative (or play), you need to discover the important details and then try to explain their function. Depending on the author's purpose, the amount of detail may vary. Poe provides many graphic and also impressionistic details in "The Cask of Amontillado," so that we can follow, almost visually, the bizarre action at the story's end. In some works, the setting is so intensely present, like the countryside in Hardy's "The Three Strangers," that it might be considered as an additional participant in the action.

1. A CREDIBLE SETTING HELPS ESTABLISH LITERARY CREDIBILITY. One of the major purposes of literary setting is to establish **realism** or **verisimilitude**. As the description of location and objects becomes particular and detailed, the events of the work become more believable. In "The Story of an Hour," Chopin gives us details about the inside of the Mallard household, particularly Louise's room and the stairway landing at the front door. These are essential aspects of setting for the story's major scenes. Even futuristic, symbolic, and fantastic stories, as well as ghost stories, seem more believable if they include places and objects from the real world. Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" are such stories. Though they make no pretenses to everyday realism, their credibility is enhanced because their settings are so realistic.

2. SETTING MAY BE A STRONG GUIDE TO CHARACTER. Setting may intersect with character as a means by which authors underscore the importance of place, circumstance, and time on human growth and change. Glaspell's setting in *Trifles* is the kitchen of the lonely, dreary Wright farm. The kitchen is a place of such hard work, oppression, and unrelieved joylessness that it explains the extinguishing of Minnie's early brightness and promise, and also helps us understand her angry act. (A blending of setting and character as seen in Maupassant's "The Necklace" is explored in the two drafts of the sample essay in Chapter 1).

The way characters respond and adjust to setting can reveal their strength or weakness. Peyton Farquhar's scheme to make an escape from his fate, even when it is almost literally hanging before him, suggests his character strength ("An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"). In contrast,

Goodman Brown's Calvinistic religious conviction that human beings are totally depraved, which not reality but his nightmarish encounter confirms, indicates the weakness of his character because it alienates him from family and community ("Young Goodman Brown").

3. AUTHORS MAY USE SETTING AS AN ORGANIZING ELEMENT IN MANY WORKS. An author may often use setting to organize a work graphically, as in Maupassant's "The Necklace" where Mathilde and her husband move from a respectable apartment to a cheap attic flat. The story's final scene is believable because Mathilde takes a nostalgic walk on the Champs-Élysées, the most fashionable street in Paris. Without this shift of setting, she would not have encountered Jeanne Forrestier again, for their ways of life no longer bring them together.

Another organizational application of place, time, and object is the **framing or enclosing setting**, whereby a work begins and ends with descriptions of the same scene, thus forming a frame or an enclosure. An example is Hardy's "The Three Strangers," which both begins and ends with a description of the lonely English countryside containing a solitary cottage ("Higher Crowstairs"), where the main action takes place. The use of objects as a frame is seen in Mansfield's "Miss Brill," which opens and closes with references to the heroine's shabby fur piece. In such ways, framing creates a formal completeness, just as it may underscore the author's ideas about the human condition.

4. SETTINGS MAY SERVE AS LITERARY SYMBOLS. If the scenes and materials of setting are highlighted or emphasized, they also may be taken as symbols through which the author expresses ideas. The horse Toby in Chekhov's *The Bear* is such a symbol. Mrs. Popov has made caring for the horse, which was her dead husband's favorite, a major part of her memorial obligations. When Mrs. Popov tells the servants not to give oats to this horse, Chekhov is using this ordinary barnyard animal to indicate that new commitments replace old ones. In Arnold's poem "Dover Beach," the light that gleams from across the English Channel and that is soon "gone" may be read as a symbol of the extinguishing of intellectual and religious faith that Arnold believed had taken place in the nineteenth century.

5. SETTING MAY BE USED TO ESTABLISH A WORK'S ATMOSPHERE. Setting also helps to create **atmosphere** or **mood**, which refers to an enveloping or permeating emotional texture within a work. Most actions *require* no more than a functional description of setting. Thus, taking a walk in a forest needs just the statement that there are trees. However, if a story includes descriptions of shapes, light and shadow, animals, wind, and sounds, you can be sure that the author is creating an atmosphere or a mood for the action (as in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"). There are many ways to develop moods. Descriptions of bright colors (red, orange, yellow) may con-

tribute to a mood of happiness. The contrast of such bright colors with darkness and dark colors, as in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," may invoke gloom or augment hysteria. References to smells and sounds further bring the setting to life by asking additional sensory responses from the reader. The setting of a story in a small town or large city, in green or snow-covered fields, or in middle-class or lower-class residences may evoke responses to these places that contribute to the work's atmosphere.

6. SOME AUTHORS USE SETTING IRONICALLY. Just as setting may reinforce character and theme, so also it may establish expectations that are the opposite of what occurs. The colorful and orderly garden described in Lowell's poem "Patterns," for example, is an ironic background for the speaker's deep anguish and grief. A bizarre irony is created by Hardy in "Channel Firing" when the noise of large guns being fired from ships at sea awakens the skeletons buried in an English churchyard. The irony is that those engaged in the gun practice, if "red war" gets still redder, will quickly join the skeletons. An equally ironic situation is created by Poe in "The Cask of Amontillado," when Montresor repeats Fortunato's appeal "For the love of God" as he puts in place the final bricks of Fortunato's living tomb.

WRITING ABOUT SETTING

In preparing to write about setting, determine the number and importance of locations, artifacts, and customs. Ask questions such as those in the following section.

Raise Questions to Discover Ideas

- How fully are objects described? How vital are they to the action? How important are they in the development of the plot or idea? How are they connected to the mental states of the characters?
- What connections, if any, are apparent between locations and characters? Do the locations bring characters together, separate them, facilitate their privacy, make intimacy and conversation difficult?
- How well done are the visual descriptions? Does the author provide such vivid and carefully arranged details about surroundings that you might even be able draw a map or plan? Or is the scenery vague and difficult to imagine?
- How important to plot and character are shapes, colors, times of day, clouds, storms, light and sun, seasons of the year, and conditions of vegetation?
- Are the characters poor, moderately well-off, or rich? How does their economic lot determine what happens to them? How does their economic condition affect their actions and attitudes?

- What cultural, religious, and political conditions are displayed and acted upon in the story? How do the characters accept and adjust to these conditions? How do the conditions affect the characters' judgments and actions?
- What is the state of houses, furniture, and objects (e.g., new and polished, old and worn)? What connections can you find between this condition and the outlook and behavior of the characters?
- How important are sounds or silences? To what degree is music or other sound important in the development of character and action?
- Do characters respect or mistreat the environment? If there is an environmental connection, how central is it to the story?
- What conclusions do you think the author expects you to draw as a result of the neighborhood, culture, and larger world of the story?

Organize Your Essay About Setting

INTRODUCTION. Your introduction should contain a brief description of the setting or scenes of the work, specifying the amount and importance of detail.

BODY. Following are five possible approaches for the bodies of essays on setting. Choose one that seems appropriate, bearing in mind that some works invite one approach rather than others. As you develop your essay, however, you may find it necessary to introduce one or more of the other approaches. Whatever approach you use, be sure to consider setting not as an end in itself, but rather as illustration and evidence.

1. *Setting and action.* Explore the importance of setting in the work. How extensively is the setting described? Are locations essential or incidental to the actions? Does the setting serve as part of the action (e.g., places of flight or concealment; public places where people meet openly, or hidden places where they meet privately; natural or environmental conditions; seasonal conditions such as searing heat or numbing cold; customs and conventions)? Do any objects cause inspiration, difficulty, or conflict (e.g., a bridge, a cellar, a fur piece, a walking stick, a necklace, a box, a hair ribbon, a breadknife, a dead bird)? How directly do these objects influence the action?
2. *Setting and organization.* How is the setting connected to the various parts of the work? Does it undergo any changes as the action develops? Why are some parts of the setting more important than others? Is the setting used as a structural frame or an enclosure for the story? How do objects, such as money or property, affect the motivation of the characters? How do descriptions made at the start become important in the action later on?
3. *Setting and character.* (For examples of this approach, see the two drafts of the sample student essay in Chapter 1.) Analyze the degree to which setting influences and interacts with character. Are the characters happy or unhappy where they live? Do they get into discussions or arguments about their home environments? Do they want to stay or leave? Do the economic, philosophical,

religious, or ethnic aspects of the setting make the characters undergo changes? What jobs do the characters perform because of their ways of life? What freedoms or restraints do these jobs cause? How does the setting influence their decisions, transportation, speech habits, eating habits, attitudes about love and honor, and general behavior?

4. *Setting and atmosphere.* To what extent does setting contribute to the atmosphere of the story? Does the setting go beyond the minimum needed for action or character? How do descriptive words paint verbal pictures and evoke moods through references to colors, shapes, sounds, smells, or tastes? Does the setting establish a feeling, say, of joy or hopelessness, plenty or scarcity? Do events happen in daylight or at night? Do the movements and locations of the characters suggest permanence or impermanence (like the return to a darkened room, the creation of a brick wall, or the purchase of a fragile toy)? Are things warm and pleasant, or cold and harsh? What connection do you find between the story's atmosphere and the author's apparent thoughts about existence?
5. *Setting and other aspects.* Does setting reinforce the story's credibility and meaning? Does it establish irony about the circumstances and ideas in the story? If you choose this approach, consult the section earlier in this chapter titled "The Uses That Writers Make of Setting." If you want to write about the symbolic implications of a setting, consult the discussions of symbolism in Chapter 10.

CONCLUSION. To conclude, summarize your major points or write about related aspects of setting that you have not considered. Thus, if your essay treats the relationship of setting and action, your conclusion could mention connections of the setting with character or atmosphere. You might also point out whether your central idea about setting also applies to other major aspects of the story.

Sample Essay

Poe's Use of Setting to Create a Mood of Horror and Repulsion in "The Cask of Amontillado"^o

- In "The Cask of Amontillado," Edgar Allan Poe uses many details of setting to create a mood of horror and repulsion. The story is a detailed narration of an act of premeditated and ghastly vengeance. Poe's character Montresor is both the narrator and the principal creator of the twisted act of murder. He
- [1] believes that his vengeance must be known by the victim, Fortunato, and that

^oSee pages 345–50 for this story.

*Central idea.

[1] it must be threatening and irrevocable. At the end he is successful, and the reader is both fascinated and repulsed by the story's mood of ghastliness and heartlessness. The mood is established through Poe's descriptions of underground rooms, space, and sound.[†]

[2] The height of Poe's graphic description is the story's evocation of gloomy and threatening vaults. The journey into the hellish "catacombs of the Montresors" (paragraph 25), which are also the area for the storage of Montresor's wine collection, ends with a room "lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead" (paragraph 68). The walls in the rooms leading to this last, horrible room are dark and damp, and they drip moisture from the river above; they also become increasingly airless and suffocating. The bones on the walls and floors are evidence of generations of death. In addition, Montresor uses the bones first to hide his bricks and mortar and then to disguise the wall within which he entombs Fortunato. The mood is further fixed by the narrator's observations that each of the catacomb rooms is progressively more covered and shrouded by spiderlike white and ghostly films of nitre, which gloomily suggest increasing death and decay.

[3] The most disturbing of the catacomb rooms is the last one, the "interior recess" which is to be Fortunato's vertical grave. It is an inauspicious area, which Poe indicates was built "for no especial use within itself" (paragraph 68), but its dimensions are ominous. It is no accident that Poe gives us the measurements of the recess. It is four feet deep, three feet wide, and six or seven feet high—exactly the size of a large coffin standing on end. The failure of the faltering torches to illuminate the area suggests the ending of breath and light, and the beginning of death. What could be more appropriately sinister, distressing, and ghostly?

[4] The rooms not only provoke horror but also are spatially arranged to complement Montresor's horrible act of vengeance. To reach these increasingly dark areas, the characters must walk downward. A circular staircase begins the descent, followed by a first and then a second set of stairs that end in the last deep crypt. The downward direction is like an inevitable journey toward the grave, and it also suggests a journey into a bleak, cold, dark, and damp hell.

[5] Within this interior of death, Poe adds the eeriness of fearsome sound. Fortunato has a terrible rasping cough, to which Poe devotes an entire paragraph (paragraph 32). The jingling of the bells on Fortunato's carnival cap appears at first ordinary (paragraph 26), then bizarre (paragraph 40), and finally sepulchral (paragraph 89). Fortunato's attempt to get free of the chains results in desperate clanking (paragraph 76). He also moans (paragraph 76), laughs in fear and disbelief (paragraph 78), speaks weakly and sadly (paragraph 78), and at the end is silent (paragraph 89). Perhaps the most grisly sounds described by Poe are those of Fortunato's screams of protest, which Montresor cruelly stifles by screaming even louder and longer (paragraph 77)—an action that was duplicated by the insane man in the film The Silence of the Lambs. These described sounds, having their source in Montresor's diabolical action, create a mood of uneasiness, anxiety, repulsion, and horror.

[6] Thus Poe's setting within the eerie catacombs is both descriptive and evocative. The major action takes place in the last room, in the gravelike recess, leading to the climax of the story's movement into darkness and the very walls of death. In this way, Poe uses his setting to show the horror of how a

[†]Thesis sentence.

- twisted and depraved person carries out a cruel and pitiless act of revenge.
- [6] The events of the story, the sustained mood, and the narrator's compulsion with vengeance are all tied together by Poe's skillful control of setting.
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🔑 COMMENTARY ON THE ESSAY

Because it treats the relationship of setting to mood or atmosphere, this essay illustrates the fourth approach described on page 72. The essay considers those aspects of setting needed for the story and then stresses how Poe's descriptions create the story's dominant mood of horror and repulsion.

In the body, paragraphs 2 and 3 form a unit describing the physical layout of the deathly catacombs, and also pointing out the exactness and evocativeness of Poe's descriptions. Paragraph 4 concentrates on Poe's description of downward movement, suggesting that this use of space is a visual accompaniment of the story's conclusion in Fortunato's death.

Paragraph 5 treats Poe's use of sound as an accompaniment to the descriptions of the deadly catacombs. The paragraph's topic idea is that the sounds move progressively toward silence, in keeping with Montresor's creation of death. References to sound are therefore one of Poe's major means of achieving an atmosphere complementary to the repulsive and horrible action.

The conclusion summarizes the central idea, stressing once again that Poe goes beyond simple description to heighten the twisted, macabre mood of his story.

🔑 SPECIAL WRITING TOPICS FOR STUDYING SETTING

1. Compare and contrast how details of setting are used to establish the qualities and traits of the following characters: Mrs. Popov of *The Bear*; Miss Brill of "Miss Brill"; the speakers of "Patterns," "Rhine Boat Trip," or "Dover Beach"; or Montresor of "The Cask of Amontillado."
2. In what ways might we say that both "The Story of an Hour" and "The Cask of Amontillado" are inseparable from their settings? To answer this question, consider the relationship of character to place and circumstance. How could the actions of the stories happen without the locations in which they occur?
3. Choose a story included in Appendix C, and rewrite a page or two, taking the characters out of their setting and placing them in an entirely new setting, or in the setting of another story (you choose). Then write a brief analysis dealing

with these questions: How were your characters affected by their new settings? Did you make them change slowly or rapidly? Why? As a result of your rewriting, what can you conclude about the uses of setting in fiction?

4. Write a short narrative as though it is part of a story (which you may also wish to write for the assignment), using option a and/or b.
 - a. Relate a natural setting or type of day to a mood—for example, a nice day to happiness and satisfaction, or a cold, cloudy, rainy day to sadness. Or create irony by relating the nice day to sadness or the rainy day to happiness.
 - b. Indicate how an object or a circumstance becomes the cause of conflict or reconciliation (such as the lost necklace in "The Necklace," the dead canary in *Trifles*, the trip through the forest in "Young Goodman Brown," or the wine in "The Cask of Amontillado.")
5. In your library locate two books on the career of Edgar Allan Poe. On the basis of the information you find in these sources, write a brief account of Poe's uses of setting and place to evoke atmosphere and to bring out qualities of human character.

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