Setting

WHAT IS SETTING?

At its most basic level, setting reveals the time and place of a story. However, setting does SO much more than that. It has the ability to act symbolically, it can reveal tone, and it can reveal deeper thematic elements that may be hidden in the sub-layers of the text. Setting is a powerful tool in a writer's toolbox, and it is our job, as readers, to determine what the writers want that tool to do and why that goal is important to the meaning of the work as a whole.

Setting as Symbol

When thinking of setting, we don't need to focus solely on physical locations. If the story takes place in a generic apartment in a generic city, then the physical setting doesn't actually matter that much. If, however, that generic apartment in that generic city is surrounded by discarded autumnal leaves and the people living in the apartment are on the verge of divorce, now we have something. Seasonal weather can symbolize numerous ideas, and in the example of the verge-of-divorce couple, the fall leaves can represent the decaying of their relationship. They are past the honeymoon stage (spring) and the deep happiness of summer, but once fall hits and the relationship hits its downward spiral, there isn't much for it to do except plummet into the slow (or quick) death of winter. Dismal, right? But seasons can symbolically represent the stages of life in many ways. Spring equates to birth, summer to childhood, fall to adulthood, winter to old age. This symbolism is universal. So as you read, read beyond the physical location and focus on a season. See if it turns up any symbolic meaning.

Setting as Tone

When watching movies, it is easy to notice the visual images that create setting and establish a tone. If it is a happy scene, we will usually see bright blue skies, full sunny days, and fluffy white clouds. If a character is undergoing some sort of emotional trauma, we can expect to see rain-splattered windows, dark clouds, or at the very least, a nighttime sky. That is because we associate setting with tone, and movie studios are well aware of that. In literature, the same strategy applies. In the novel "Wuthering Heights" by Emily Bronte, one of the main characters, Heathcliff, overhears a snippet of a conversation that damages his ego, and he runs away from home. He runs away from a warm kitchen with the smells of food and the presence of family and into a dark and stormy night with thunder and rain so torrential that he can't hear as his childhood friend chases him out into the storm and yells for him. The tone in this scene is dark and hopeless, and Heathcliff stays gone for three years. The contrast of the warm kitchen to the storm highlights the tragic tone in this section of text.

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Setting as Theme

Setting can serve various functions at once, including establishing place and time, setting a tone, and being a symbol, but it can also establish or reinforce a theme in a text. For example, in "Frankenstein," Mary Shelley ensures that lightning strikes and storm winds blow every time, Frankenstein's scientific creation, Monster, comes back into the narrative. This is because he is such an aberration to nature that nature itself revolts when Monster enters the stage. Shelley creates a setting that actively reinforces the theme of science versus nature.

Sample Analysis

In "The Story of an Hour," published in 1894 by Kate Chopin, the story opens with Louise Brently being informed that her husband was killed in a train accident. Her initial response is immediate sobbing, and she locks herself in her bedroom. The narrative below is what happens next in the story. Notice how the view from her window, the setting, can be analyzed in various ways:

Passage

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

Analysis

1. Chopin creates this spring-time setting in contrast to the dire news of Louise's husband's death because she is establishing the contrast between how we expect her to feel and how she actually feels. The setting establishes the tone as being fresh and new rather than dark and decaying.

2. This "delicious breath of rain" is not a storm, not a dark moment; it is the promise of a symbolic cleansing, a sunny shower, a life-giving rain—not what we would expect after her husband's death. This contrast emphasizes the theme of freedom from marital oppression that the narrator feels.

3. The birds are part of the setting, and Chopin elects to include them intentionally. Since they are part of the setting and birds in flight traditionally represent freedom, it is interesting that these birds are stationary. Since these birds are sitting, they have the potential for flight, for freedom, but they are not embracing it. This is similar to Louise's situation in this moment because with her husband gone she is free from the standards an 1890s wife must live up to, but she isn't taking advantage of that freedom yet.

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