Analyzing Setting



Duration

One 40-minute class session

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Objectives of the Lesson

- To explain how the setting functions in a text
- To determine why an author crafts a setting in a specific way
- To analyze how authorial choices add meaning to a text

College Board Objectives from the 2019–20 CED

- SET 2: Explain the function of setting.
- SET 2.A: Identify and describe specific textual details that convey or reveal a setting.
- SET 2.B: Explain the function of setting in a narrative.

Student Activities

• Apply Study Guide strategies to analyze and annotate the excerpt from *Frankenstein*.

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is designed to give students an opportunity to understand setting, find it in a passage, and analyze it using active verbs. It provides students with the tools to discuss the author's purpose (see the side box), and it provides a study guide for students that will help them determine what to look for when analyzing setting. The annotation practice with the Student Handout can happen in class or be sent home for homework. If digital learning is taking place, students can annotate on the Student Handout PDF with a Google Extension like Kami.

Spending time walking students through the Setting Study Guide is the best place to begin. Ensure that students understand what is in the study guide, and have them read the sample analysis at the end of the study guide, as those annotations model what they will be asked to do in the lesson.

- Students need to be able to focus on the author's purpose as they analyze setting. Basically, what did the author intend when he or she wrote the setting in a specific way. In each annotation, encourage students to use active verbs to describe what is happening in the section or phrase they are looking at, how the author is making it happen, and why the author chose to write it in this way. It helps to show students a sample and then offer them some verbs to pull from.
- Sample: In the first sentence of the excerpt, Victor finds that the gates are locked, as if society is saying "no" to Victor and his monstrous acts of science. This detail of setting not only places victor in the same space, physically, as Monster, but <u>allows</u> Shelley to use the locked gates as a way to <u>parallel</u> both characters as outcasts.
- Some verbs students might include while discussing the author's purpose:
 - Highlights
- Emphasizes
- Utilizes
- Demonstrates
- \circ Juxtaposes
- Observes
- Concedes
- Emphasizes
- Minimizes
- SupportsAccentuates



Next, walk students through the prompt at the top of the Student Handout. Then, read the first sentence of the excerpt together. Next, show students the sample analysis in the side box on this lesson plan. It helps if you write the sample sentence and the verbs on the board and have students expand the verb list with words they offer themselves. The words provided are just a jumping-off point; the more words they add, the more ownership they will feel.

Next, have students number the functions of setting (from the Setting Study Guide) that they find in the text as they read. The numbering system I use is:

- 1. Setting as a Symbol: Victor is on the outskirts of the science community, and his actions are considered monstrous by his peers, which is why he built Monster in isolation in his lab. The setting of the woods at the scene of his younger brother's murder sets the symbolism up for the isolation in the woods to represent Victor's isolation in society.
- 2. Setting Enhances Conflict: If Monster and Victor had met at another place, Victor may not have come to the realization that his own creation had killed his younger brother, so the setting enhances this conflict.
- **3. Setting Reveals Tone:** The stormy weather emphasizes that Victor and Monster are both out of accordance with the rules of nature and sets an ominous tone for their meeting in the woods.
- 4. Setting Illuminates Theme: Since Victor and Monster are both out of accordance with nature, it makes sense that the storm would enhance this theme and that Nature would literally have a fit whenever they appear together in a scene, thus emphasizing Shelley's theme even more.

Students will read the excerpt and annotate the text with how Mary Shelley utilizes the functions of setting. For each annotation, they will analyze what the author is doing, how the author is doing it, and why it is important to the author's intent. Be certain that students underline or highlight the verbs that explain the author's purpose (it will make it easier to grade later, and it gets students in the habit of intentionally putting them into their analysis).

In the teacher's commentary, you will be given one example for each of the annotation types above. Students may mark different parts of the text for the same element, so encourage their exploration of the text.

As an optional follow-up in the next class session, students could work in small groups to share their annotations and compare where they found evidence of the different functions of setting. Students could then take an excerpt from a text that they find on their own and annotate that excerpt for the function of setting.



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Analyzing Setting



Practice Activity: Frankenstein Excerpt

Prompt: The following excerpt is from Chapter 7 of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, published in 1817. In this passage, Victor Frankenstein is traveling home to comfort his family after the murder of his young brother. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Shelley uses literary elements and techniques to highlight the function of setting in this excerpt.

Excerpt

"It was completely dark when I arrived in the environs of Geneva; the gates of the town were already shut; and I was obliged to pass the night at Secheron, *Line* a village at the distance of half a league from the city.

- ⁵ The sky was serene; and, as I was unable to rest, I resolved to visit the spot where my poor William had been murdered. As I could not pass through the town, I was obliged to cross the lake in a boat to arrive at Plainpalais. During this short voyage I saw the
- 10 lightning playing on the summit of Mont Blanc in the most beautiful figures. The storm appeared to approach rapidly, and, on landing, I ascended a low hill, that I might observe its progress. It advanced; the heavens were clouded, and I soon felt the rain coming slowly in
- 15 large drops, but its violence quickly increased. I quitted my seat, and walked on, although the darkness and storm increased every minute, and the thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head. It was echoed from Salêve, the Juras, and the Alps of Savoy;
- 20 vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire; then for an instant every thing seemed of a pitchy darkness, until the eye recovered itself from the preceding flash. The storm, as is often the case in Switzerland, appeared
- 25 at once in various parts of the heavens. The most violent storm hung exactly north of the town, over the part of the lake which lies between the promontory of Belrive and the village of Copêt. Another storm enlightened Jura with faint flashes; and another
- *30* darkened and sometimes disclosed the Môle, a peaked mountain to the east of the lake.

While I watched the tempest, so beautiful yet terrific, I wandered on with a hasty step. This noble war in the sky elevated my spirits; I clasped my hands,

- 35 and exclaimed aloud, "William, dear angel! this is thy funeral, this thy dirge!" As I said these words, I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently: I could not be mistaken. A flash of lightning
- *40* illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy dæmon,

ANNOTATIONS

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to whom I had given life. What did he there? Could

- 45 he be (I shuddered at the conception) the murderer of my brother? No sooner did that idea cross my imagination, than I became convinced of its truth; my teeth chattered, and I was forced to lean against a tree for support. The figure passed me quickly, and I lost
- *50* it in the gloom. Nothing in human shape could have destroyed the fair child. *He* was the murderer! I could not doubt it. The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact. I thought of pursuing the devil; but it would have been in vain, for another flash
- 55 discovered him to me hanging among the rocks of the nearly perpendicular ascent of Mont Salêve, a hill that bounds Plainpalais on the south. He soon reached the summit, and disappeared."

ANNOTATIONS

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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 guick) 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.

NOTES

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 <u>delicious breath of rain</u> 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.



NOTES

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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- 35 and exclaimed aloud, "William, dear angel! this is thy funeral, this thy dirge!" As I said these words, I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently: I could not be mistaken. A flash of lightning
- *40* illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy dæmon,

Commentary

- 1 In this opening paragraph, the storm begins once Victor reaches the woods where Monster is hiding and where his brother was murdered. It could be that Mary Shelley created the storm to <u>symbolize</u> that Nature rebels against what Victor has created and also against the actions that Monster took when he killed Victor's innocent younger brother.
- (3) When the storm intensifies, Victor mentions that the lightning comes down "like a vast sheet of fire," revealing the tone of the passage. This isn't a light summer rain; this is a rain that mimics the torrents of hell, and Shelley is <u>emphasizing</u> the ominous tone of this meeting.
- As soon as Victor begins apostrophizing to his younger brother and dedicating the storm to him, Monster appears. Victor still thinks himself innocent in this scenario and believes that nature is rebelling against his brother's death. He never once considers that his own actions may have played a role in the untimely death of his brother. The "noble" one in this scenario, Victor thinks, is himself. Victor, once he realizes that Monster killed his brother, thinks that HE, Victor, is the noble one who needs to eradicate the "demon" he has created. The "noble war in the sky" is the war against himself and the Monster. And in this moment, Shelley reveals a major theme in the text, that Victor is playing at being a god.



to whom I had given life. What did he there? Could

- 45 he be (I shuddered at the conception) the murderer of my brother? No sooner did that idea cross my imagination, than I became convinced of its truth; my teeth chattered, and I was forced to lean against a tree for support. The figure passed me quickly, and I lost
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- 55 discovered him to me hanging among the rocks of the nearly perpendicular ascent of Mont Salêve, a hill that bounds Plainpalais on the south. He soon reached the summit, and disappeared."

(2)

(2) When Monster seems to fly off into the mountains as he makes his escape, Shelley <u>leads</u> the narrative further into the wilderness, away from civilization and rational thought. The setting practically absorbs Monster, <u>pulling us deeper</u> into the conflict.